

Homily for Corpus Christi, Year A

June 11, 2023

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14b-16a (God provides manna in the desert.)

Responsory: Psalm 147 (Praise the Lord, Jerusalem.)

Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 (Eucharist as a participation in the body and blood of Christ.)

Gospel: John 6:51-58 (Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood will have eternal life.)

It probably would not surprise any of you to learn that all Catholic seminarians must take a semester-long course on Eucharist as part of their priestly training. This is a great mystery, after all, with many layers of meaning to unpack. Frankly, one semester of studies at the Master's level can barely scratch the surface. Yet, at the same time that our seminaries are teaching future priests to delve deeply into the theology and history and practice of the Eucharist, in hopes that they will one day celebrate the sacrament with reverence and understanding, our Catholic schools and religious ed programs are preparing *second graders* to receive the very same sacrament. How on earth can we expect seven-year-olds to grasp the meaning of the Eucharist when highly educated graduate students, not to mention professional theologians, are still wrestling with it after years of advanced study?

When I speak with children who are preparing to receive their First Holy Communion, I try to keep them focused on just one thing — the most essential thing. The most important truth that all of us must believe about Eucharist is not *what* it is, but *Who* it is. If those young children *truly believe* in their hearts that when they receive Holy Communion, they receive *Jesus*, then they might just grasp the meaning of the sacrament as well as many of us adults. They may lack the advanced vocabulary and theological concepts which we can bring to bear in our study of Eucharist. But what matters more is that their *faith* stirs them to respond with a heartfelt “Amen” when the minister presents the Eucharist to them and declares, “Body of Christ.” We make that same profession of faith each time we come forward to receive the Sacrament. By our reverential bow and our confident “Amen,” we express our firm belief that *this* reception of Eucharist, like every other in the past, will be a *personal encounter with the Risen Christ*.

From time to time, researchers ask people who identify as Catholics whether they believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. With every new survey, the results get more alarming, as more and more people express doubts. But, I'm not sure whether the respondents are doubting that a true encounter with the Risen Christ is taking place or whether they are doubting the simplistic ways in which they were taught to understand Eucharist as young children. It is perfectly acceptable to say, “I believe that I am receiving Christ in this sacrament, but as an adult, I no longer find the explanation of Eucharist that I received as a child to be satisfying or complete.” Of course, the responsible thing to do, once we realize the limitations of our sacramental training, is to *seek further understanding*, not to throw up our hands and say, “I don't know what to believe anymore.” When our Church in the United States kicked off our three-year Eucharistic Revival, my hope was that all of us together would use this opportunity to seek a deeper understanding of the Eucharist and its importance in our lives. My fear was that many

would instead use it as an opportunity to judge others as less devout, or even less “Catholic.” There’s nothing wrong with having doubts and asking sincere questions of our religion, as long as our goal is to arrive at a *deeper and stronger faith*.

No matter how much we study the Eucharist and probe its many layers of meaning, we still need to make a leap of faith and say, “Yes, I believe, even though I don’t understand completely.” That’s the nature of *Mystery*. We must believe, and make an assent of faith, even as we struggle to grasp the whole of the mystery. Let’s face it, the main reason why we believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is *because Jesus said so*. We heard it in the gospel today. Jesus says plainly, “My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” It’s pretty hard to listen to that statement from Jesus and then interpret his words at the Last Supper, the words that we hear the celebrant say during the Eucharistic Prayer, as just a figure of speech. When Jesus blessed the bread and wine of the Passover meal and declared, “*This is my body, this is my blood,*” he clearly meant for us to interpret his words literally. And so, when we repeat that ritual in remembrance of him, as he commanded us to do, we believe that the bread and wine *do, in fact, become his body and blood*. The consecrated elements *cannot* be just a *symbol* which calls to mind Jesus’ table fellowship with his disciples and recalls his death on the cross. Nor should the Eucharist be understood as just a symbol of the Lord’s *spiritual presence* in our lives today. Jesus would be just as spiritually present without the sacraments. He gave us the Eucharist so that he could make himself *physically* present to us, as well.

The celebration of Eucharist is a *sacramental encounter with the Risen Christ*, a tangible means by which the Lord invites us to enter into communion with him and with each other. That’s why we call the reception of the Eucharist “Holy Communion.” By offering our prayer of praise and thanksgiving, together with our gifts of bread and wine, we participate in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. In turn, Christ *transforms* the bread and wine into his own Body and Blood, and then offers it back to us so that, receiving him, we may participate ever more deeply in his divine life. St. Paul conveys that concept to the Corinthians with two very pointed rhetorical questions: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” Our response of faith is, “Yes, of course, that’s *exactly* what Eucharist is. That is what we believe.”

We believe that Jesus himself is the “bread that came down from heaven.” Unlike the manna in the desert, which provided only *physical* nourishment to sustain the Israelites on their journey to the Promised Land, the Eucharist is *bodily and spiritual nourishment*, which sustains us unto eternal life. When we come to the table of the Lord, let us come with that understanding. The Lord is welcoming us to come and receive *Him*. He is inviting us to participate in his sacrifice on the cross and to share in the eternal fruits of that sacrifice. He is calling us to share in *his very life* — a life that will never end.