

**Homily - Corpus Christi, Year B –
St. Monica's - June 6-7, 2015
(4 p.m. – Matrimony Sunday)**

Exodus 24:3-8: Israel pledges allegiance to God's covenant through the sign of blood.

Psalms 116: I will take the cup of salvation; I will call on God's name.

Hebrews 9:11-15 - Because of the perfect sacrifice of the blood of Christ, the High Priest, we are made part of a new, eternal covenant.

Sequence (Lauda Sion): *Love we share at his command.*

Mark 14:12-16, 22-26 - Jesus' last meal with his disciples: body broken for us, blood of the new covenant shed for us.

We celebrate today "*Corpus Christi*": the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ. For those of "a certain age", it conjures up images of processions through the streets with the Blessed Sacrament: candles, flowers, people in the streets bowing and even kneeling on the sidewalk as the Eucharist was carried in triumphal procession. We may remember some of the devotions – Forty Hours, Exposition and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, the Divine Praises – inviting us to adore the Lord in his Real Eucharistic Presence.

Just this past Thursday, in fact, there was a Corpus Christi procession through the streets of Old Montreal, beginning with Mass at MQW Cathedral and concluding with Benediction at St. Patrick's. The crowd for this event seems to grow every year, and it attracts an interesting mix of younger people, members of religious movements, as well as Catholics of many different languages and cultures. All reminding us that we continue, as a Church, to draw strength from Jesus, sacramentally and truly present to us in the Eucharist.

Since Vatican II, the liturgical reforms have focused our attention a bit less on "adoration," and more on the mystery of Christ's Body and Blood given to us as Holy Communion. Jesus gives himself to us as spiritual food and drink, as bread sustaining our journey through life, as wine to bring us strength and joy. Sunday after Sunday – day in and day out – we reclaim our identity as a Eucharistic people. The great St. Augustine, son of our patroness St. Monica, invited the Christians of his time to come to communion by saying: "Receive what you already are; become more fully what you have received:

The Body of Christ.” Faithful to that invitation, we gather each week to remember, to celebrate, to strengthen our belief in Jesus’ Eucharistic presence, and our commitment to be that presence ourselves in the world to which He sends us.

Like many of the most precious gifts we have received – life itself, creation, faith, family, friends – it is easy for us to take the Eucharist for granted. We may find ourselves going through the motions of Mass mechanically, receiving communion routinely. But if Eucharist is “our daily bread”, it is anything but “routine”. The Eucharist is the fulfillment, in this time and place, of Jesus’ promise to be “with us always, until the end of time.” This presence is not just a symbolic representation, a comforting memory, an intellectual theory: it is a real, substantial presence. Jesus is present “body and blood, soul and divinity,” as the old catechisms put it.

In his book *What’s the Point of Being a Christian?*, Dominican preacher Fr. Timothy Radcliffe has a chapter entitled “The Body Electric”. He exposes the centrality of the body to all the major Christian doctrines: creation, incarnation, redemption, resurrection, sacramentality, the Christian vision of marriage and human sexuality as “theology of the Body.” He writes, “*we are not spirits trapped in a bag of flesh, but corporeal beings whose communion has a bodily foundation. It is in the body that we encounter God. All of our sacraments are rooted in our bodily life: birth and death, sex and food, sin and sickness. In these most ordinary, physical activities, God’s grace meets us and heals us.*” (90-91)

Jesus gives his Body to us. How often do we stop and think about the implications of this reality? We tend to treat Jesus sometimes as if he were a “pure spirit”, as if we don’t believe he was really human, “like us in all things but sin.” But the Body Jesus gives us in the Eucharist is the same body that was conceived and developed and came to birth in his mother’s womb; that was nursed and cuddled in infancy, that grew in strength and skill through childhood, developing to full manhood through puberty and adolescence, that worked long hours in a carpenter shop, that walked across Galilee preaching Good News, that reached out to touch the sick and to reconcile sinners, that got tired and hungry and thirsty.

This same body sweated blood in Gethsemane, was scourged and crucified and left for dead in the tomb; was eventually raised up by the Father in a glorified Body that still bore the wounds of his Passion. It was a fully human, strong-yet-vulnerable, enfleshed body.

Fr. Radcliffe suggests that the gift of Jesus' body in the Eucharist reveals something important about marriage and human sexuality. Our society is at once obsessed with the body, and trivializes it, treating it as an object that we own, often reducing the mystery of human sexuality to simple *recreation* and *commerce*, as the twin institutions of pornography and prostitution illustrate. Yet as Christians, we believe that one of the most profound ways in which we express who we are is in the gift of our body to someone else. In the sacrament of marriage, sexuality is not about "objectifying", but is profoundly intersubjective. Radcliffe puts it bluntly, in a way fully coherent with JP II's Theology of the Body: *"Each says to the other: Here is my body for you. It is a profoundly Eucharistic act."* (93)

When Jesus hands over his body to his disciples, he is vulnerable. Christian sexual ethics invites us to embrace that vulnerability in ways that are appropriate: taking the risk involved in self-exposure and self-gift. Casual sex is not wrong because God is anti-sex or anti-pleasure; it is wrong because it subverts the communication which is human sexuality. We say something with our bodies which we deny with our lives. It is to say with your body "I love you", and then refusing to say, "I will be there for you and with you."

All this to say that the Eucharist is not merely a ritual, one we repeat each week, each day even, without thinking about it. It is a profoundly intimate gesture. In this small fragment of bread, Christ's Body is truly and substantially present. Jesus gives himself to us as bread for our hunger, as food for our journey, as life for the world. He invites us to take his body into our body, in such a way that we truly become "one flesh". Jesus says to us: **"Take and eat: this is my Body"**.

Jesus says also: **"Take and drink; this is the Cup of my blood."** As Catholics, we're much more uncomfortable with the second part of this gesture, and as you may have noticed, a lot less people receive from the cup. Why might this be?

Several reasons suggest themselves: our modern obsession about personal hygiene and avoiding germs; our natural squeamishness about blood; the residual notion that this is a “Protestant” rather than a “Catholic” practice; or the sense that the gesture is somehow too intimate, and so, we shy away from it.

All of these are understandable. In coming forward to receive from the Cup, we **are** taking a risk. By sharing in the blood of Christ, we are stating that we are willing to share in his sufferings. This is an intrinsic aspect of the symbolism of the Cup. When James and John came seeking places of honour in the Kingdom, Jesus simply asks them: “**Can you drink the cup that I must drink?**” Later on, in the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays so intensely that he sweated drops of blood: “**Father, take this cup away from me!**” Yes, sufferings come from drinking the cup. But it is also our share in the promised celebration in the Father’s Kingdom: “the blessing cup that we share is our communion in the blood of Christ.”

To drink the cup is to acknowledge that being Christ's presence in the world isn't always going to be easy, that there may be a price to pay. It is also a profound statement of solidarity with all who suffer throughout the world, with all those who, like us, are imperfect and stand in need of the reconciliation purchased for us by the Blood of Christ. Sacramentally, we recognize the fullness of Christ's presence in either the bread or the wine. But symbolically, the gesture has deep significance; it is our participation in the death and Resurrection of Jesus. This is not something we do alone, isolated from one another, but as a community, in solidarity with Christ and with our brothers and sisters who form his Body on earth. So let us become more fully what we already are: Christ's body, blessed and broken; Christ’s blood, poured out for the life of the world.