

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ
(Year C)

<i>First Reading</i>	Genesis 14:18-20
<i>Response</i>	You are a priest forever, in the line of Melchizedek.
<i>Psalm</i>	Psalm 110:1, 2, 3, 4
<i>Second Reading</i>	1 Corinthians 11:23-26
<i>Gospel Acclamation</i>	I am the living bread that came down from heaven, says the Lord; whoever eats this bread will live forever.
<i>Gospel</i>	Luke 9:11B-17

For Corpus Christi of Year C, the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, the Church picks a passage from St. Paul, which is frankly unsurprising, because it's the only account in all of the letters of the New Testament of the Last Supper itself.

So we have Paul's famous account in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 of the last supper of Jesus and of the institution of the Eucharist. Now I know we've looked at this passage in other contexts before, but here I want to hone in on something distinctive about it that's fitting for this particular solemnity. So let's read through it together and we will look at the relationship between the institution of the Eucharist by Christ and the concept of Sacred Tradition. So let's begin, 1 Corinthians 11:23-26:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.¹

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.

Before we get into the issue of tradition, just on the level of the literal sense of this text in its original context, a few observations that I want to highlight. First, unlike the accounts of the Last Supper in the gospels, like Matthew, Mark and Luke, the words of institution, Paul's very explicit here that what he's about to tell the Corinthians is something that he's received from someone else. So that's what he means when he says:

I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you...

We're going to come back to that in just a minute. Second, notice that Paul gives us here the words of institution, but he has something that's actually distinctive about his account. When he's speaking about the cup of the new covenant, he has a clause that he adds in there:

“Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Now in the ancient Church, that clause as often as you drink it actually became a scriptural foundation for the practice of receiving communion under one kind. Because wine was not as readily available in all places as it is to us nowadays, although the Eucharist would be celebrated with bread and wine, it was not the case that there was enough wine to communicate that or to give the chalice or the cup to everyone participating in it. And so the custom rose fairly early on of reception under one kind, where the faithful would just receive the body of Christ and not drink of the blood of Christ, although the celebrant, the priest, would partake of both, the custom rose of the faithful just partaking of one.

There are lots of theological reasons and arguments about that. The Council of Trent actually would eventually have to go on and dogmatically define that whether you receive under one kind or under both kinds, it doesn't matter. You always receive the whole Christ, the totus Christus, the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Jesus, whether it's under the appearance of bread or under the appearance of wine. But what was interesting is that this particular verse, “as often as you drink it,” was interpreted as implying that sometimes you would drink it and sometimes you would not. This gave a kind of basic foundation for the idea, or the practice I should say, of reception under one kind. That's the second point.

Then the third point about this in its original context that is fascinating is the last line where Paul says:

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Now the Greek word there, *katangelō*, just means to proclaim, but a number of scholars have pointed out that the Hebrew synonym for that word, *haggadah*, to proclaim or proclamation, is the name of the Passover rite or the Passover ritual that would later develop in ancient Judaism and continues to this day. So sometimes we will talk about, in contemporary context, a Passover seder meal. That's very common. Seder means order. So it's the order of the service that will be celebrated at a Jewish Passover. But when you actually get to a Jewish Passover, the description of the ritual is frequently called the Passover Haggadah, which literally means the Passover proclamation. It has specific reference to the proclamation of certain scriptural texts associated with the Passover from the Old Testament.

So scholars have suggested that when Paul is writing this letter to the church at Corinth, when he says "for as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes", that he's actually drawing there on the language of the Jewish Passover, that just as the Jews proclaimed the Haggadah, the proclamation, of what God had done at the time of the Exodus and how he was saving them through the sacrifice of the Passover lamb and through the deliverance under Moses, so too now, those who are in Christ are proclaiming the way God delivers them from sin and from death, namely through the death of the Lord who is the true Passover lamb.

In support of that suggestion, if you go back to 1 Corinthians 5:7, Paul says:

For Christ, our [passover]...

that's the Greek word for *pascha*

...paschal lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival,

or "keep the feast," more literally. So what feast is Paul talking about when he says, "Let us keep the feast"? Well, some people think he means the Passover feast of the Jewish people, but in context, it's more likely that he's referring to the Eucharistic feast, and that he's taking the terminology of Passover and applying it to the Lord's Supper. He's saying, "because Christ, our Passover, has been sacrificed, let us keep the feast of the Lord's supper," the feast of the Eucharist.

All right. So that's just a basic little overview of what he's getting at in this particular passage. Oh, by the way, and he says, "You proclaim it until he comes." So that's another aspect. He connects the Lord's Supper with the second coming of Christ. It's an anticipation. It's awaiting the coming of Jesus at the final judgment, which is also like the Jewish Passover, because by the time of Paul in the first century AD, a tradition had arisen that the Messiah would come on Passover night and that he would return at the time of the Passover. So just as the Jews celebrated their Passover meals in partial anticipation of the coming Messiah, so now Paul's telling the Corinthians, whenever you celebrate the Eucharist, the Lord's Supper, you're proclaiming the Lord's death until he comes in the second coming of the Messiah at the end of the time.

With all that said, what about the relationship between Eucharist and Tradition? Well, one aspect of Paul's account of the Last Supper that's very significant and it's unique to his account is the link between the Eucharist and Tradition. Now you can't see it clearly in your English translation, but in the Greek text, when Paul says, "I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you," the Greek word for delivered is *paradidōmi*. It literally means handed over to you. And that verb, *paradidōmi*, there's a noun, *paradosis*, which is the word for tradition. So tradition, *paradosis* in Greek, is literally the handing down. So when Paul says, "I delivered to you that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread..." so on and so forth. You could actually translate it this way, "For I received from the Lord what I tradition to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said "This is my body..." so on and so forth.

So why does that matter? Well, I think it's significant because it shows that tradition in the early Church, the Apostolic Tradition, which is so crucial, had as one of its central elements the celebration of the sacraments, and not just the sacraments in general but the celebration of the Eucharist in particular.

I think this is important for us to remember, because sometimes when we talk about Sacred Tradition or Apostolic Tradition, it can get a little fuzzy. Like exactly what do we mean when we're talking about the tradition? Do you mean these secret oral traditions that were secretly passed by word of mouth to people?

What is the tradition exactly? The tradition is the handing over. It's the *paradosis*. It's what is handed down from Jesus to the Apostles, from the Apostles to their successors, from their successors to us, the Church. Paul's helpful here because he gives us a glimpse into the content of tradition.

What is the content of tradition? Well, one of the aspects of tradition that's central is the handing down of the words of consecration, of the words of institution, of the narrative of the institution of the Eucharist, and the celebration of the Eucharist itself. So I think, at least in my experience, I don't know that many Catholics think of the Eucharist, of the liturgy, of the mass as being handed down through tradition, but that's what Paul's saying here. Paul doesn't refer to tradition often. He refers to it several times, but this is one of the key passages in which he does and I think it's very telling that he links it here with the celebration of the Lord's supper.

That's why in the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Decree on Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum*, a very famous document of the council, one of the things that that document was trying to do, it was trying to clarify the nature and importance of tradition, of Sacred Tradition. And as an example it actually gave the Eucharist, the worship of the Church, as one of the objects, so to speak, of Sacred Tradition. So just in closing, listen to these words of the Second Vatican Council on the nature of tradition. What is tradition? This is what the council said:

Thus, the apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved in a continuous line of succession until the end of time. Hence the apostles, in handing on what they themselves had received...

See the language here

...warn the faithful to maintain the traditions which they had learned either by word of mouth or by letter (cf. 2 Th. 2:15)...

So tradition can take two different forms. It can be oral or it can be written.

...and they warn them to fight hard for the faith that had been handed on to them once and for all (cf. Jude 3). What was handed on by the apostles comprises everything that serves to make the People of God live their lives in holiness and increase their faith. *In this way...*

Here is the key line

...the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes.²

So notice there, the Church highlights here three things that she hands on: her doctrine, her life, and her worship. So this is what tradition does. It transmits, it hands those things down, not just the teachings, not just the morality (like the life, the way Christians live), but the worship, the way we worship is something we receive from Sacred Tradition. It's not something we create. It's not something we concoct. It's not something we make up. It's something we receive. It goes back not just to the Apostles, but to Jesus Christ himself.

Therefore, when Paul is instructing the Corinthians on how to celebrate the Lord's Supper properly, it is very telling that he begins by saying:

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you [what I tradition to you], that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body."

This is the Eucharist. This is the tradition. This is what we celebrate on this great feast. This is what we receive whenever we go to mass, and the priest pronounces these words of consecration, "this is my body" and "this is my blood." The bread and wine are transubstantiated into the body, the blood, the soul, and the divinity of Jesus Christ.

² Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* 8