

Tonight we immerse ourselves in mystery – the mystery of the Master who made the Universe, yet washes human feet, a God who makes bread throb with life and a cup blush with blood. And all of this we encounter in a meal at which He commanded: “Do this – in remembrance of me.”

We immerse our whole selves – mind and imagination, heart and senses. To see and listen, then finally to touch and taste. To savor a unique presence of a loving Lord. So may we marvel together as we relive a singular supper, an evening remembered down through the ages.

Two things I wish us to ponder this evening. First, the intimacy we share with God and one another. And second, what this covenant made in blood means.

First, the intimacy. It is a touchingly human thing Jesus did that startling Thursday we call Holy. With passionate desire, He tells His apostles, he has YEARNED to share this supper with them before He suffers. (cf. Lk 22:15). They became His COMPANIONS, those He shares bread with – cum – with, panus – bread. Companions was the term that St. Ignatius used for the members of the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits. A companion is someone you share your bread with. Bread is shared which becomes Christ’s body; wine is shared which becomes His blood. Bread of Angels – Panis Angelicus. And the cup of our salvation.

The bread is paired with wine. Wine in the ancient world was a sign of commitment – and intimacy. At times our image of the table is so private that we have trouble understanding a culture that saw the table as the place for serious agreements, even for pacts/treaties. In ancient Israel never was a pact formed, an agreement reached, a wedding celebrated, a feast noted, without the presence of wine. It was there not just as food but as a sign of the graciousness of the host.....and of the wisdom of the Creator. There seems to be an unasked question on the floor of the Temple, a question that need not be asked. Nevertheless the answer is given. The question? “Just how clever is this God that you worship?” The answer? “Blessed art thou, O Lord God, King of the Universe, Creator of the Fruit of the Vine.” That settles the discussion! Only God could have come up with something as blessed as wine.

Wine has been an important part of our Catholic understanding of the goodness of ALL creation. Ours is a faith which REJOICES in the things of the earth and partakes of them – we do not declare them ‘bad’ or ‘evil’ or sinful.’ Our entire sacramental system is founded on this deep love for the world which God made for our pleasure, our delight. Our Catholic understanding is admirably summed up in that marvelous little poem by Hilaire Belloc:

Where’er the Catholic sun doth shine

There’s food, laughter and good red wine.

At least I’ve always heard it so,

Benedicamus Domino! (Let us bless the Lord!)

That sage of the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin said that “Wine is proof that God loves us and wants us to be happy.” (He also apparently said that about beer!) And it was a priest and Benedictine monk, Dom Perignon, who invented the cork and made another discovery which was the result of his genius and some accident. When he should have been upstairs in the chapel at prayers with his brother monks, Dom Perignon was in the wine cellar playing with his new discoveries, the bottle and the cork. He knew that a still wine, or a wine that had completed fermentation, would continue to age and improve in the bottle. He

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removed the cork from a few and added a little more yeast and sugar and corked the bottles up again. And then, typical of the life of the Catholic Church, he watched. The day he tasted his new creation the brothers were again above singing hymns in the chapel. Tradition has it that the priest tasted the now carbonated wine and ran to the bottom of the stairs, yelling and interrupting the service of worship. "Brothers, come quickly," he cried, "I am drinking the stars." He had invented champagne.

Even in ancient Rome we find no word for treaty. The word that was used was 'libation.' "Let us drink together and form a pact, a libation." The older texts even talk about Moses eating and drinking with the King of the universe upon receiving the Ten Commandments. Drinking wine with God was a sign of intimacy. In tonight's meal, all of our weary world is called into table fellowship, into intimacy with God, into covenant with the Lamb who was slain, the Paschal Lamb whose blood is poured out upon the altar.

This covenant could have just been announced by Jesus – simply by saying so. But His love was never content with naked words. He added the final touch, the last stroke of love – HE GAVE HIS LIFE, HE POURED OUT HIS BLOOD. HE BECAME THE NEW LAMB slain for us. And you and I, the children washed in the blood of the Lamb, are the adopted children He died for.

Second, this covenant blood image has a beautiful background, touched upon in our 1st reading from Exodus about the paschal lamb. In the old shepherding communities, sometimes a shepherd would check his flock in the morning and find a new lamb....but the mother had died during the night. In another section of his flock he might find a ewe, sitting silently beside her newborn lamb that had died during the night. The mother would die of a broken heart and the orphan would die from lack of sustenance.

All logic would tell us to put the orphan under the care of the childless mother. But the two would know they were foreign, and they would not accept each other. The moment of wisdom came when the old shepherd, this old Jewish philosopher and theologian, would see in this event the nature of our relationship to God. We are so separated from God, he said, that God is dying of a broken heart -- and we are dying from lack of sustenance. And it seems that nothing can be done. We are foreigners to one another.

But one thing can be done. It is still being done by shepherds to this very day. If the shepherd slits the throat and drains the blood of the dead baby and washes the orphan in the blood of the lamb, the living mama smells her own and moves around so that the orphan can suckle, can come home to the table and live.

Tonight, we, the new Israel, the Church, dying from lack of sustenance, are invited to come home to the table, to a God who is dying of a broken heart in love-for-us. We come home as a people adopted, washed in the blood of the new paschal lamb, Jesus.

Tonight as a family, we come together in covenanted communion to bread that breathes and wine that bleeds, to eat Christ's Body and Drink His Blood, to do what Christians have done since that Last Supper which was but the first supper. This supper reminds us, tonight and always, that we need never go hungry again, never again die from lack of sustenance. This supper reminds us that we, the blood-bought children of adoption, can come home to the table – forever. Amen. (Help from THE FRUGAL GOURMENT COOKS WITH WINE, pp 75-76)