

MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST -- B (June 14, 2009)

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It's hard to imagine too many more things more basic to life and its preservation than the acts of eating and drinking; our bodies need food and water (and other liquids) in order to survive. And so it is not too surprising that we spend a lot of time and energy obtaining, preparing and consuming food and drink. So many of life's important moments often involve special meals; think of the dinners that accompany weddings or funerals, graduation parties or family holiday get-togethers. How often have you heard "what's for dinner/lunch?" Or how often do you ask yourself: "do I have bran flakes or corn flakes for breakfast this morning?" I think we have all heard the expression "you are what you eat"; when we hear the concerns about all the junk food that is seemingly everywhere, that could be a pretty scary expression...

Today the Church celebrates a feast that reminds us that eating and drinking are not only physical or biological acts, but that there is also a spiritual component to them as well. We observe the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ--the centerpiece of our celebration of the Eucharist. Bread and wine, very basic food and drink formed from wheat and grapes grown from the earth, are changed into the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ through the words and actions of the priest at the altar. This is certainly 'mystery' in the sense we spoke of that word last week on Trinity Sunday: something we believe because it is divinely revealed, even if we cannot fully comprehend it in our limited human intellect. The reality of the Eucharist as the real Body and Blood of Christ is affirmed strongly by Jesus himself. In today's gospel from St. Mark's account of the Last Supper, Jesus could not have been more clear: "Take it [this bread]; this is my body...This [cup] is my blood of the covenant". Jesus did not say "this bread represents my body; this cup symbolizes my blood"--he said "this is my body...this is my blood." When we consider these words along with what Jesus said in the sixth chapter of John's gospel (which we will hear a few weeks from now), we realize that we have to take Jesus at his word--he meant precisely what he said.

Our belief in this Real Presence of Jesus' Body and Blood in the Eucharist certainly is grounded in the words of the gospels, but it is not limited to those words alone. The writings of the Church Fathers--those great saints and theologians of the first few centuries of the Church's life--give further support to our belief. St. Ignatius of Antioch, a bishop who lived less than 100 years after the time of Christ, wrote "I have no delight in perishable food...I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread...which is the flesh of Jesus Christ...and I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is ...eternal life". Many other examples could be given. Speaking of the Church Fathers, I am doing an adult education series on this subject on the third Monday night of each month in the church hall (check the bulletin for details--you are more than welcome to attend even if you haven't attended prior sessions). Many of you have heard the word "transubstantiation"--a word used by the Church in a 13th-century council to describe in a bit more detail how the bread and wine become Christ's Body and Blood: the substance, the basic essence of the bread and wine are changed by the words of consecration to the essence of that Body and Blood; only the outward form or appearance of bread and wine remain. These doctrines and beliefs have been reaffirmed many times since--in church councils (including Vatican II) as well as in the teachings of many popes (including John Paul II and Benedict XVI).

Our belief in the Real Presence of Jesus' Body and Blood has a number of important consequences. One of the Precepts of the Church--our obligations as Catholic Christians--is to receive Holy Communion at least once a year. Our belief leads us to show respect to the Eucharistic presence by bowing or genuflecting when going by the tabernacle, bowing before receiving Communion, and kneeling during the Eucharistic prayer at Mass when the bread and wine are consecrated to become Christ's Body and Blood. The nature of our eucharistic belief and what it means has consequences also regarding who can receive Holy Communion and in what circumstances. I cannot review those in detail at this time; I refer

you to the inside front cover of the missalette where the U.S. Bishops' "Guidelines for the Reception of Communion" are set out in full. The Church invites us to take part in adoration of the Real Presence outside of Mass as well. Here at St. Edward, we have a monthly day of eucharistic adoration on the third Monday of the month with Benediction at 7 p.m.--where the priest or deacon blesses the people with the consecrated Host. We are also fortunate to have Perpetual Adoration of the Eucharist here in Waterloo--at the chapel at Columbus High School. Many of you have found it to be a real grace to spend an hour there each week or whenever you can come in and simply be in the presence of Jesus Christ himself--a time of peace, of prayer, of quiet; a welcome break from the busy-ness and noise of the world. If you are interested in taking part in that, please call the Perpetual Adoration phone number listed on the front cover of the bulletin.

But our belief in the Real Presence of the Lord's Body and Blood goes even deeper than all this. Remember: the Eucharist is real, tangible food and drink, the real and true Body and Blood of Jesus under the outward form of bread and wine. Just as the ordinary food and drink we consume become part of our bodily and physical existence, so does the Eucharist--Jesus himself--become part of us, of our very existence. Pope Benedict has referred to the Eucharist as "bringing us out of ourselves to be united with him, making us one with him." Indeed, 'you are what you eat'! After we receive Communion, when we leave Mass, we are taking Christ out into the world because we have received him into ourselves--physically as well as spiritually. In a very real sense, we are a temple of the Lord, a receptacle; we can even and truly say that we are a tabernacle of the Lord--no less than the tabernacle that is in our Eucharistic chapel here at St. Edward.

The crucial question then becomes: do we remember that? Do we live and think and act like people who are grateful for receiving Christ into our very bodies and who then take him out in the rest of our lives and world in our bodies? Do we leave the parking lot and drive the streets and highways conscious of the fact that Jesus is with us and within us because we received his Body and Blood? Do our thoughts, attitudes and actions toward others reflect the fact that Jesus is with us and within us because we received his Body and Blood? When we are at the office, at home or at the ballgame, watching TV or alone at the computer, are we conscious of the fact that Jesus is with us and within us--is part of our very selves--because we received his Body and Blood?

Like the mystery of the Trinity that we celebrated last Sunday, the mystery of our Lord's Body and Blood is not simply an abstract dogma having no relevance to real life. It is supremely relevant, because it is all about Jesus Christ and the fact that in the Eucharist we receive him into ourselves--eating his Body and drinking his Blood. Jesus thereby becomes a real part of us--not just in this church building, but wherever else we go and whatever else we do. We are given the incomparable privilege of receiving Jesus into our own bodies. With that privilege comes the awesome challenge and responsibility of being genuine and authentic signs of that Real Presence of Christ within us to the rest of the world. God grant us the grace through the Eucharist, more and more, to truly become what we eat.