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May 6, 2009

The Covenant and Christ's Presence in Eucharist

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The Covenant and Christ's Presence in Eucharist

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This article was previously published in *The Catholic Advocate*.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Sunday Readings for May 10, 2009 for Cycle B:

Acts 9:26-31; Ps 22; 1 Jn 3:18-24; Jn 15:1-8

THE COVENANT AND CHRIST'S PRESENCE IN EUCHARIST

Lawrence E. Frizzell

Occasionally we hear a complaint about the complexity of Christian faith, especially when compared with "the simplicity of the Gospel." How do we deal with this type of facile indictment? A poet has remarked about the Bible and especially Gospel according to St. John: "It's so simple that a child can wade in it, so profound that a whale can swim in it." Throughout a lifetime we can probe ever more deeply into God's Words; indeed, this is what the Church has done over the centuries. Because faith is lived within a community, its application to a world-wide Church involves considerable challenges. In his first letter, St. John conveys the essence of Christian faith and practice in a nutshell: "This is God's commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he commanded us" (3:23). However, this link between faith and love needs to be set within the context of covenant and the mystery of the Blessed Trinity. So we read on: "All who keep his commandments abide in him and he in them. By this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us" (3:24). Christian faith must be explicitly Trinitarian while adhering to the Jewish belief in the one God.

We can begin to plumb the depths of this synthesis of the Gospel only by appreciating the biblical heritage upon which John drew. Through the reciprocal formula of abiding or indwelling, he pointed to covenant, expressed by Jeremiah in these words: "I will put my law within them and I will write it in their hearts; I will be their God and they shall be my people"(31:33). His younger contemporary named Ezekiel recorded a similar divine message: "I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes... and you shall be my people and I will be your God" (36:27-28).

The Gospel of John devotes five chapters to the Last Supper without mentioning the institution of the Eucharist. A "simple" reading might lead one to conclude that Jesus' gift of himself under the signs of bread and wine was considered unimportant. But wait! A long chapter is devoted to the necessity of sharing in the Bread of Life to possess eternal life. "The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (6:51). What could be closer to the proclamation concerning the bread held by Jesus at the Last Supper: "This is my body which is for you" (1 Corinthians 11:24)?

The Jewish blessing for the cup of wine at a meal expresses gratitude and praise to God for creating the fruit of the vine. Jesus' allegory of the vine undoubtedly expands upon this prayer. "I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower." The Fourth Gospel contains seven "I am" sayings with a predicate. Is it mere coincidence that the first saying is "I am the bread of life" (6:35, 48, 51, 57) and the last is "I am the vine, you are the branches" (15:5)? In both passages the reciprocal formula occurs, with the verb "to abide." John may not record the term "covenant" but the intensely personal experience of union with Jesus, resulting from the Father's work (6:32, 37, 44-46, 57 and 15:1, 8-10) must take place within the community of believers, the Church. Although the English term "you" is ambiguous, the Greek text of John 15 uses the plural form of the pronoun. The covenantal

experience of divine indwelling has numerous effects, two of which are efficacy of prayer and fruitfulness of deeds expressing obedience to the commandments. "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples" (15:7-8).

The account of Saul's return to Jerusalem after his Baptism in Damascus draws attention to the Christian's need to belong to the Church and to be recognized by its leaders. Like the first communities described by St. Luke, may the Church today have peace and be built up, walking in the fear (awe) of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 9:31).