

THE MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (CORPUS CHRISTI)

GEN 14:18-20; I COR 11: 23-26; LUKE 9: 11-17 (JUNE 6,2001)

Apollo 11 landed on the moon on Sunday, July 20, 1969. Most remember astronaut Neil Armstrong's first words as he stepped onto the moon's surface: "*That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind.*" But few know about the first meal eaten on the moon. Dennis Fisher reports that Buzz Aldrin, the NASA Astronaut had taken aboard the spacecraft a tiny Communion kit provided by his Episcopalian pastor. Aldrin sent a radio broadcast to Earth asking listeners to contemplate the events of the day and give thanks. Then, blacking out the broadcast for privacy, Aldrin read, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit." Then, silently, he gave thanks and partook of the consecrated elements. (Dan Gulley: "Communion on the Moon": *Our Daily Bread*: June/July/August, 2007). His actions remind us that in the Lord's Supper, God's children can share the life of Jesus from any place on Earth – and even from the moon. God is everywhere, and our worship should reflect this reality. In Psalm 139 we are told that wherever we go, God is intimately present with us. Buzz Aldrin celebrated that experience on the surface of the moon. Thousands of miles from earth, he took time to commune with the One who created, redeemed, and established fellowship with him.

Today, we celebrate the solemn feast of *Corpus Christi*. It is a doctrinal feast established for three purposes: 1) to give God collective thanks for Christ's abiding presence with us in the Eucharist and to honor him there; 2) to instruct the people in the mystery, faith and devotion surrounding the Eucharist, and 3) to teach us to appreciate and make use of the great gift of the Holy Eucharist, both as a sacrament and as a sacrifice. In the three-year cycle of the Sunday liturgy, there is a different theme each year for this *Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ*. In Cycle A the theme is the Eucharist as our food and drink; in Cycle B the emphasis is on the Eucharist as the sign of the covenant; and in Cycle C the theme focuses on the priesthood of Jesus. Although we celebrate the institution of the Holy Eucharist on Holy Thursday, the Church wants to emphasize its importance by a special feast, formerly called "*Corpus Christi*." It was Pope Urban IV who extended the feast to the universal Church. This is one of the few feasts left in which we observe a procession and a sung "*Sequence*."

The biblical foundation: Our belief in this Real Presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist derives from the literal interpretation of the promise of Christ to give us his Body and Blood for our spiritual food and drink, as found in St. John's Gospel, Chapter 6, and also in the four independent accounts of the fulfillment of this promise at the Last Supper (Mt. 26; Mk. 14; Lk. 22; 1 Cor. 11). Eucharistic theologians explain the *real presence* by a process called *transubstantiation*: the entire "*substance*" of bread and wine is changed into the risen and glorified Body and Blood of Christ, retaining only the "*accidents*" (taste, color, shape) of bread and wine. Can there be a religion in which God is closer to man than our Catholic

Christianity? Jesus does not believe that he is humiliating himself in coming to us and giving himself to us in his flesh and blood.

Today's gospel: *Theologically*, the miraculous feeding of the crowd of five thousand men could be understood as a type or prefiguring of Jesus' gift of the Eucharistic bread that would spiritually nourish those who believed in him. *Christologically*, the taking, breaking and giving of the loaves anticipated the "taking" of Jesus in the garden, the "breaking" of his body during his passion and Jesus' "giving" of himself as a sacrifice for the sins of humankind. The description of the miracle also points out the disciples' role in the miraculous feeding of the multitude. Only after they finally agree to give him what little they have can Jesus bless, break and give it back to them to distribute to the hungry crowd. Luke tells us that Jesus demands all his followers "share what little they have" when they gather for the Lord's Supper. No matter how insignificant or small our gift, it could be the very thing Jesus blesses to satisfy the hunger of those around us. To die by becoming one and to die by sharing ourselves are at the heart of the Eucharist. If those elements are missing, our rubrics and actions are meaningless. In Greek the word *koinonia* is used by the Christian writers to describe both the Eucharistic communion and the communion of wealth. For the first Christian communities the two things were the same (cfr. Ac.2:42-45).

Theological significance: Center and culmination of Christian life. Vatican II states that as a sacrifice "the holy Eucharist is the center and culmination of Christian life." Why? 1) Because it enables us to participate in Christ's sacrifice as a present reality and to benefit from its fruits in our own lives. 2) Because it helps us to worship the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the most perfect way. 3) Because it strengthens our charity and unity with Jesus and each other in a joint offering of his body and blood to the Father. 4) Because it gives us a lasting memorial of Christ's suffering, death and resurrection, reminding us of our obligation to make loving sacrifices for others. The Eucharist is the mystery of our faith, the mystery of our hope, the mystery of our charity. Why do we celebrate the Eucharist some 2,000 years later? We do this because Jesus told us to do so: "*Do this in memory of me.*" St. Augustine in the 5th century said it best when he said: "It is your mystery, the mystery of your life that has been placed on the altar." This Holy Memorial is known by various names: 1) "*The Eucharist*" because Jesus offered Himself to God the Father as an act of thanksgiving; 2) "*The Lord's Supper*"--or "*Breaking of the Bread*"--because we celebrate it as a meal; 3) "*Holy Communion*" because, we become one with Christ by receiving Him; and 4) "*Holy Mass*" (holy sending), because it gives us a mission: "Go in peace to love and serve others."

The sacrament and the sacrifice: Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist during the Last Supper as a sacramental banquet and a sacrificial offering. As a sacrament, the Holy Eucharist is an outward sign in and through which we meet Jesus who shares his life of grace with us. In this Sacrament of the Eucharist, we do meet Jesus the risen Lord who comes to us under signs of bread and wine to nourish and strengthen us for our journey through life. The Eucharistic Meal

is a great mystery because during the Eucharistic celebration the substance of bread and wine are converted into the risen Jesus' body and blood, while their appearances (or 'accidents') remain. We believe in this transformation of bread and wine (called Transubstantiation) because Jesus unequivocally taught it and authorized his apostles to repeat it. As a sacrament, the Holy Eucharist imparts to us Jesus' abiding presence in our souls. We share in his divine life, which is an assurance of eternal life and the basis for the conviction that we are children of God the Father. God shares His life with Jesus and with all other people. The Eucharist is the sacrament of our union with Jesus. In this sacrament, Jesus gives us his own Body, broken for us on the cross and his precious Blood poured out for us, in order that our sins might be forgiven. The Eucharistic celebration is also a sacrifice because it is the re-presentation or re-living in an unbloody manner of Christ's Death on Good Friday and of his Resurrection on Easter Sunday. By means of signs, symbols and prayers, we share in Christ's passion, death and resurrection made really present for us in an unbloody manner. This re-presenting, this re-living of the One Sacrifice of Christ, which is the heart and point of every Mass, assures us of Jesus' love for us and of his forgiveness of our sins. Through this sacrifice, the risen Jesus becomes present on the altar, offering himself to the Father through the ministry of the priest.

The duty of preparing properly to receive Holy Communion: We should remember the warning given by St. Paul: "*Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be answerable for the body and blood of the Lord. Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgment against themselves.*" [1 Cor. 11:27-9].