

Homily.Corpus Christi.A.6.11.23
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PARTICIPATING IN THE BLOOD OF JESUS

This morning I want to focus on 3 passages from our Second Reading and the Gospel. These passages are central to our Catholic faith.

First, from the Second Reading: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ?”

From the Gospel of John: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you.”

And, again, from the Gospel of John: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life...for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.”

More specifically, I want to describe how we participate in the blood of Christ and by doing so have the opportunity to be fully united with Jesus.

The theme of the blood of Jesus runs throughout the Bible and in a sense ties the whole Bible together.

It starts in the very first book of the Bible, the Book of Genesis.

There are two brothers, Cain and Abel. They're out in a field together. Cain attacks Abel and kills him. God confronts Cain, asking what he has done to his brother. Cain responds by saying, “I do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?”

God then says to Cain: “What have you done! Listen: your brother's blood cries out to me from the soil!”

The blood of Abel crying out from the ground has two dimensions.

First of all, and most obviously, it's Abel, who loves his brother, and doesn't have any way of understanding why Cain would be coming at him with a weapon. The cry of Abel's blood is his begging for appeasement, justice, an explanation, some way of understanding.

But secondly, the cry of Abel's blood represents the cry of all the oppressed people in the world, the starving, the abused, the neglected, the poor, the aborted, the falsely imprisoned. Think if all those people around the world were crying out right now and you could hear that shrill, anguished cry, the cry of all those who are victims of our inhumanity, that would be the cry of Abel's blood.

The cry of Abel's blood is our first clue that God hears that cry, and He's going to respond to that cry with the blood of His Son.

Next, in the story of Noah and the great flood also described in the Book of Genesis, God tells Noah that it's okay to eat any living animal. But then God adds: "Only meat with its lifeblood in it you shall not eat." What's that about?

The answer is in Chapter 17 of the Book of Leviticus. God says this to Moses: "You shall not partake of the blood of any meat. Since the life of every living body is in its blood, anyone who partakes of it shall be cut off."

What God is saying is that the essence of a living being's life, of its identity, is contained in its blood. You would not consume the blood of an animal because that would merge the life of a lower form of life with your own life, and that would be beneath your dignity as a human being.

This explains kosher, or Jewish, meat. The blood has been drained from it.

This understanding of the blood is evident in what was called at the time of the early Jews a blood covenant. Here's how that would have worked. Say two sides had been fighting each other and wanted to enter into a peace treaty. They would have ritualized their understanding with each side sending a representative forward to put blood from each of them into a single cup. Then each of them would have consumed some of the blood from that one cup. That would have meant that from that time on, the two groups that had been fighting were united in the most powerful way, that what happened to one side from now on would be regarded as happening to both sides.

Keeping all this in mind, at the Last Supper, Jesus breaks the bread and offers it to the apostles. Then He raises the cup and gives it to the apostles saying "Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many for the forgiveness of sins."

The apostles would have been shocked at what Jesus was doing for them, but they would have understood that He was giving them the essence of His very life. He was uniting His life with theirs in the most powerful way possible.

This is how you and I, when we receive the Eucharist, participate in the blood of Christ. Just like the apostles, we consume and take into ourselves the very life of Jesus. His divine life, the life He shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit, is now infused into our bodies and our lives.

In addition to being united in the most powerful way with the life of Jesus, receiving His body and blood also unites us in a lesser but real way with every member of the Body of Christ. As St. Paul writes in 1st Corinthians 12, "If one part of the body suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy."

Having access to the Blood of Jesus is a source of immense grace, but it is also a serious challenge. First of all, it's hard to embrace the concept that the Savior of humanity, the Son of God, humbles Himself to come to us in the form of bread and wine.

But then there's also this passage in Matthew 20:20-22, where the mother of James and John asks Jesus to give her two sons a high place in heaven. Jesus responds by asking the two brothers if they can drink from the cup that He is going to drink.

He asks each of us that same question. Are we willing, with the grace that comes from having received the life of Jesus, to commit to sacrificing ourselves for others as Jesus did? That's an important part of what it means to drink from the cup.

With the presence and power of Jesus now inside us, we are commissioned to hear the cry of Abel's blood in our world today. Our task is to ask the Holy Spirit to tell each of us what part of that cry He wants us to respond to, and then go to work addressing that cry.

The story of the blood covenant that started with Abel comes full circle in the Letter to the Hebrews, Chapter 12, which refers to the heavenly Jerusalem and to "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that cries out more powerfully than that of Abel."

The Bible tells us that Jesus came into the world that we might have life through Him. He makes this life available to us most powerfully in the Eucharist of the Catholic Church.

Jesus asks us at every Mass, "Do you want me? How much of me do you want? I am offering to you all that I have, all that I am. If you let me, I will give you a life far beyond anything you can imagine."

May each of us today, on this Solemn Feast of the Body and Blood of Jesus, say to Jesus, in the depths of our heart, "Yes, Jesus, I want You. I need you. All of You. Come to me in all Your fullness every time I receive You. Change my life with Your love, Your grace, Your truth, living in me."