

June 14, 2020

11:30 a.m.

St. Augustine Cathedral

**Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ**

After these many weeks of celebrating Lent, Easter, Pentecost, and the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity just last Sunday---each of them important, and all of them Feasts celebrated by all Christians----today we celebrate one more, very important, and uniquely Catholic Feast.

This Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (also known as "*Corpus Christi*") celebrates the central mystery of our Catholic Faith---the Gift of the Holy Eucharist. Jesus gave Himself to us as the way for Him to remain with us always. This is what we celebrate every time we gather together around this Altar for Holy Mass---and when we are able to have the privilege of receiving Jesus' Real Presence with us, to keep us spiritually alive and strong. While many other Christian denominations might have what they call "Communion", which they understand as a symbolic reminder of Jesus with them, it is only we Catholics who believe, and have at the very heart and soul of our Catholic Faith, that the Eucharist IS Jesus' Real Presence with us---Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity---to be our Food and Drink for the journey of Faith.

We believe with all our hearts what we just heard Jesus say with such conviction in this morning's Gospel passage: "*I AM the Living Bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever. And the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.*" For some people, that's a hard teaching. St. John himself told us very clearly that many of the people standing there listening to Jesus couldn't believe what He was saying, and they challenged Him, asking: "*How can this be?*" But Jesus didn't back down or change His mind; in fact he just said it again, even more firmly: "*Amen, Amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his Blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood HAS eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.*"

It was at the Last Supper when Jesus turned that promise into a reality as He instituted the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Anticipating His great suffering and death the next day on Good Friday, when His Body would be scourged, beaten, broken, crucified and killed for the salvation of the world, and when His life-Blood would be poured out for the remission of sins----in anticipation of that Bloody Sacrifice, Jesus gave us this Memorial Sacrifice for all time. It was during that

meal that Jesus took Bread---blessed and broke it---and gave it to the Apostles, saying: *“Take this all of you and eat of it; for this is My Body which is given up for you.”* And in the same way, with the Cup of Wine: *“Take this all of you and drink of it: this is the Cup of my Blood which will be poured out for you.”* And then, Jesus gave us the reason why He was instituting the Eucharist when He said: *“Do this in Memory of Me.”*

This is what’s at the heart of every Mass. The Eucharist IS what the Priest says immediately after the Consecration at each Mass: *“The Mystery of our Faith.”* And our response to that proclamation is: *“We proclaim Your Death O Lord, and profess your Resurrection, until you come again.”*, or a variation on that same belief, that the Eucharist is a participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ.

At the end of the beautiful Eucharistic Prayer during which the Consecration takes place, we pray what’s called the Doxology, when the priest proclaims that “through, with, and in Christ, united in the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is given to the Father forever”, and we proclaim our “Amen”, not just once, or twice, but three times----it’s so important that it’s called “the Great Amen”!

And when it’s time for us to receive the Eucharist, at the moment just before, there’s a brief, but significant conversation that takes place, which is intended to be a personal act of Faith on behalf of each of us. The Minister of the Eucharist presents the Sacred Host and says: *“The Body of Christ”*. And we respond *“Amen.”*

That little word, “Amen”, both our individual response, and our collective response at the “Great Amen”, contains a lot of meaning. It’s part of the language of “Liturgy” and it’s a word expressive of “Faith”. It means “So be it”; “I agree”. It’s a word of conviction, of trust, of belief. It’s a word that should indicate our willingness and readiness to become more like Jesus Himself Whom we are receiving.

St. Augustine, our Patron, loved to say about receiving the Eucharist: “Receive what you are and be what you receive.”

That’s why Jesus gave us the Gift of the Eucharist. It’s not just a Gift to make us feel spiritually blessed, and really loved. It should certainly do that, but Jesus intends for His Gift to do even more. The Eucharist is supposed to help us to become more like Christ----it’s supposed to help us do what St. Paul talked about in today’s Second Reading, to allow us *“to participate in”* the Sacrifice that Jesus

gave when He *gave His Body and poured out His Blood*. As St. Paul put it *“the bread that we break is a participation in the Body of Christ”, and the cup of blessing is a participation in the Blood of Christ”*. Therefore, when we *“participate”* in the Body and Blood of Christ, we are trying to conform ourselves to Christ and willingly working to become united with the entire Body of Christ--- all of you, all of humanity.

We need to stop and realize that when we receive the Eucharist, we are receiving Jesus Himself. That should make us be overwhelmed with a sense of humility and unworthiness, but at the same time, a sense of being so very much loved. And while we could never repay Jesus for the “priceless” Gift of Himself that He freely gives to us, what we CAN do is to give ourselves to Jesus, in our desire to become more like Him.

We can never lose sight of the fact that Jesus didn’t give us the Eucharist just for ourselves, but as a way to strengthen us to be sent on Jesus’ mission in which He commands us all to participate, namely, to love our neighbor. As I wrote in my recent Pastoral Letter *“Loving God and Our Neighbor: Living the Mission of the Eucharist”*: *“ Our encounter with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist should never leave us with a sense of complacency, concerned only with our own needs....Our Lord’s Gift of Himself to us is intended to inspire and strengthen us for service to others.”* Whether that “service” is to just go back home and love our family, or to go forth and give witness to Jesus’ Love to the whole world, we are sent to serve.

As you all know, this Year 2020 is a year that we especially designated here in the Diocese of Kalamazoo as a *“Year of the Eucharist”*. I’m sure none of us could ever have imagined that in the first six months of this “Year of the Eucharist, that most of you have not been able to come to Mass and receive the Eucharist for almost 2/3 of that time due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, and the restrictions forcing us to stay home to keep the coronavirus from spreading. But as the old saying reminds us, “absence makes the heart grow fonder”; my hope and prayer is that because we haven’t been able to receive the Eucharist, our desire to be united with Jesus has grown more intense; I pray that we have found other ways, such as participating in livestreamed celebrations of the Mass and renewing the practice of “spiritual communions”, to stimulate our hunger and longing for the time when we will be able to receive Jesus Sacramentally. Our “Year of the Eucharist” is still an important and special time for us, and I hope that we will spend the remainder of this Year rekindling the fervor and respect for the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, as well as by spending time in prayer, reading

Scripture, and most especially by practicing the Corporal and Spiritual works of Mercy.

Jesus comes to be with us in the Eucharist, so that we in turn can “be Christ” to others, by showing compassion, understanding, working for reconciliation and peace, following Jesus’ example of humble service, and committing ourselves to unite whatever divides us.

These are challenging times in which we’re living. Even though the 3-4 months of restrictions and lock-downs during the pandemic were challenging, there was a strong sense of unity among the whole human family that many of us have never seen before, because we all had a *common enemy* we were united against: the unseen and dangerous enemy of the coronavirus. Unfortunately, in light of the brutal and inhumane killing of George Floyd almost 3 weeks ago, hatred, anger, and violence, fueled by racism, injustice and inequality have created great division among us.

The Eucharist is a Sacrament of Unity. Jesus gave us the Eucharist to help us to live together as One, united in Christ.

Today’s Feast in particular, and our Faith in Jesus in general, means that we must avoid being influenced by political pressures or trying to force us to take sides. We can only stand with Jesus, Who calls us to unity, and tells us that we must love God with our whole heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor----all neighbors----every person---as we love ourselves.

Today’s Feast in particular, and our Faith in Jesus in general, demands that we not just *receive communion* worthily, but that we *live in communion with* others just as worthily.

Today’s Feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ in particular, and our Catholic Faith in general, means that our “Amen” commits us to follow Jesus, to live the Beatitudes, to forgive our brother and sister, to “turn the other cheek” and “go the extra mile” rather than to demand retribution, take revenge, or participate in retaliation. Our “Amen” means that by “participating” in the *Body of Christ given*, and the *Blood of Christ outpoured*, we are willing to love like Christ in the sacrificial outpouring of ourselves for the well-being of others----ALL others, at all times.

And why would we do that? Because: *Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, Almighty Father, forever and ever. Amen. Amen. Amen.*