

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Jun 7th 2015

In the summer of 1996, I was studying German in a small town in Bavaria, halfway between Munich and Salzburg. Early in my program, sometime in mid-June, I learned that the Goethe Institut I was attending would be closed the following day, even though it was midweek. Why? Because the day in question was the Feast of Corpus Christi (now called the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ). A number of things struck me about that day: it was a midweek celebration; not only was school not in session, the entire town took the holiday—all businesses were closed. Most impressive and memorable was a procession down the main street, late in the morning, of a group of parishioners singing their way through the village. And in the midst of the procession was a priest carrying a monstrance with a large consecrated Host.

Nearly twenty years later, that memory remains fresh in my mind. The procession gave eloquent testimony to the centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the Church. It also bore witness to abundant joy—not just the joy of a set of individuals, but that of a community of faith. And not only was this community showing forth the precious gift of the Eucharist; they were doing so as the Body of Christ they were by virtue of their baptism and regular celebration of the Eucharistic liturgy. What we had celebrated inside the walls of the parish church could not be contained therein.

Today's readings have two themes that run through them like a thread: blood and covenant. The first reading is a dramatic scene from Mount Sinai. In the aftermath of the exodus, God summoned the people and invited them into covenant relationship: he would be their God, and they his particular people. Enjoying God's special protection, Israel was summoned, through the divine commandments, to witness to God's holiness to the nations (Lev 19:2). This covenant relationship was sealed with the blood from sacrificial animals—"the blood of the covenant"—symbolic of the force and dynamism of life. Half of the blood was sprinkled on the altar that represented God's presence, and half on the people. God and Israel thereby united and committed themselves to one another.

The other two readings take up these themes. We hear from Mark's version of the last supper in which Jesus breaks bread and pours out wine—actions that interpret his self-giving love on the cross—and offers them to his friends as his Body and Blood. Concerning the latter, Jesus calls it "my blood of the covenant," echoing the words of Moses. The author of the letter to Hebrews depicts the risen Jesus as a high priest who "offered himself unblemished to God," presenting to the Father his own blood for the forgiveness of sins. Through Christ's loving self-gift, God invites all of us into a special relationship with him, into "a new covenant." Freed from all those things that constrain us, especially the selfishness of sin, we are to bear witness—as the people in whom God deigns to dwell—to God's holiness and love. As the end of today's responsorial psalm suggests, we are to be a Eucharistic people in the presence of all.

Reflecting on these readings through the prism of the memory of the Corpus Christi procession in a Bavarian village has led me to ask: Does my life reflect the joy of knowing and receiving the gift of God's love poured forth through Jesus' offering of his Body and Blood? Do I appreciate that, while Holy Communion is a special event between God and me, it also makes me part of a community, one that becomes what we consume in the Eucharist: the very body of Christ? Do we bring this gift to others—to our families, to our circle of relationships, at work, in our civic responsibilities? Are we becoming a people who, through our growth in self-giving love, bear witness to the holiness of the covenantal God?

Today is a wondrous feast. Let us celebrate it with joy and thanksgiving (the meaning of the word "Eucharist"). And let us share with others the amazing gift we receive every time we gather to hear God's Word and come to the Lord's Table.

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