

Homily Corpus Christi June 18, 2017

Today we celebrate the solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ. The assigned readings vary over a three year cycle. This allows the preacher, over the years, to speak about different aspects of this great Catholic belief and teaching, a miracle and mystery. This year's readings, especially the Gospel, point to the central mystery of the real and objective presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, under the mere appearance of bread and wine.

Today's Gospel comes from Jesus' Bread of Life discourse following the miraculous feedings of the crowds. It includes Jesus' most literal language announcing that He would give His flesh and blood as food and drink. Responding to those who questioned Jesus reiterated His intention to offer His flesh and blood as food and drink. We know some left Jesus because of this, but those closest, His apostles, did not. They knew Jesus and believed in Him and would have to trust that He really would do what He said.

The how of giving His flesh and blood as food and drink was demonstrated at the Last Supper when He took bread and wine and declared it to be, changed it into, His Body and Blood so that those closest to Him could indeed receive Him, consume Him, as food. His literal language echoed His previous words in His teaching on the Bread of Life. The why is understood in the context of the events of that night and the several days that followed. At the Last Supper Jesus announced that He was going to give up His Body and shed His blood in a sacrifice that would create a new covenant. He did this in the midst of the Jewish Passover and annual sacrificial celebration that included eating the victim of the sacrifice as a sign of the way it affirmed the relationship between the people offering the sacrifice and the God who received it. At the Last Supper Jesus wanted to unite the apostles to Him and thus unite them to the impending sacrifice of the cross to underscore how they were to benefit from His actions. When He told them to "do this in remembrance of me" He set into motion the perpetual presence of that sacrifice in every Mass. In every Mass, we are united to the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus as the sacrifice is made present, and He as priest and victim becomes present. As at the Last Supper He calls us to take and eat and drink His Body and Blood, presented to us (as at the Last Supper) under the appearance of Bread and wine. We consume the victim of the sacrifice and thus participate in a unique Holy Communion with God.

The teaching, the doctrine, on the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist has a certain history, as do many doctrines. Over time the way a truth is described and explained

may evolve. Disciplines and devotions related to the doctrine develop as well.

In the case of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist, the truth goes back to what Jesus said and did at the Last Supper. The Church teaches that with the words of Jesus a real change occurred and bread and wine became the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, even though all of the characteristics or properties of bread and wine remained. Scriptural affirmation is found in St. Paul's writing. From the beginning, the post scriptural writings provide a consistent string of affirmations of the real and objective presence of Jesus Christ under the appearance of bread and wine. The doctrinal description of the Real Presence reached a high point in the Council of Trent in the 16th century when the sacrificial nature of the Mass and the related truth of the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in that sacrifice were rejected by most of the Protestant reformers. The philosophical term transubstantiation was used to describe the process. The substance changes while the accidents, or properties remain the same. The belief that every Mass makes present the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross and makes Him as victim and food present remains a key distinction between Catholics and most other Christians.

There is no reason to doubt the constant reverence and care for the Eucharist, a care associated with the ability to retain the Eucharist to be taken to those unable to participate in the Mass. However, writings indicate some evolution first of the tabernacle, the special repository for the sacramental presence of Jesus, and eventually the provision and encouragement of a place to gather and pray at the tabernacle, in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament outside the Mass. Concurrently various devotions of worship directed to Jesus Christ, under the appearance of bread and blessing with the Sacrament emerged.

All of these developments have been affirmed by the Church of the 20th century and today, especially through the Second Vatican Council and its complete implementation, which was not without its bumps and detours.

Among those protocols is the placement of the tabernacle in visible prominence and the treatment of the church as Sacred Space outside of the Mass. The Church, in turn, places a special value on prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament as people do with our church open every day. Scheduling special times of adoration when the Sacrament is placed on the altar in a monstrance accents the doctrine. That is a practice here at St. Cecilia every Friday and Saturday.

I would also note our genuflection (or if necessary profound bow) in adoration when we enter, leave or cross in front of the sacrament. The doctrine is supported by our

careful purification of the sacred vessels at Mass when any fragments of Body and Blood are diluted with and consumed.

I sometimes think the simplicity and accessibility of the Eucharist make it easy to diminish our sense of the gift, the mystery, and the power of Jesus' presence. Consequently, we need to catch ourselves now and then and ask if all we say or do relative to the presence of Jesus affirms that presence to ourselves and those who gather with us.