

Corpus Christi B

“Sacramental Imagination and the Transubstantiation of the World”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, last week the Church contemplated the mystery of the Trinity. This week, we celebrate the solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, another central mystery of the faith. As the Father pours out his love for the Son and the Son pours out his love for the Father and the Holy Spirit proceeds forth as the love between Father and Son, the mystery of the Eucharist follows nicely after the mystery of the Trinity. The Eucharist is quite simply the love of God poured out for us.

A helpful understanding of Eucharist comes from our understanding of what a Sacrament is. Those who remember the Baltimore Catechism remember that a Sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. I love our current Catechism’s treatment on grace. Saving grace is that which heals our human nature wounded by sin by giving us a share in the divine life of the Trinity. Trinity Sunday flows well into Eucharist Sunday, Corpus Christi.

A question I get from kids from time to time is: Father, how can the bread and wine we offer become truly the body and blood of Christ? After the prayers are said, the hosts still taste like bread and the precious blood still tastes like wine. The answer to this question comes from our understanding of Sacraments. Take the Sacrament of Marriage for example. When the bride and groom exchange vows on their wedding day, something dramatic happens. The two truly become one in the eyes of God, in the eyes of the community, and in the eyes of the IRS. They still have their separate identities, memories, and social security numbers. The sacrament did not destroy their individuality. The sacrament, however, gives the bride and groom grace to become a new creation in the eyes of God and humanity. They become one. They participate in the inner life of the Trinity by the measure of their love for each other, especially when that love is creative.

Another example is the sacrament of Holy Orders. This coming week, I will be celebrating my 16th anniversary of my ordination. When I was ordained, a scientist might tell you I walked out of the Cathedral the same individual who walked in. I had the same hair color, the same eyes, and the same weight. Those with sacramental imagination, however, know that I walked out of the Cathedral that day a completely new person. Are you following me? God had given me the grace to become a new creation without destroying me in the process. Priests participate in the inner life of God by the measure we love the Church and her people, especially when that love participates in the love of Christ for the salvation of souls.

At the offertory today, simple gifts of bread and wine will be brought forward. Just like Jesus did 2000 years ago on Christmas morning, Jesus will become fully present to us today. This time, however, Jesus will be truly present to us (body, blood, soul and divinity) under the appearances of food and drink. What do the scriptures today have to tell us about this?

Our first reading from Exodus recalls the strange ancient practice of sacrificing animals for the forgiveness of sins. The author of Hebrews in our second reading points to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross as the perfect sacrifice. Why is this so? On the cross, ancient sacrificial imagination is turned around. On the cross, God sacrifices himself for us for the forgiveness of sins. The altar is no longer a place to kill. The altar is a place to be fed. In the Eucharist, we are fed the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. As we see in our Gospel reading, "While they were eating, [Jesus] took bread, said the blessing, broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take it; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, and they all drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many.'"

My friends, have you ever considered that every celebration of Eucharist is but an extension of the Last Supper as recalled in our Gospel reading. On our bulletin, it suggests that Blessed Teresa Parish has four masses. This is in fact theologically misleading. It is truer to say that there is only one Mass at Blessed Teresa, offered at four different times. There is only one Mass celebrated throughout the world throughout space and time. When we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, and if Mom is correct when she says, we are what we eat, when we leave the church after Mass, we should become Christ to the world.

If we have sacramental imagination, communion calls us to be Eucharistic ambassadors, participating in what Jesuit theologian Teilhard de Chardin called the Transubstantiation of the World. Transubstantiation is the word we use to describe how the bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ without destroying the appearance of bread and wine in the process. When Teilhard refers to the transubstantiation of the world, he speaks of the transformation of the entire world into the body of Christ if we live out our Eucharistic calling.

I want to conclude this homily with a paraphrased excerpt and prayer from Teilhard de Chardin's work entitled *The Divine Milieu*. Teilhard writes, "When the priest says the words *hoc est Corpus meum*, [this is my body], his words fall directly on to the bread and directly transforms it into the individual reality of Christ. But the great sacramental operation does not cease at that local and momentary event...[Indeed], a single event has been developing in the world: the incarnation, realized, in each individual, through the Eucharist. All the communions of a life-time are one communion. All the communions of all human beings now living are one communion. All the communions of all human beings, present, past and future are one communion...As our humanity assimilates the material world, and as the Host assimilates our humanity, the Eucharistic

transformation goes beyond and completes the transubstantiation of the bread on the altar. Step by step it irresistibly invades the universe. It is a fire that sweeps over the hearth; the stroke that vibrates through the bronze...”

Teilhard therefore prays...”Grant, O God, that when I draw near to the altar for communion, I will ... discern the infinite perspectives hidden beneath the smallness and nearness of the Host in which you are concealed. I have already accustomed myself to seeing, beneath the stillness of that piece of bread, a devouring power, which, in the words of the greatest doctors of your Church, far from being consumed by me, [the Eucharist] consumes me.”