

The Solemn Celebration of the Lord's Supper--Holy Thursday:
When we receive communion.....

Thank you for coming this evening to join us in prayer as we begin the Paschal Celebration. The word paschal refers to the lamb. Our celebrations of Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Sunday are celebrations of the Lamb of God. There are three movements, if you will, to the one Paschal Celebration. The first movement is tonight, the solemn celebration of the Lord's Supper. The second movement is the Veneration of the Cross on Good Friday and the third movement is the celebration of the conquest of sin and death at the Solemn Easter Vigil and all the Easter Masses. These liturgies are intertwined. At the Last Supper the Lord gives us His Body and Blood which are offered up to the Father for us on Good Friday so that we might share in His Resurrected Life, the Gift of Easter.

The focus of this evening's liturgy is the Blood of the Covenant. The concept of covenant is biblical. A covenant is a binding relationship between God and man. Man would have to remain faithful to God, and God would work the wonders of His Love for man. The first covenant scripture records was the covenant made with Noah after the flood, the Covenant of the Rainbow. The rainbow was a sign that God would never give up on His people. Man's part of the covenant was to live as God's people, to be moral. The second covenant was the covenant with Abraham. You might remember a few weeks ago we had that mystical scene from Genesis 15. Abraham sacrificed various animals, cut them in half, and then waited until the sign of the covenant was completed. When the sun was about to set, a trance fell upon Abram, and a deep, terrifying darkness enveloped him. Then there appeared a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch, which passed between those pieces. It was on that occasion that the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying: "To your descendants I give this land, from the Wadi of Egypt to the Great River, the Euphrates." God promised that Abraham would be the father of the people of faith. And he is today recognized as the father of faith by Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

In today's first reading we meditated on the first Passover Supper. The angel of death passed over the children of Israel while they were in captivity in Egypt. How did the angel of death know not to enter the houses of the Hebrew people? Remember, they were told to sacrifice a lamb and put its blood on the lintels of their doors. The blood of the sacrificed lamb protected the Hebrews from death. This was the beginning of the great Old Testament Covenant of the Law, or, if you wish, the Covenant of the Ten Commandments. This action is also a prophecy that a lamb would be sacrificed to protect all God's people from death, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Jeremiah prophesied that a time would come when there would be a new covenant with the House of Israel and the House of Judah. This would not be have a physical sign like the rainbow, or the blazing bowl, or the tablets of the Ten Commandments. Jeremiah prophesied that the new covenant would be a covenant within each person's heart. The Lord said, "They shall all know me, from the least of

them to the greatest, for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more."

The prophecy of Jeremiah, the prophecy or the New Covenant became a reality with Jesus Christ. This evening we celebrate this new covenant. It is the covenant of a new Sacrificial Lamb. It is the covenant of the Body and Blood of the Lamb of God. The one sacrifice of Good Friday would be renewed continuously throughout the ages as the Body and Blood of the Lord is offered on the altars of the world in the celebration of the Holy Mass. We will receive communion, as we do so often, but this evening we should focus on the event that brings about our salvation.

At every Mass, immediately after the consecration or transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, we say or sing the Mystery of our Faith:

We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection, until you come again.

Perhaps we may use one of the other acclamations, like

Save us Savior of the world, for by your cross and resurrection you have set us free.

Or

When we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim your death O Lord until you come again.

The totality of what we believe as Christians is contained in those simple proclamations. The Christ event freed us from the power of sin, and restored our spiritual Life. More than this, the Savior of the world would return to restore the world to its original state, to the paradise where there was no pain, suffering or even physical death.

When we receive communion, we receive the Lord offering Himself for us at the Last Supper, on the Cross, and giving us His Life at Easter. The Eucharist is not just one of many ways of praying to the Lord, or of cultivating His Presence. Praying in our homes, in the car or wherever, every day is wonderful and necessary. But the Eucharist is more than that. Focusing on the presence of Jesus in our lives is important and necessary, but the Eucharist is more than that. Reading the Bible, praying the rosary, and all the spiritual practices that we might do to keep us centered on Christ are wonderful and necessary, but the Eucharist is more than these.

- When we receive communion, we are united to Jesus at the Last Supper. We are one of those disciples that He is calling to share the New Covenant in His Body and Blood.

- When we receive communion we are united to Jesus on His Cross, our Compassionate Lord who is begging us to give Him our cares, our shortcomings, our sins, and let Him suffer for us.
- When we receive communion we are united to Jesus as He leaves the tomb and calls upon us to receive His Life.

Recently I have heard some priests say that people have become so accustomed to going to Mass and receiving communion that the Eucharist has become nothing more than another devotion. Some have even suggested that we offer fewer daily Masses. I disagree. I believe that the people who come to daily Mass, as well as the people who would never miss Sunday Mass, I believe that the people whose faith is so strong that the laws obliging worship are totally unnecessary, I believe that you folks enjoy a profound faith in the Power of the Eucharist. We are drawn here this evening and to all the Triduum Liturgies because we need the Eucharistic Presence of the Lord to provide us with grace to live our own passions, to accept our own deaths and to enjoy our own resurrections. This is the reason why we receive communion even during the Good Friday Liturgy of the Veneration of the Cross.

We are human beings. We are frail. Our bodies give out on us. Our minds give out on us. Our emotions get out of whack at times. We have our struggles, our own passions. When we receive communion, our passion is united to His Passion. Our pains have meaning and purpose and become prayers. If we are going to suffer, and all life encompasses a certain degree of suffering, then through the Eucharist we suffer with Christ.

Our lives have a limited number of years. Hundreds of thousands of people die every day throughout the world. Through the Eucharist, our deaths are united to His Death. In the Eucharist we are united to the One who died for us, and who dies with us.

In the Eucharist we are united to the One who is the Life Giver. We are united to Jesus at His Resurrection giving eternal life to all who believe and who live a faith filled life. Christ's conquest of death is the affirmation of the spiritual reality open to us, shared by Christ with us.

When we receive communion, we are united to the very Presence of Christ, serving His People. Therefore, to be a Eucharistic people, we need to serve all. The very first action Jesus performed to begin His Paschal Triumph was a symbolic act of service. Before the Last Supper Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and then commanded us, mandated, that we wash the feet of others. The meaning of the rite is that we are called to empty ourselves of our pride and arrogance, and humble ourselves for the sake of God's people. The Eucharistic union with the Lord that is our Paschal celebration begins with service.

Putting everything together: when we celebrate the Eucharist on our altars and in the reception of communion, we are in the Upper Room, we are beneath the Cross, we are united to the life and death of Jesus who emptied himself in humble service. When we receive communion, we leave the tomb united to the Tremendous Lover who by His Passion and Death has given us His Life.