

## MOST HOLY BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST – A (June 11, 2023)

Last weekend we celebrated Trinity Sunday—the truth of the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and whose communion of perfect and divine love within that one God is made possible for us as well. Salvation history is all about this God of love and how he made himself **present** to his human creation who he created in his image and likeness and to whom he showed his love in so many ways:

- Remember how he was **present** to his chosen people in leading them out of slavery in Egypt and guided them to the land he promised them. For example, Moses reminded them in our first reading how the Lord their God kept them going in their 40-year journey and even gave them water from the rock and fed them with manna, that bread from heaven.
- Then, about 1200 years later, God the Son became **present** to us all when he took on our flesh-and-blood human nature and was conceived in Mary’s womb by the Holy Spirit. As St. John declared in the first chapter of his gospel: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” This one God joined the human race in the person of Jesus and thus became part of human history.
- And even after Jesus’ death and resurrection and immediately before ascending into heaven, as we heard three weeks ago, he promised his disciples: “Behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.”

God the Son became **present** to us in a visible, tangible way; he promised his ongoing, never-ending **presence** to us even after ascending body and soul to be seated at the Father’s right hand. How can Jesus be present to us in the here and now after his Ascension? Well, of course, he is God—and God is certainly not constrained by our limited intellect in his ability to do what seems impossible to us.

Today we celebrate the mystery by which Jesus makes his **presence** known and available to us in a most amazing way—the mystery of the Eucharist. Unlike the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, John in his gospel does not give us an account of Jesus instituting the Eucharist at the Last Supper. Those other three gospels were most likely already written and well-known by the time John got around to writing his gospel, and so he may not have felt a need to repeat what they already contained. But John gave us what we call Jesus’ ‘bread of life’ discourse or teaching in chapter six from which today’s reading comes.

And what a teaching it is! To those who heard these words back in the first century, they must have sounded absolutely crazy. “[U]nless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life...For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.” Over and over he repeats himself, he doubles down as if to say: “Folks, I know this sounds weird, but I mean precisely what I’m saying here!” No wonder some of his listeners scoffed and said “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”; no wonder some of his own disciples said “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” And some were so scandalized that they left him. But Jesus never took back a single word he said; he did not say: “hey, come on back, guys—you misunderstood me; I didn’t mean that

literally!” Yes, he did mean precisely what he said; they understood him correctly...and some left because they couldn’t handle it.

Ever since her beginning, the Church has understood this gospel to refer to the Eucharist—the very same Eucharist that Jesus gave us at the Last Supper. Once bread and wine is consecrated, those elements become his true Body and his true Blood. All that remains of the bread and wine is their outward appearance as such. Mysterious? It sure is. Difficult to understand or comprehend? Of course it is—that’s why we call it ‘mystery’: something we can’t know by mere logic, but that we accept on faith on the basis of Jesus revealing this truth to us...and Jesus does not lie.

The Eucharist is one of the most mysterious and most powerful ways that Jesus makes his presence known to us, that Jesus shows his love for us. There is a very close, even an intimate relationship between these ideas of love and presence. If you really love someone, do you not want to be with that person? Of course you do! You want to be with those you love—whether at birthday or anniversary or graduation parties, at Christmas or Easter or any other such occasions. And that’s even more the case when the one you love is in a bad way or otherwise hurting. Think of parents who stay with their sick child at home, or when you are sitting at the hospital bedside of your spouse or parent or child or other loved one. You want to be there, even if you can’t help that person, even if that person doesn’t even know you are there. I remember from a former parish assignment an elderly couple—Bernard and Barbara. They were married for 67+ years; she died in 2018 and he died two years later. Barbara was in a care facility for Alzheimer’s for several years before her death, and Bernard went to see her every day that he possibly could—feeding her lunch, talking to her, being with her...even though she wasn’t always able to respond and sometimes didn’t even know that he was there. But Bernard knew that Barbara was there—he loved her, and he wanted to be with her. You simply want to be with the one you love.

The Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Jesus, is all about his incredible love for us—a love that gives himself entirely for us on the Cross, and whose gift to us continues in the Eucharist. You want to be with the one you love—and the Eucharist is his presence to us and, after receiving his Most Holy Body and Blood, it is his actual and real presence within us. Never, ever take the Eucharist for granted; never, ever forget that Jesus gives us himself in this most Blessed Sacrament. He does so because he loves us, and Jesus wants to be with the ones he loves. And as long as we remain in this earthly life, there is no more powerful, more intimate way for Jesus to be present to us than in this sacrament of his Body and Blood.

Bishop Robert Barron, our neighbor to the north across the Minnesota state line, says it so well as he so often does: “The doctrine of the Real Presence...has always been a standing or falling point for followers of Jesus. If the Eucharist is but a symbol of Jesus, who cares? But if it is the flesh and blood of the Master, nothing could possibly be more important.” Bishop Barron absolutely nailed it. Nothing could possibly be more important than the Eucharist, because the Eucharist is Jesus Christ himself. And nothing and no one is more important than Jesus Christ himself.