

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST – C (June 6, 2010)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

Another school year has come to an end, and another group of seniors have graduated from our high schools, colleges and universities. Graduation ceremonies, of course, lead to receptions—and I was able to get to a number of them over the last couple of weeks. It is always good to join in the celebration, and there is always food and drink to add to the festivities. That is almost always a part of any social gathering, isn't it? I remember when I was growing up: we would go to my Uncle Vince and Aunt Rose's place to play cards (their farm was about a mile from ours). During the card game, Aunt Rose would always have plenty for us to munch on. Then, when we finished the game (generally after midnight—we took our card-playing seriously!), Aunt Rose would bring out the lunch: sandwiches, chips, relishes, kolaches, cake, cookies...just a little light snack, you know...

It was all about hospitality: providing nourishment for the body which also led to nourishment for the soul, the joy of relating to one another by serving one another. We see that in the readings today as well. The gospel presents us with the familiar story of Jesus speaking to large crowds for a good part of the day. As time went on, they would naturally get hungry. The apostles suggest that Jesus dismiss the crowd so they could get something to eat. But Jesus challenged the twelve to give them some food themselves—they were challenged to show hospitality, to give them nourishment. And even though they had only five loaves and two fish to share, we know the rest of the story, don't we? Jesus blessed and broke those seven items, the apostles passed them to the crowd, and all had enough to eat, with plenty of leftovers besides.

Today we celebrate the feast, the solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ—or its more traditional name of Corpus Christi (Latin for “Body of Christ”). We celebrate the sacrament, the reality of the Eucharist: bread and wine which are blessed and consecrated such that they become the very Body and Blood of Jesus Christ which we are then invited to eat and drink. It is truly and surely the ultimate act of hospitality. Jesus not only offers us food and drink for our nourishment and sustenance—Jesus, through the words and actions of the priest, makes himself that food and drink offered for our nourishment and sustenance. This is certainly another one of those fundamental mysteries of our faith that surpass our ability to understand but that we still believe because it has been revealed to us by God (remember our celebration of the mystery of the Holy Trinity last weekend).

St. Paul reminds us about the basics here. Today's second reading is from his first letter to the Corinthians, and it is the same reading we hear every year on Holy Thursday night when we recall the origin or institution of the Eucharist. Paul reminds the Corinthians what Jesus did at the Last Supper: he took bread and wine, blessed them and gave them to the disciples and said “take and eat and drink: this is my Body and Blood.” Then he told them to do that very same thing in his memory. The apostles must have been astonished to hear and see such things; I strongly suspect they did not have a clue what Jesus was doing and saying here. But after Jesus' resurrection and their receiving the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, they remembered what Jesus did (as he promised they would) and they began to celebrate this Eucharist themselves. The Church has done so ever since, and will continue to do so until the end of time.

Can we even begin to fathom how much Jesus loves us? Do we even try to remember and appreciate just what a priceless gift the Eucharist is? Again, this is Jesus Christ, God the Son, who wants so much to be with us and within us, that he displays this perfect hospitality, this gift of himself in his Body and Blood. Pope John XXIII (now Blessed John since his beatification) said that the Blessed Sacrament, the Body and Blood of Christ, contains all the splendor of creation and redemption, the whole life of Jesus, and it is offered as our “daily nourishment of love, prayer and contemplation”.

It really is amazing and it really is the ultimate display of generosity and hospitality. Jesus offers us nourishment and strength of body, mind and soul, and that nourishment is Jesus himself in his Body and Blood. That offer is the continual presence, the “making available to us” now of his self-sacrifice and death on the Cross at Calvary. The Old Testament gives us many examples of sacrifices and offerings made to God; e.g. the bread and wine offered by Melchizedek that we heard about in the first reading and responsorial psalm. But Jesus’ priestly offering was utterly unique: he is both priest (the one who offers) and victim (the one who is offered). And the Eucharist, the making present to us of his Body and Blood here and now and our sharing in those gifts, is our opportunity to be joined to him ever more fully and ever more completely.

This is why the Eucharist is truly the source and summit of our life in Christ as the Second Vatican Council taught us, and it is why the Church, speaking with Jesus’ authority, challenges us with the responsibility and obligation to participate in Sunday Mass. So often I have heard the claim (maybe you have too): “I don’t need to go to church on Sunday; I can worship God out in the woods or elsewhere in his creation.” Yes, it is certainly true that we can worship God anywhere and everywhere—and I hope we all do so. But you cannot take part in the Eucharist everywhere; you cannot receive the Body and Blood of Jesus your Savior out in the woods or at the mall or on the golf course or other such places. Jesus offers us his presence, the gift of himself most completely and most powerfully in the Eucharist. Do we accept his gracious invitation with joy and gratitude, or do we throw it away as if it were nothing more than another piece of junk mail?

It is indeed all about hospitality. We enjoy both offering hospitality to others and gratefully receiving it from others. It seems to be part of our very nature; we are ‘hard-wired’ to give and receive. Jesus responds to that nature of ours (he shares in it himself, after all) by offering us the total gift of himself—his Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity—in the Blessed Sacrament. What he wants in return is our grateful acceptance of that gift of himself and our desire to become ever more like him whose Body and Blood we receive. Jesus has already shown us his perfect hospitality, offering us nourishment through this self-offering. What hospitality will we gratefully show in response to him?