

A little boy was walking down a dirt road after church one Sunday when he came to a crossroads where he met a little girl coming from the other direction. "Hi," said the little girl. "Where are you going?" asked the little boy. "I've been to church this morning and I'm on my way home," answered the little girl. "I'm also on my way home from church. Which church do you go to?" asked the little boy. "I go the Catholic church back down the road," replied the little girl. "What about you?" "I go to the Lutheran church back at the top of the hill," replied the little boy. They discover that they are both going the same way so they decide that they would walk together. They came to a low spot in the road where spring rains had partially flooded the road, so there was no way that they could get across to the other side without getting wet. "If I get my new Sunday dress wet, my Mom's going to skin me alive," said the little girl. "My Mom'll tan my hide too, if I get my new Sunday suit wet," replied the little boy. "I'll tell you what I think I'll do," said the little girl. "I'm gonna pull off all my clothes and hold them over my head and wade across." "That's a good idea," replied the little boy. "I'm going to do the same thing with my suit." So they both undressed and waded across to the other side without getting their clothes wet. They were standing there in the sun waiting to drip dry before putting their clothes back on, when the little boy remarked, "You know, I never realized before just how much difference there really is between a CATHOLIC and a LUTHERAN!"

As we celebrate the Feast of Corpus & Sanguinis Christi – The Body & Blood of Christ -- our liturgy of the Word guides us through the religious developments that led to our Eucharist, giving us a highly condensed biblical theology of the Eucharist. We begin as Moses leads his people in a spectacular liturgy of sacrifice. In what was almost participatory theater, the people renewed their covenant with the God who led them out of Egypt and gave them commandments to assure a good life. The people listened and kept silence while Moses wrote. At the climax, he sprinkled them with blood representing the life they shared with God and would lose if they were unfaithful.

This celebration evolved into the Temple liturgies that kept Israel conscious of her covenant relationship with God. They provide the context for the portrayal of Christ as the final high priest in the Letter to the Hebrews, showing how He accomplished once for all what Moses and his successors celebrated with their people. Hebrews explains that the priests used animal blood to cleanse a defiled people, but Christ shed His own blood, thus cleansing and transforming people's consciences. Christ gives new access to God whose reason for creation is to share life with us.

Mark's account of Jesus' Last Supper with His disciples brings this theology to its fulfillment. When the disciples talk to Jesus about His own Passover, He reminds them that eating that meal together pledges them to share His same commitment and fate. While they were at supper, Jesus shockingly altered their ritual prayers. Instead of simply thanking God for the saving actions of the past, Jesus added His own name to the traditional litany of blessing. By doing so, He bade His friends to partake in His own self-giving. When Jesus took the cup, a blessing cup they were accustomed to sharing, He gave it to them and they all drank of it. After they had drunk, He explained that it was the cup He had promised they would drink with Him (Mk 10:30). It was their share in the cross He would take up, the symbol of losing their lives for Him and the Gospel in such a way that by losing their life they would be saved. When they drank from that cup they were signing a blank check of solidarity with Him and His cause. They were pledging themselves to full communion with Him and He with them. Today we are bidden to ponder Christ's question: "Can you drink the cup? Do you want this communion with me?" We are tempted to join Jesus' followers who too easily answer: "Yes! We want to see your glory!" Christ does not let us off so easily. After He said, "Take and drink," He said, "This

is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many.” That was what they imbibed. That was what they took in so that it could become a part of their inmost self.

When St. Augustine taught about the Eucharist he offered these time-honored insights: “So now, if you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle Paul speaking....‘You are the body of Christ, member for member’ (1 Cor 12:27).You are saying ‘Amen’ to what you are: your response is a personal signature, affirming your faith.....Be a member of Christ’s body, then, so that your ‘Amen’ may ring true!”

When we take our place in the Communion procession, we are being invited not just to see and touch and taste. We are called beyond our hymns to where we can truly grasp what He offers and allow it to grasp us. We can’t stop with the fact that this is the Body and Blood of Christ. We have to allow ourselves to be consecrated as Christ was consecrated. Christ present in the Eucharist says to us, “Receive what you are and become what you receive; be flesh and blood given for the life of the world.” Once again, we are reminded that the Eucharist is about a life of service to others, not a private grabbing of some ethereal grace for ourselves.

Franciscan Friar Scott Surrency composed a poem “Can you drink the cup?” and the opening verses pose the key question of today’s feast. Can we drink the cup?

Drink, not survey or analyze,/ ponder or scrutinize -- /from a distance./ But drink – imbibe, ingest,/ take into you so that it becomes a piece of your inmost self.” (all of this adapted from CELEBRATION, 3 June 2018, p. 1-2)

Second, a fragment of a poem by St. Francis of Assisi: *I once spoke to my friend, an old squirrel, about the Sacraments – he got so excited./ and ran into a hollow in his tree and came back holding some acorns, an owl feather, and a ribbon he had found./ And I just smiled and said, “Yes, dear, you understand: everything imparts His grace.”* When Lady Julian of Norwich looked at a little hazelnut and said, “This is everything that is,” she was saying much the same thing. If we have one authentic relationship, it serves as the only real doorway to a relationship with everything else. How we do anything is how we do everything. To encounter one thing in its gratuity and uniqueness is to encounter all of creation – and its Creator – along with it. An authentic I-Thou relationship with ONE thing opens a universal doorway. How we relate is how we relate.

How do we get to this understanding? Only by prayer – which is the art of full relationship. It is learning how to relate to reality in an immediately appreciative and non-manipulative way. The contemplative mind does not demand, is not needy, and is not easily offended. It allows other things and people to have their own voices without trying to impose its own agenda on them. It takes a lifetime to learn this, it seems.

The daily practice of prayer will help us to both *allow and trust an overwhelming gratuity from outside ourselves*. It then offers us the safety, the validation, and the courage to relate to everything else as gratuitous gift too. When we see contemplatively, we know that we live in a fully SACRAMENTAL universe, where everything is a finger pointing at the moon of Divine Reality. Every ordinary moment can be an epiphany, a manifestation of God.

To let one moment teach us is to allow EVERY moment to teach us. We must allow ourselves to be at least slightly STUNNED by it until it draws us inward and upward, toward a subtle experience of wonder. But we usually need a single moment of gratuitous awe to get us started. (adapted from Richard Rohr, posting of 3/31/2018)

Which brings me to my third point and today's feast of Corpus Christi. Without FIRST having experienced the presence of God in EVERYTHING, it is very difficult for many people to find God in the SOMETHING we call the Body and Blood of Christ, in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

A few years ago I heard an interview on the radio with a bishop from a large American diocese. At one point, he was asked, "What do you consider as your single most important task as a bishop?" The bishop, a sincere and thoughtful man, answered: "To protect the faith." I would contrast his answer to one that I read from Cardinal Hume when he was faced with essentially the same question. His response as to the most important task facing the church was: "To try to help save the planet." These are obviously very different answers. Which is closer to Jesus?

Jesus, in defining His meaning and ministry, said: "My flesh is food for the life of the world." We can easily miss what's really contained in that. Notice what He's NOT saying: Jesus isn't saying that His flesh is food for the life of the church or for the life of Christians; albeit we, believers, get fed too and, indeed, generally get fed first, but the ultimate reason why Jesus came was not simply to feed *us*.

His body is food for the life of the world and the world is larger than the church. Jesus came into the world to be eaten up by the world. For this reason, He was born in a manger, a feeding-trough, a place where animals come to eat, and it's for this reason that He eventually ends up on a table, an altar, to be eaten by human beings – even when we do it without due reverence or attention. Jesus came not to defend Himself, the church, or the faith, but as nourishment for the planet. We can only arrive at this deeper understanding when we can appreciate St. Francis' dialogue with the squirrel and Julian's contemplation of the hazelnut. We need a sense of AWE.

We particularly need to keep this horizon of awe as we journey through a time of anti-ecclesial and anti-clerical sentiment. Today the church, its teachings, and its clergy are often under siege, sometimes for good and well-deserved reasons, but many times simply because of ideology and bias. The danger in this is not that the church will somehow collapse, but that the church, us, will become too defensive, too self-protective, lose the vulnerability that Jesus demonstrated and asks for, and instead see the world as an enemy to be fought rather than as a precious body to which we are asked to give our lives – akin to a parent who has a child whose hostility makes an easy loving relationship difficult, but who must then resist the temptation to write off responsibility for that child. The first task of the church, no matter the difficulty, is not to circle the wagons and defend ourselves. Even when the world doesn't welcome what we have to offer, we're still asked to give ourselves over to it as food.

This is why we need our private prayer AND the Eucharist. Without private prayer, we too easily lose our sense of awe, how beautiful and wonderful the world is that we have been given to serve – with all of its warts, challenges and sufferings. But without the Eucharist, we can too easily lose our sense of mission and the fact that our focus has to be beyond ourselves. The Eucharist is not our private snack. Too much of our fighting over the words, the postures, the music, the way we DO Eucharist is just a distraction from the mission – we exist as a Eucharistic community for the same reason Christ came to earth – to give our flesh as food for the life of the world. Our task is not to defend ourselves or even to carve out some peace for ourselves against a world which sometimes prefers not to have us around. No. Like Jesus, our real reason for being here is to try to help nourish and serve that very world that's often hostile to us. That takes both the AWE of faithful prayer and the mission-consciousness of faithful, weekly celebration of the Eucharist. And when we pray and celebrate Eucharist, we BECOME the body of Christ, given for the sake of the world. AMEN. (last section adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 7 September 2003)

FOR PERSONAL USE ONLY