

Body And Blood Of Christ- Year A

In 1263 a German priest, Peter of Prague, stopped at Bolsena, Italy, while on a pilgrimage to Rome. He is described as being a pious priest, but one who found it difficult to believe that Christ was actually present in the consecrated Host. While celebrating Holy Mass, he had barely spoken the words of Consecration when blood started to seep from the consecrated Host and trickle over his hands onto the altar and the corporal. The confused priest then went immediately to Orvieto, the city where Pope Urban IV was then residing. The Pope ordered an investigation and when all the facts were ascertained, he had the Host and the linen cloth bearing the stains of blood brought to the Cathedral of Orvieto where the linen corporal is still reverently enshrined. One year after this Eucharistic miracle, Pope Urban IV instituted the feast of Corpus Christi which has been celebrated by the whole church ever since.⁴ In his first pontifical homily on April 20, 2005, Pope Benedict XVI urged that the solemnity of Corpus Christi be celebrated in a particularly special way. He also asked the faithful to intensify their love and devotion to the Eucharistic Jesus and to express in a courageous and clear way the REAL PRESENCE of the Lord.

Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14b-16a

In today's selection, Moses is speaking to the people of Israel as they are about to enter into the promised land after 40 years of wandering in the desert.¹ On the plains of Moab, God charges Moses, now close to death, once more to proclaim the Law which he received through the revelation on Mt. Sinai. Here Moses is addressing a new generation of Israelites, all those who would have been under the age of twenty when the Exodus began. By having the Law read again, Yahweh is saying that His covenant with Israel is made with all generations, past, present, and future: it is an everlasting covenant.¹¹

Moses said to the people:

2“Remember how for forty years now the Lord, your God, has directed all your journeying in the desert, The Eucharist sustains us on our journey through the desert of this life and God provides for us through the Eucharist just as God provided for the Israelites in the desert.¹ **so as to test you by affliction** These trials were really opportunities. **and find out whether or not it was your intention to keep his commandments.** Our hunger, neediness and trials make us aware of our need for God. **3**He therefore let you be afflicted with hunger, and then fed you with manna, This was food that God provided for the Israelites during their sojourn in the desert. It was white and sweet and fell on the ground like frost and could be ground or pounded like meal, boiled or made into cakes. It would keep overnight except over the Sabbath, but it melted in the heat of the morning sun.¹⁰ **a food unknown to you and your fathers, in order to show you that not by bread alone does one live,** Jesus quotes these words when he rejects Satan's first temptation in the desert. (Luke 4:4) **but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord.**

14Do not forget the Lord, your God, Remembering is also important for our understanding of the Eucharist. Jesus said to “do this in remembrance of me,” so we say that the mass is “The memorial of the Lord's Passion and Resurrection.”² **who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery,**

15who guided you through the vast and terrible desert with its saraph serpents These were poisonous snakes who were fiery either in their appearance or in their bite.⁷ They carried out the judgment of God against the Israelites who complained against Moses and against God.¹⁰ As a result of the intercession of Moses, God told him to make a bronze serpent and mount it on a pole so that all who were bitten by the snakes and then looked at the one mounted on the pole, would live.

(Num. 21:6-9) and scorpions, its parched and waterless ground; who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock (Water came forth when Moses struck it with his staff. (Ex. 17:6) This foreshadows the wine of the Eucharist.¹

16. and fed you in the desert with manna, This foreshadows the bread of the Eucharist.¹ a food unknown to your fathers.” Moses has just reminded them that the Father delivered them from bondage, directed their journeying and fed them on their way to the land of promise. These actions of God were meant to call the people to gratitude even as Eucharist calls us to thanksgiving, for that is what “Eucharist” means. Perhaps the most striking liturgical “ancestor” of the Mass is the “todah” of ancient Israel. This Hebrew word means “thank offering” or “thanksgiving.” The todah was a sacrificial meal shared with friends in order to celebrate one’s gratitude to God. It began by recalling some mortal threat and then celebrating man’s divine deliverance from that threat. It was a powerful expression of confidence in God’s sovereignty and mercy. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) has written that, “the whole of Eucharistic Christology is present in the todah spirituality of the Old Testament.” Both the todah and the Eucharist present their worship through word and meal and include an unbloody offering of unleavened bread and wine.³

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

Brothers and sisters:

16The cup of blessing This is the traditional name for the third ritual cup of wine consumed at the Jewish Passover meal.¹¹ It is this cup that Jesus blessed and consecrated at the Passover of the Last Supper and made the Eucharistic cup of the mass in the New Covenant. (Luke 22:17) that we bless, is it not a participation Eucharistic Communion unites believers with Christ and with one another. These two blessings are related inasmuch as the Sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood is what continues to mold us into the Body of Christ, the Church.⁵ in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? To the Jews, to partake of the sacrifice offered to God was a means of union with God. They also thought that eating things sacrificed to false gods or to devils, by analogy implied union with them. Here they see the principal effect of the Blessed Eucharist is intimate union with Jesus.⁷ The very name “communion” is taken from this passage of St. Paul for he points to becoming one with our Lord by receiving his Body and Blood. John Chrysostom preached: “What in fact is the bread? The Body of Christ. What do they become who receive Communion? The Body of Christ!” It was St. Augustine who pointed out that in Holy Communion, the Host does not change into us as happens with bodily food, but rather, we are changed into Christ whom we have received!⁶

17Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. Bread is made from many grains and wine is pressed from many clusters of grapes. Thus they signify that we, though many, are closely bound together and the Eucharist is the sacrament that becomes the symbol of unity and the bond of love for the whole Church.⁶ The Catechism further reminds us that what material food produces in our bodily life, Holy Communion wonderfully achieves in our spiritual life. Communion with the flesh of the risen Christ preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at baptism. This growth in Christian life needs the nourishment of Eucharistic Communion which is the bread for our pilgrimage through life until the moment of death and then at the time of departing, it is given to us as viaticum² (CCC 1392) which means “for the journey” or traveling provisions from death to eternal life.¹² Note that no one may take part in

Holy Communion unless he 1. believes that what we teach is true, 2. has received baptism for the forgiveness of sins and new birth, and 3. lives in keeping with what Christ taught.² (CCC 1355)

John 6:51-58

Jesus had just multiplied the loaves and fishes to feed 5000 people. He was at the peak of his popularity and the people wanted to crown him king. The very next day he gave this very difficult teaching and many, even disciples, walked no more with him. (John 6:10, 15, 66)

Jesus said to the Jewish crowds:

51“I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” The future tense points both TO the Cross, where Jesus surrenders his life for human sins, and TO the Eucharistic liturgy where Jesus offers himself as living bread to a starving world.⁹

52The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” Christ’s hearers understood perfectly well that he meant exactly what he said but they could not believe that what he said could be true. If they had understood him in a metaphorical, figurative or symbolic sense there would have been no reason for them to be so surprised nor would it have caused an argument. Later, in verse 55, Jesus reaffirmed what he had said — confirming what they had understood him to say.⁸ The crowd thought of cannibalism, an idea thoroughly repugnant to them. Jesus does not mean his mortal flesh as it was during his earthly ministry, but his glorified humanity as it was after rising from the dead. This is why he calls himself the “living bread.”⁹ In the early centuries of the Church, Christians were frequently accused of cannibalism because rumors spread widely that they ate human flesh, obviously a reference to the “body and Blood” of Jesus, the Real Presence” as taught by all the Church Fathers.¹³ The remainder of this reading is from the mouth of Jesus.

53Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, Amen means “I do believe” and the double Amen is a solemn affirmation, an oath.¹¹ I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man This is a special clue because “Son of Man” is a messianic title.¹⁰ and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Drinking the blood of animals was forbidden under the Old Covenant. To do so was to consume “life.” The “life” that Jesus imparts is not natural but supernatural; it does not pull us down to the level of animals; it elevates us to become sharers in his divine nature.⁹ The penalty for drinking blood under the Law was to be expelled from the tribe; they would be excommunicated. “Flesh and blood” is a common Old Testament expression for life. When the two are separated, death results. By taking both, they must be partaking of a living being.¹¹ In the “Our Father”, the daily bread signifies what is necessary for life. Taken literally, it refers directly to the Bread of Life, the Body of Christ, without which we have no life within us.²(CCC 2837)

54Whoever eats The word that Jesus uses is actually much stronger than just simply “eat”, it literally means “chew” or “gnaw”. This shows that Communion is a real meal.¹¹ **my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.** No longer are we told that eternal life is the result of believing in Jesus; it comes from feeding on his flesh and drinking his blood.¹⁷ The promise to raise him up on the last day is a pledge that only God can make.¹¹

55For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. “Cannibalism” and “human sacrifice” were charges often whispered against the first generations of Christians.⁴

56Whoever eats This word is never used symbolically anywhere in the New Testament, the Old Testament, the Septuagint, or even in ancient secular literature.¹⁶ **my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.** By feeding on the Eucharistic Body of Christ, we are transformed by his very life in us. He conforms us to himself. In this sense, we really become what we eat.¹⁴ In his encyclical, *Mysterium fidei*, Pope Paul VI wrote that “Every day, as is desirable, and in the greatest possible numbers, the faithful must take an active part in the sacrifice of the Mass, avail themselves of the pure, holy refreshment of Holy Communion and make a suitable thanksgiving in return for this great gift of Christ the Lord. Here are words they should keep in mind: ‘Jesus Christ and the Church desire all Christ’s faithful to approach the sacred banquet every day. The basis of this desire is that they should be united to God by the sacrament and draw strength from it to restrain lust, to wash away the slight faults of daily occurrence and to take precautions against the more serious sins to which human frailty is liable.’”⁸

57Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. Rather than concentrating on our worthiness to receive Jesus (who could ever be worthy?) we should dwell on how desperately we NEED to receive him to sustain ourselves!¹⁵

58This is the bread that came down from heaven. This is the third time in this discourse that Jesus compares the true Bread of Life, his own body, with the manna God used to feed the Israelites every day during their forty years of wandering. That bread was only a faint type of the Eucharist, the sacrament of life. It sustained them for forty years, this will sustain them through all eternity.¹¹ **Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died,** There was a Jewish tradition that the generation in the desert died spiritually as well as physically and would have no place in the world to come.¹⁷ **whoever eats this bread will live forever.”** This expression, “will live forever” occurs twice in John and once in Genesis. A comparison is thus implied between the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, which bore the fruit of immortality and the Bread of Life, which tradition calls the “medicine of immortality.”⁹

Some of the material for this commentary was taken from: (1) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers” by Lawrence E. Mick, (2) “The Catechism Of The Catholic Church,” (3) “The Lamb’s Supper” by Scott Hahn, (4) “Eucharistic Miracles” by Joan Carroll Cruz, (5) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The First and Second Letters of Saint Paul to the Corinthians” with Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (6) “The Navarre Bible: Corinthians,” (7) “Saint Joseph Textbook Edition of the Holy Bible,” (8) “The Navarre Bible: John,” (9) “Ignatius Catholic Study Bible: The Gospel of John” with Introduction, Commentary, and Notes by Scott Hahn and Curtis Mitch, (10) “Dictionary of the Bible” by John L. McKenzie, S.J., (11) The St. Paul Center for Biblical Theology Online founded by Dr. Scott Hahn, (12) “Catholic Source Book” Edited by Rev. Peter Klein, (13) “Catholic Bible Study: John” by Stephen K. Ray, (14) “Catholic For A Reason: The Heart of the Home Jesus in the Eucharist” by Edward P. Sri, (15) “Workbook for lectors and gospel readers: 2002” by Aelred R. Rosser, and (16) “Born Fundamentalist, Born Again Catholic” by David B. Currie.

In loving memory of Peg Schneller, who compiled these commentaries.