

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of the Lord: Beyond the Carousel

A few years ago I came upon a beautiful carousel. Instant reflections of early childhood hit me as I remember the merry-go-rounds I would go on at Seaside Heights, New Jersey back in the day when the term “Jersey Shore” had no connotations of immorality. I don’t know if modern carousels still do this, they probably don’t because of safety issues, but back when I was little, everyone would try to be on a horse or animal on the outside of the circle. That was so they could reach for the ring. There was a mechanical arm hanging over the edge of the merry-go-round that held a ring to be plucked by the riders. Children would spend the entire ride hoping to get the ring. It wasn’t easy. For one thing they had to be brave, at least for a eight or nine year old. They had to stretch out their arm as far as they could while holding onto their horse. But if they were successful and reached beyond themselves, there was a reward in store, usually a free ride or something.

The people that Jesus speaks to in the Gospel reading for this week, from *John* 6, were satisfied with receiving free bread. The day before Jesus had multiplied loaves and fishes. Now they wanted more free food. Jesus told them that He would give them bread beyond their imagination. He would give them His body and blood. They had to be willing to reach out for it, though, and accept His gift. They had to stretch beyond their physical senses and let Him feed them with the Living Bread that is the Eucharist.

Many of them were not interested. They were satisfied with going around in circles on the merry-go-rounds of their lives. They did not believe that there was a far greater gift beyond the physical which was being offered to them. They had reminded the Lord about the Manna that God provided for their ancestors in the time of Moses. Jesus pointed out that those ancestors still died. The bread He would give would be for everlasting life. Were they willing to stretch their lives and reach for the spiritual gift?

Are we? We are called by the Lord to eat His Body and Drink His Blood. On the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of the Lord, we have to ask ourselves whether we do reach out for Him, or whether we just perform a ritual action in Church with as much enthusiasm as our standing, kneeling and sitting at various moments during the Mass. Today’s celebration is given to us to remind us what we are doing and Whom we are receiving when we go to communion.

We have got to fight against the spiritual laziness that relegates the Eucharist to a sacramental, as though taking communion is on the same level as making the sign of the cross with Holy Water. We have to prepare to receive the Lord, not just in the prayers we say moments before Mass but in the life we lead the week before Mass. We have to celebrate the Presence within us, not just in the pews after communion but in the way we treat others, with the Kindness of the Lord.

The fundamental action of Jesus's life, the reason why He became one of us, was the gift of Himself in His passion, death and resurrection: the Paschal Event. The gift of His sacrificial love re-established our union with God and our capacity to share in His immortality. Or to put it simply: because He died for us we can live forever with Him.

When Jesus gave us his Body and Blood the night before He died and when He gives us his Body and Blood every time we receive communion, the Lord gives us the total sacrifice of Himself to his Father. *"This is my Body which shall be given up for you. This is the cup of my Blood, the new and everlasting covenant that shall be shed for you and for all until the end of time."* When we receive the Eucharist, Jesus is present as the Servant of God who in his sacrificial death is saving us all. Right here, right now. Today's Gospel states: *'The one who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has life eternal.'* In the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist we receive Jesus saving His people.

We receive Christ strengthening us and transforming our joys and sorrows into prayers to his Father. Sometimes we are full of the joy of the Resurrection, sometimes the sorrow of the Passion, but always we are strengthened by the One who gives us His body and blood.

In the Eucharist Jesus is within us, nourishing us. He comes closer to us than our skin. He experiences our joy and our sorrow. He knows our needs before we can express them. He builds up our faith life, our spiritual life, our eternal life.

He is there for us, but we have to reach out, stretch ourselves beyond our physical limitations and take the gift He holds out to us. We cannot be satisfied with just receiving communion. We have to let His Presence transform us. When we allow Christ to be our lives, we can go beyond the carousel of life and accept the prize of eternal life.