

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, May 29th 2016

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

We used to call this special annual celebration of the gift of the Holy Eucharist by the name Corpus Christi (Latin for “Body of Christ”). The more recent English title puts us back in touch with the vivid concreteness of Jesus’ gift of himself in his humanity, now present to us as our risen Lord, and accessible tangibly in the meal form of bread of wine. This Sunday’s second reading from St. Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians gives us the earliest report of the Last Supper — some ten to twenty years before the Gospel accounts. Let’s savor his special treatment of this central sacrament of our faith.

“On the night when he was betrayed” reminds us of the drama of the Gethsemane prayer and the arrest, leading to Jesus’ Passion and death—and the human complicity (Jewish and Roman) entailed in all of this.

The words identifying the bread and wine with his body and blood point both to the death that separated his blood from his body and to the fact that his risen presence to the community at worship would indeed be nurturing and empowering as “bread for the road” in the post-Easter mission.

“New covenant in my blood” is language that reminds the community that it is part of the renewed covenant people of God. The mandate (spoken twice) —“Do this in memory of me”— makes this more than a memory; it is a commission to repeat this ritual as a regular practice of the community, reminding us of our identity as the body of Christ meant for the life of the world.

It is also a repeated proclamation of “the death of the Lord until he comes.” That is a faith claim. What is proclaimed is not simply the death of a Palestinian craftsman; it is the death of the one we know as our risen Lord, present and empowering us in the continuation of his mission for forgiveness and the creation of a community of love and service. The phrase “... until he comes” expresses the sure hope that the kingdom of God will come to full expression in a future in which we will participate.

And why does Paul include this tradition in this letter? Not for archival reasons. He does it to remind the Corinthian Christians that their failure to take care of one another is a failure to “discern the body of Christ” (v. 29) — both as the Lord present in the Supper and as the assembled community sharing the same graced life and called to minister to one another. This feast delivers a profound challenge to conversion. Discerning the body gets us involved in unexpected ways with the people and the world around us.

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