

Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ

(Year A)

<i>First Reading</i>	Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14b-16a
<i>Response</i>	Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem!
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 147:12-13, 14-15, 19-20
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 10:16-17
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh.”
<i>Gospel</i>	John 6:51-58

The second reading for the feast of the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ—commonly referred to as Corpus Christi—is a very short but significant reading from Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians. It comes from 1 Corinthians 10:16-17. And in this passage, the context here is Paul is writing to the Church at Corinth, and he’s preparing to address some abuses that are taking place in the celebration of the Eucharist, which he calls the Lord’s Supper. And before he gets to the abuses that he’s going to address and correct, he first lays the foundation for what the Lord’s Supper is by comparing it to some of the sacrifices in the temple of Israel and contrasting it with some of the sacrifices that were often offered in pagan temples. And in that context, he says in chapter 10, verse 16 and 17, these very important words:

The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.¹

End of second reading. Very short one today.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Bible citations/quotations herein are from *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*. New York: National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, 1994.

Okay, so what's going on here and why does the Church choose this for the feast of Corpus Christi? Well, it should be obvious here that Paul's talking about the two principal elements of the Lord's Supper—a cup of wine and then the bread of the Eucharist. But in this context, he says something very interesting about them. First, he uses ancient Jewish terminology to describe them. This is interesting. So when Paul uses the term “cup of blessing,” on the one hand, you can just infer from that that he's talking about a cup that receives a blessing. That's obvious. Just like to this day, people will say a blessing before they eat a meal that consists of food and drink.

But in a first century Jewish context, as we know from reading other ancient Jewish writings outside the Bible, Paul appears to be using here a technical term which we actually find represented in later Rabbinic writings, to describe not just any cup but a specific cup that was actually used in certain religious meals, certain celebratory meals like the Passover meal.

So if you, for example, look at the Babylonian Talmud, there's a whole tractate called *Berakhot*, means “blessings.” The Talmud is a fifth century collection of ancient Rabbinic traditions, sayings of the rabbis, many of which were attributed to rabbis who lived at the time of Jesus and the time of Paul. And in that tractate of various blessings, you actually have the exact same expression that Paul uses here, except in Hebrew, to refer to the “cup of blessing.” And if you read through the writings of the rabbis, we actually have examples of the kind of blessing that would be uttered over the cup of wine that was used at the Passover meal or other sacred meals, in which a “cup of blessing” was drunk from.

And so, for example here, in the Mishnah, another collection of Rabbinic traditions from the third century (early third century, around 200AD), listen to the words of this ancient Rabbinic blessing over the cup of wine:

Blessed are you, O Lord our God, King of the universe, who creates the fruit of the vine.²

² Mishnah, *Berakoth* 6:1

That's from Mishnah, *Berakoth* 6:1. Sound familiar? Yeah, it should, because it's very similar to the blessing utilized in the ordinary form of the Roman Rite, the ordinary form of the Mass, to this day. So when the priest utters a blessing over the wine of the Eucharist, he is (in a sense) echoing the kind of Jewish blessing, some of the words of the ancient Jewish blessing, that Paul would have utilized over the cup of blessing...and that, arguably, Jesus Himself would have uttered at the Last Supper, the Passover meal there.

So when Paul talks about the “cup of blessing” here, he's referring specifically—in all likelihood—to the Passover cup, which has now become part of the Eucharistic liturgy of the early Church, the liturgy of the Lord's Supper. And then secondly, Paul says:

The bread which we break...

Now again, this obviously just on one level, refers to a common loaf that has to be broken and distributed amongst the members of the meal in order to eat. However, it also has a specific liturgical context, because part of the ancient Jewish rite of Passover was the breaking of the unleavened bread and its distribution amongst the members of the Paschal feast. And we see this same liturgical act of breaking and sharing bread...actually, it was one of the earliest names for the Lord's Supper that we have in the New Testament.

So, for example, if you look at Acts chapter 2:42...after Pentecost, Peter describes the spiritual practices of those who have recently been baptized. And in that context, he said these words—well, he doesn't say this but Luke says this is in Acts:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

So this is the same terminology being used here. Well, most scholars agree—and this goes back to ancient times—that the breaking of bread is a specific reference to the Eucharist, the Eucharistic celebration in the early Church. Because one of

the key rites in the celebration of the Lord's Supper was the breaking of the bread. So you'd have a single loaf, it'd be broken and then distributed amongst the members who were communing. And it would symbolize the unity of the people celebrating the meal.

So when Paul says:

The cup of blessing which we bless...

...and...

The bread which we break...

Those are both references to the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Now with that in mind, the key term here that we want to highlight is Paul's use of the word "communion" or "participation." This Greek word here is *koinōnia*. We've actually seen it used elsewhere in Paul's writings, when he talks about the *koinōnia* of the Holy Spirit. It means to have something in common. It means to participate, to have a share in something. It means to commune, to have a common spiritual bond with one another. And here, Paul is saying that mysteriously in the cup of wine and the bread of the Lord's Supper, we have a *koinōnia* of fellowship, not just in the Body of Christ but also in His Blood as well.

So this is one of the most striking passages in Paul that shows that Paul does not consider the Eucharist to be just ordinary bread or ordinary wine. Rather, he clearly teaches that through partaking of the cup and partaking of the bread, we somehow have a real share, not just in the Body of Christ but also in His Blood. We have a real participation in His Body and in His Blood. This is going to be one of the foundational texts for the Church's doctrine of the mystery of the Real Presence of Christ. It's not a purely symbolic remembrance. It's also a real participation in the mystery of Christ's Passion, death, and resurrection in His Body and Blood that are given for us on Calvary.

But it's not just Eucharistic. It's also ecclesiological. It's also a mystery of the Church itself. Because notice what Paul says here:

Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body...

If you read through the letters of Paul, you're going to see it over and over again. One of Paul's favorite ways of referring to the mystery of the Church is the image of the Body of Christ. So what he's doing here is he's drawing an analogy between the Body of Christ that's represented by the one bread and the Body of Christ that's constituted by the Church itself. So he's not just talking about the mystery of the Eucharist here, he's also talking about the mystery of the Church.

And with that in mind, I'd like to just close with a quotation from St. John Paul II. Before Pope John Paul died in 2005, the last encyclical that he wrote was an encyclical on the Eucharist, which was very close to his heart. And it's one of my favorite of John Paul's encyclicals. It's called *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*—the Church of the Eucharist or the Church from the Eucharist, if you translate that Latin. And it's an encyclical on the relationship between the Holy Eucharist and the mystery of the Church. And this is what St. John Paul II has to say about the words of Paul that we read today on Corpus Christi. He wrote this:

Eucharistic communion also confirms the Church in *her unity as the body of Christ*. Saint Paul refers to this *unifying power of participation in the banquet of the Eucharist* when he writes to the Corinthians: "The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 *Cor* 10:16-17). Saint John Chrysostom's commentary on these words is profound and perceptive...

You know, St. John Paul II also is familiar with one of my favorite writers, St. John Chrysostom and his commentaries on Paul. He continues:

"For what is the bread? It is the body of Christ. And what do those who receive it become? The Body of Christ – not many bodies but one body. For as bread is completely one, though made of up many grains of wheat, and these, albeit unseen, remain nonetheless present, in such a way that their

difference is not apparent since they have been made a perfect whole, so too are we mutually joined to one another and together united with Christ”.

I think that’s where the quote from St. John Chrysostom ends, and then Pope John Paul II picks up again:

*The argument is compelling: our union with Christ, which is a gift and grace for each of us, makes it possible for us, in him, to share in the unity of his body which is the Church.*³

So that’s *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* paragraph 23. Now I don’t know about you, but that adds something to the way I think about the mystery of the Eucharist. So nowadays—as I’ve mentioned elsewhere—many people talk about the Mass as “I go to Mass to receive the Eucharist” or “I go to receive Holy Communion, receive the Body of Christ.” And that’s absolutely true.

But again, that’s not all that’s happening. That focuses on what happens to me individually, but in the Eucharist itself, it’s not just the case that I receive the Body and Blood of Christ. What also happens is that I am united to all of the members of the Church. I’m united to all of the members of the mystical Body of Christ. And so John Paul II has that beautiful image here, looking at the host. And he’s saying, “Just as the host of the Eucharist is one host, but it’s made up of many, many particles of wheat that you can’t even see anymore. You can’t distinguish them anymore because they’ve all been united into one bread. So too as members of the Church, we are all like little particles of wheat that have become members of the one Body of Christ.”

And this is why I think it’s important—when catechizing on the Eucharist—to emphasize not just the terminology of Eucharist or thanksgiving, but also the terminology of Holy Communion. Because through the Eucharist, we participate in the communion of the Body and Blood of Christ and in the communion of the saints. One of the articles of the Creed is, “I believe in the Holy Spirit. I believe in the communion of saints.” What is the communion of saints? It’s the union that we

³ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* no. 23

have with one another through the one Spirit of Christ (the Holy Spirit) and the one Body of Christ that we receive above all in the gift of the Eucharist.

So, just for your own meditation and reflection, you might consider that—that the next time you participate in the Eucharist, recall to mind that as Paul is saying here, that the bread that we break and the cup that we bless, is a communion, a *koinōnia*, a sharing not just in the Body and Blood of Christ. But through the Eucharist, every time we partake of the Eucharist, we are united with Christ, with the Blessed Virgin Mary, with all the angels, with all the saints in Heaven, with the souls in Purgatory—because they are still members of the mystical Body of Christ, they’re being purified but they’re part of the Church—and then finally, with all of the saints on Earth, with the Church on Earth. We’re being united to our loved ones who may be far away from us. But if they’re receiving the Eucharist, we are in union with them. They may have died and gone on to Heaven, but through the Eucharist, we have a real participation, a real sharing, a real communion with them insofar as they are members of the mystical Body.

So I think just in our day, especially since our experience of the Church and especially of the world is so filled with division...we live in a world that is very divided. And especially for the last 500 years, Christians themselves are divided with one another, it’s very important for us to realize—and St. John Paul II stressed this over and over and over again—that the Eucharist is not just a symbol of the unity of the Church. It’s actually the mechanism. It’s actually the way. It’s actually the sacrament that gives the Church her unity. It’s what constitutes the Church as the one Body of Christ...as the one Corpus Christi.