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Pondering Gifts of Christ’s Body, Blood

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Pondering Gifts of Christ’s Body, Blood

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Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ
Sunday Readings for June 26, 2011 for Cycle A:
Dt 8:2-3, 14-15; Ps 147; 1 Cor 10:16-17; Jn 6:51-58

PONDERING GIFTS OF CHRIST’S BODY, BLOOD

Lawrence E. Frizzell

The celebration of Holy Week introduces the faithful into an appreciation of Christ's Death-and-Resurrection that should deepen from year to year. However, the manifold gifts associated with the Paschal Mystery of the Lord cannot be grasped fully in such a short time, so the Church has introduced special feasts to commemorate his love and self-giving in the Eucharist. Thus in June we celebrate the Feast of Christ's Body and Blood and that of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (the heart in Hebrew thought symbolizes the core of the person, with emphasis on intellect and will).

At the Last Supper... our Savior instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood. He did this in order to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until he should come again, a memorial of his death and resurrection... (Second Vatican Council, The Liturgy #47)

The magnificence of this awe-inspiring gift can best be understood by reflecting on how God cared for his people as he freed them from Egypt and guided them through the wilderness. The Passover meal, with a lamb whose blood had saved them, unleavened bread, wine and other symbolic foods, constituted a memorial whereby each generation re-lived the Exodus and taught their children. "This is done because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt" (Ex 13:8). Prayers of gratitude accompany every Jewish meal, but this requires an extended commemoration. Jesus and his disciples certainly knew the ceremonies well, and Jesus' own work of freeing humanity from slavery to sin was explained in this framework, along with the Temple sacrifices and fidelity of God's servant who was persecuted and made vicarious atonement for the multitude of humanity (Is 52:13-53:12).

During forty years of wandering in the desert, Israel learned how God's gifts sustain life when human efforts are woefully inadequate. The manna constituted a daily bread which could not be hoarded; the Israelites would realize dependence on God and become attentive to his Word as spiritual nourishment. At Passover time, Jesus multiplied loaves and fishes to give a sign to the crowd of the gifts he wished to offer (Jn 6:1-14).

The selection from St. John's Gospel proclaimed on this feast is the climax of the discussion of this sign. Earlier, when Jesus declared himself to be the life-giving bread nourishing the human spirit, he emphasized the necessity of faith on the part of those coming to him. "I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst" (Jn 6:35). Jesus is the very Word of God nurturing his people. At the time when disciples first heard this teaching that Jesus would give his flesh (i.e. his very person, with emphasis on his body) for the life of the world (6:51) they were faced with an enigma. It was shocking to hear that to have eternal life they would need to eat his flesh and drink his blood! Those who remained with him
were in darkness concerning the consummation of Jesus' ministry in the Last Supper and his death.

During the meal they saw him take the unleavened bread and expected to hear the words: "This is the bread of affliction which your fathers ate in the land of Egypt". This memorial enabled the Jewish people to unite with their ancestors and to experience the power, goodness, wisdom and mercy of God in their own time of need. After all, these attributes of the living God, manifested so marvelously in the Exodus, were not exhausted at that occasion. Now Jesus demonstrates the rich potential of the Passover symbols. They become the vehicle for Christians to grasp the meaning of Jesus' death; as the Lamb of God, he offers his blood to free humankind from slavery to sin, the source of all other forms of human oppression. The new life of the Spirit, conveyed by Jesus as risen Lord, must be sustained by food of the spiritual order. This gift is rooted in the Covenant experience of mutual exchange, expressed in the formula "I will be your God and you will be my people" (Ex 7:6; Lv 26:12; Jeremiah 31:33, of the new Covenant). Of the person who receives him in the Eucharist Jesus says "he remains in me and I in him" (Jn 6:56), a formula pointing to the Covenant that will be echoed with several variations, especially in the Last Supper discourse. Thus, the gift is very personal yet is offered only in the community whose faith is rooted in apostolic witness.