Third Week of Easter, Saturday, 2024
Reflection: When We Eat His Body and Drink His Blood

Christ gives himself totally and without reservation.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His bride has made herself ready." It was given to her to clothe herself in fine linen, bright and clean, for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. Then he said to me, "Write, 'Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'" And he said to me, "These are true words of God."

Rev. 10: 7-9

Why do we speak about eating the Body and drinking the Blood of Christ when speaking about the Eucharist? To begin with, it is because Jesus said, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you." Why would Jesus want to be physically present to us under the appearance of bread and wine? Why did Jesus command us to eat his body and drink his blood, even making this a condition for being his disciple? That is a hard teaching of Jesus that was difficult for first century Jews to stomach as it is for Christians today. Many of his disciples walked away, and many Christian churches and ecclesial communities continue to walk away from this teaching, which remains a stumbling block to Christian unity.

To answer those questions, we must go back to the Greek philosophers. Plato famously taught that the soul (spirit) was superior to the physical body. Death was akin to a prison break because it meant the soul could escape the body and be truly free. Throughout history, the Greeks and many others taught that the body and all matter were inferior and even evil. The spirit was good and on a higher plane than the physical one. If truth be known, many of us are Platonists in this regard.

Note how this thinking contradicts the account of creation that affirms God created this material world and everything in it, including humans, as good and very good.[1] Note that Adam did not become alive until God breathed a soul into his body, which was made only of clay. Unlike the Greeks, who believed that for the human person to be fully alive, the spirit had to be freed from the body, God revealed that for human persons to be fully alive, their spirit had to be united with their body. The Church affirms this by teaching the Risen Christ retains his human body though it has been transfigured or transformed into a higher level of existence. That means we cannot talk about the Risen Christ as if he exists as a pure spirit, no longer needing a body.

That will help us understand God's thinking (wisdom) behind having the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, which the Church teaches is the Risen Jesus who is really and truly present, soul and divinity. That is another way of saying the person of Jesus, who has two natures, human and divine, is just as present to us now as he was when he was walking the earth in his physical body 2000 years ago. Think about that. At Holy Communion, you are holding the Body of Christ, the very person of Christ, in your hands. You are also being touched by the Body of Christ, the person of Christ, when you hold him in your hands at Holy Communion. The same Christ who healed people when he touched them now touches you. Think about that.

Still, why did Jesus insist that we eat his Body and drink his Blood, even making this a condition for being his disciple? In the spirit of Mary, let's ponder this question and seek the deeper meaning behind eating the Body and drinking the Blood of Christ. To help us do that, I want to look at this action using

[1] Genesis 1:31

the lens of the Sacrament of Marriage, where the husband and wife are no longer two but become one body in Christ.

When couples are dating, they long for the day when they will be together forever, when they will no longer be two but one. They become a new creation by exchanging the marriage vows and when those vows are consummated. That happens when the words of their marriage vows, pledging to give themselves totally to each other in love, become enfleshed in the marital embrace. They offer the gift of themselves (person or spirit) through the gift of their bodies. The husband and wife lose themselves in each other so much so we can say they are no longer two but one flesh while retaining their identities.[2]

God made us with an innate hunger to be one with him, to be together forever. St. Augustine put it this way, "Our hearts are restless (or hungry) until they rest in (or are fed by) God." In Holy Communion, the Son of God fulfills our heart's desire and addresses our deepest longing or hunger: to be united with God in love. In Holy Communion, Jesus gives himself, body and soul, to the communicant who receives his body, now under the appearance of bread and wine, by which Jesus gives his person (soul) in love to the soul that embraces him in love.[3] Jesus becomes one with us, but we neither disappear nor are subsumed into God. We retain our individual identities. At the same time, the divine life (love) given to us in Baptism is nourished and strengthened by the one who alone can calm our restless hearts and satisfy our deepest hunger. In Holy Communion, the Risen Christ satisfies that hunger to be united with God in love and intensifies it by giving us a taste of heaven, where we will be together forever with God.

Eating the Body of Christ and drinking the Blood of Christ is a continuation of Jesus giving himself totally and entirely to us in the sacrifice of the cross but now in a sacred meal. Jesus' gift of himself in the Eucharist is best revealed in how couples love each other in the Sacrament of Marriage.[4] I can say that because the Lord called the Church his spouse (Mark 2:19) and regards the Church as the object of his

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[2] "That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body" (Genesis 2:24).

[33] The Eucharist is understood as being a new covenant between God and his people. As a review, a contract is an exchange of goods between two parties. I will do this or that for you. You will do this or that in return. Once the terms of the contract are met, the two parties usually go their separate ways.
A covenant is different. It involves establishing a relationship, a communion in love. "I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God, and you shall know that I am the LORD your God, who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians" (Exodus 6:7). A covenant is sacred and binding relationship established by God with his people. It is fulfilled in the new and everlasting covenant established by Christ through the incarnation and his life, death and resurrection. The New Covenant in Christ fulfills the God's promise of a new and lasting covenant foretold by the prophet Jeremiah. "For this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD: "I will put My law within them and write it on their heart; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people (Jeremiah 31:33). That is what is happening whenever we eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ. He gives himself totally to us in love. We are to give ourselves totally to him in love. Christ and the communicant become one body, his body, which is his gift to the Church and is intended to embrace all of humanity. The latter is the mission entrusted to the Church.

[4] This refers to the bloody sacrifice of Jesus on the cross where Jesus gave himself totally and completely out of love for sinful humanity. (Love will always entail sacrifice because we live in a sinful world that resists love and makes loving painful.) Whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, that sacrifice is brought forward into the present, but in an unbloody way. That past event at Calvary becomes present to us at Mass. When the priest raises up (presents) the Body and Blood of Christ at the consecration of the Mass, we are at Calvary looking at Jesus who was raised up on the cross where he suffered and died for you and me. We are looking at the risen Christ who is also looking at you and me with love. He is looking to see if you and I will look upon him with love and give ourselves to him totally and completely as he does to us.

spousal love. As the bride of Christ, the Church is mysteriously united to Christ, with the two becoming one, the body of Christ.

Look upon the Eucharist as Jesus says, "I promise to be true to you, in good times and in bad, in sickness and health, through death and into eternal life." This is the Spouse speaking to his bride, the Church. God has chosen the most intense experience of intimacy that human beings experience in marriage to reveal the depth of intimacy God seeks with us human beings. When we eat and drink the Body and Blood of Christ, the Risen Christ continues to love us by giving himself (person) totally and completely as he did on the cross, but now through a sacred meal. Holy Communion anticipates the day when we will be invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb and say, or better sing, "*Let us rejoice and be glad and give the glory to Him, for the marriage of the Lamb has come and His bride has made herself ready" (Rev. 10: 7).*

All that is and much more is in play when we eat his Body and drink his Blood.