

## SOLEMNITY OF THE MOST HOLY BODY & BLOOD OF CHRIST (A)

*Second Sunday after Pentecost*

John 6:51-58

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Wichita, Kansas

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

In The United States, this weekend and more accurately tomorrow, we have a day of remembrance which we call, Memorial Day. As a nation we are invited to recall all those who have died in protection of our nation's freedom. It is a time to go to the cemeteries where those who defended democracy and liberty are buried. It is a patriotic celebration at which portions of our Declaration of Independence, our Constitution, and letters and poems recalling our military history and national dedication, are often read.

This weekend in the Church, is also a memorial celebration, in which we recall the One Death which freed us all from spiritual bondage and decay. The Body of Christ lived among us as a Real Presence of the Eternal Love of God. Jesus gave his Body and Blood to set us free from sin, death, and the power of the devil.

As people gather to recall the deaths of service men and women, which resulted in our living more freely as a nation, so the Church gathers to remember again the Death of this One Who laid down His life for His friends. As when a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies to itself so that many grains of wheat might fruitfully grow, so Jesus offered up his Body and poured out his life-giving Blood, so that we might be the fruit of his life, death and resurrection.

In our First Reading from Deuteronomy, we hear Moses relating some events of God's history with Israel. The context of this speech is that Moses is presenting the laws and customs which the people are to obey in their personal and communal lives. He asks them to call to mind the past ways God had found them, guided them and preserved them, as his special people. The children of Israel are being asked to go into their futures more faithfully, and to do so they are called to remember how God has fed them in the past.

It is quite true that if we do not relate our stories — that is, if we do not remember our history, we will forget who we are. This Memorial Day weekend our nation is invited to remember and tell the stories of Bunker Hill, Gettysburg, Omaha Beach, Inchon, Khe Sanh, and innumerable others. Our freedoms have been purchased at a great price, and telling those stories brings us to a renewed sense of identity and gratitude.

As true as that is for us as a nation, so it is true for us as God's people, the Church. We need to remember our own history — the history of Israel, and of the Church, in order that we might arrive at a renewed sense of identity and gratitude to God.

And so, in our First Reading, Moses is reminding the people of just *who*

they are in the eyes of God. By their retelling these stories of God's faithfulness to them, and of his care for them, they will see themselves as God's people in their own eyes. Much has been given to them, and so, much is asked *of them* — to live as God's chosen and faithful people.

So it is appropriate for us in the Church to inquire, "*Where does today's liturgical celebration come from?*" The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ began as a local celebration in France, and spread to the whole western Church in the latter half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century (1264), under Pope Urban IV. This festival is the delayed octave — that is the 8<sup>th</sup> day — of Maundy Thursday. On Maundy Thursday, our Lord Jesus instituted the sacrament of Holy Communion, but Holy Week — especially in the Middle Ages — tended to be a time of sadness, when the minds of the faithful were occupied with thoughts of the Christ's passion and death. Easter lasts a full seven weeks, and after the Easter season comes Pentecost week, so a celebration of the gift of the Body and Blood of Christ is postponed until the Thursday after Holy Trinity Sunday. And in this country, that Thursday celebration is observed on the following Sunday — today.

The Festival of the Body and Blood of Christ — or Corpus Christi, as it has been commonly known from the Latin — this festival was retained by some Lutherans until around the year 1600, though Martin Luther himself was hostile to it. In recent years however, some Lutheran congregations have begun to observe it once again.

If *we* are going to observe it, it is only right that we understand why it was that many Lutherans were originally hostile to it. One must remember that in the middle ages, the lay people did not regularly commune. They might attend Mass regularly, and they might gaze at the consecrated host in prayer and devotion, but they received the sacrament only irregularly. In fact, the Church had to issue instructions that it was necessary for the faithful to receive Holy Communion at least once a year — and so many did just that, once a year.

On the Feast of Corpus Christi, a grand procession was typically held in which a consecrated host was placed in a beautiful holder — a monstrance. The procession would travel through the town and people would pray and adore the sacrament from afar.

And *that* was precisely what Luther had problems with. People would gaze at and adore the sacrament, but *they would not receive it*. They were not allowed access to the cup, and they restrained themselves from eating the host. For Luther, this was the heart of the problem. Our Lord Jesus instituted the sacrament, in order to *give himself* to his people. Our Lord Jesus gave us this sacrament, in order that we might *eat and drink*, in order that we might take his very Body and Blood into ourselves. And so for all of the attention that this Feast day gave to Christ's sacramental presence, it missed the *very purpose* for which Jesus gave it: that we might actively *receive him* — that we might *faithfully eat and drink* — and so

share in his eternal life.

In his Large Catechism, Luther writes:

*Christ did not institute [the sacrament] to be treated merely as a spectacle, but commanded his Christians to **eat and drink** and thereby remember him.* (emphasis added)

At our monthly Council Meetings, and at our monthly Committee Meetings, we have been reading from the Augsburg Confession. This last week, we focused on Article 24, on the reform of The Mass. We read:

*We [reformers] are unjustly accused of having abolished the Mass. Without boasting, it is manifest that the Mass is observed among us [Lutherans] with **greater devotion** and more earnestness than among our opponents.*

*Moreover, the people are instructed often and with great diligence concerning the holy sacrament, why it was instituted, and how it is to be used. . .in order that [they] may be drawn to the Communion and Mass. . .*

*Inasmuch, then, as the Mass is. . .a Communion in which the priest and others **receive the sacrament** for themselves, it is observed among us in the following manner: On holy days [Sundays and festivals], and at other times when communicants are present [weekdays], Mass is held and those who desire it are [communed]. Thus the Mass is preserved among us in its proper use.* (emphasis added)

According to Luther and Melancthon and the other reformers, the **proper** use of the Mass was **not** to gaze upon, and so rarely dare to receive it. No, the **proper** use of the Mass was to encourage and exhort the people to **actively participate**, to encourage and exhort them to **receive** the very Body and Blood of Christ, to encourage and exhort them to **eat and drink** and so receive the gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation.

The Lord instituted this meal because we need a very tangible way of being in communion with him, sinners though we are. In fact, the sacrament is **specifically for sinners**. Every week we are reminded again: Christ's Body and Blood are "*given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.*"

We recall from recent weeks the stories of Jesus' appearance to his disciples after his resurrection. And what did he do with this failed, sinful group? He ate with them.

Do we need this kind of sign? When Martin Luther was encouraging Christians to receive the sacrament more frequently, he suggested that they pinch themselves. If they feel the pinch, they are living human beings, and they need what the Lord gives — forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

And so week in and week out, we gather together, and in obedience to

Christ's command we offer up bread and wine to God. We give thanks. We bless these elements. And in obedience to our Lord Jesus we *receive* them. We eat and drink. We tell the story of his sacrifice for sinners, over and over again. Because it is *our* story, and so it tells us who we are. That story, that history, gives us our identity.

We are sinners. Sinners beloved of Christ. Sinners fed with his very Body and Blood.

In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.