

20th SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME – B (August 16, 2009)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

First, I want to update you on an issue mentioned in the current issue of the parish newsletter which you should have received by now—the needed repairs to our church organ. I won't repeat everything in that article, but I can now tell you that those repairs will begin on August 24 (a week from Monday). The work will take about 10-12 weeks (till mid-to-late November); there will be occasions during this time when parts of the organ will be disassembled. When that occurs, the choir loft will not be available for seating—we really cannot afford to have anyone up there under those conditions. So when the ushers tell you that the choir loft is closed or you see signs to that effect, please do not go up there—we will certainly be able to find seating for you in the main pews. This will also have an impact on musicians and singers, especially during funerals. During the time that the choir loft is closed, our resurrection choir will provide music from the music area near the sanctuary. I know this will be a disruption of our usual routine, but it will only be temporary; your understanding and patience will be appreciated! Finally, I would refer you to an article in today's parish bulletin regarding the cost of these repairs. We have the funds needed for this project in our memorial account, but we would certainly and most gratefully accept any donations you wish to make toward this repair work (again, check the bulletin for details).

Do you remember last weekend when we considered how Jesus is always challenging us to grow in faith and holiness? In today's gospel we come to the climax of his 'bread of life' discourse—and what scandal Jesus' words caused! "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life..." and on and on. Jesus keeps hammering home the point, repeating himself as if to say "I know this sounds unbelievable, but I really, really mean it!" Next week we will hear of the reaction of his followers—some of them simply couldn't take it and so they left Jesus.

What's going on here; what is Jesus talking about? It's about the Eucharist; there really is no other way to interpret his words once you consider thoughtfully and prayerfully what he said. It is no longer possible to think that Jesus was speaking only in a symbolic way. The Greek word that is translated as 'eats' or 'feeds' refers explicitly to the physical, biological act of eating—using teeth and jaws to chew real, physical food. Jesus' words dovetail very well with his institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper as told in the other three gospels where he tells the apostles 'take and eat—this is my body' and so on. St. Paul confirms this understanding of the Eucharist truly being Jesus' Body and Blood in chapter 10 and 11 of 1 Cor., and the early saints and Fathers of the Church say the same thing over and over. To take just one example among the many that could be cited: St. Justin the Martyr, writing barely a century after the time of Jesus, said that "the food which has been made into the Eucharist...is both the flesh and blood of that incarnated Jesus."

Jesus is very clear that the Eucharist is his Body and Blood; Sacred Scripture, Sacred Tradition and 2000 years of Christian history affirm that claim. Obviously the Church has grown in her understanding of this mystery of our faith—using words like 'transubstantiation' and the idea that the basic substance and reality of bread and wine is changed by the priest's repetition of Jesus' words into his Body and Blood. Outwardly, to our senses, they still appear to be bread and wine—but that's only an appearance. That core belief of Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist has been with us from the beginning. And so it simply is not true, as some of our non-Catholic friends believe, that the Catholic Church somehow invented the Eucharist or the doctrine of the Real Presence much later in the Middle Ages.

That Real Presence and Jesus' invitation to eat his Body and drink his Blood lead to many important consequences, some of which I spoke about on the feast of Corpus Christi earlier this year. As a brief reminder:

1. it's why we kneel (at least when feasible) during the Eucharistic prayer when the bread and wine is consecrated. Kneeling is a posture of worship and adoration, and so it is only fitting that we kneel when Jesus, God the Son, becomes physically present on our altars.

2. it's why we bow or make some other gesture of reverence before receiving Holy Communion; again, it is Jesus our God and Savior who we approach. And when we hear the invitation "The Body/Blood of Christ", we answer with a clear "Amen" which means "I believe; it is true". We could call that 'amen' a mini-profession of faith, a statement of acceptance of our faith in the Eucharist and the Catholic faith in general. That is why we cannot extend a general invitation to receive Communion to those who do not profess or practice the Catholic faith in its fullness. By no means is it a statement that Catholics are somehow morally superior or can look down our noses at non-Catholics. It simply reflects the fact that receiving Communion is an outward sign of our belief in the Real Presence of Christ but also of our own full communion with the Church in a larger sense. Where that full communion does not exist, receiving the Eucharist cannot be that sign of unity that it is supposed to be. I would refer you to the inside front cover of the missalette for more information on this issue.

3. Jesus' Real Presence in the Eucharist continue in the Host even after the Mass is ended, and so the Church invites us to worship Christ in the Blessed Sacrament at other times as well. This Monday is our monthly day of Eucharistic adoration here at St. Edward—I encourage you to sign up for a time (the sign-up sheet is in usual place in the main entrance). If you cannot commit to be present for an hour, you are welcome to come for any length of time. In our hectic and noisy world, it's a real gift to spend some quiet time in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ himself. And I want to put in another plug for Perpetual Adoration at the Columbus chapel; the phone number is on the bulletin cover—give a call if you have questions or would like to participate.

The most important consequence, however, is this: by receiving Jesus in the Eucharist, we are transformed—we become more like him. Recall again that challenge from last week about growing in holiness—the Eucharist is the means par excellence by which that happens. You know the old saying "you are what you eat". Well, if the Eucharist is the true Body of Blood of Christ, then how can we not become more closely conformed to Christ? We receive him into ourselves, and if we are conscientious about remembering that and letting Jesus even more deeply into not only our bodies but our minds and souls, then we will become more like him and experience the peace and joy only he can give. If, on the other hand, we receive Holy Communion mechanically or routinely and just take it for granted, then we make less and less effective the grace and joy that Jesus so wants to give us. "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day." Jesus invites us to receive himself into ourselves so that we can become ever more like himself. The degree to which that happens depends entirely on our response to that amazing invitation, to that heavenly banquet.