

Transformed by the Holy Eucharist

This weekend, we celebrate the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, or Corpus Christi Sunday. The feast dates back to the 12th century. Saint Juliana of Liege, an Augustinian who lived in present-day Belgium, is whom we have to thank for it. She was very talented and educated and was given the grace of absolute faith that the bread and wine presented at the Mass becomes the Real Presence of Jesus Christ. Until her time, the Body of Christ was not elevated after the Consecration. Her Eucharistic devotion became a movement that drove the desire of medieval Catholics to want to see the Body of Christ, so the elevation of the host began in Paris in 1220. Adoration became a regular practice as well.

Today, literally seeing the Eucharist certainly isn't a problem, at every Mass the host and the chalice are elevated. But as a whole, I think the challenge today is seeing the deeper meaning of the Eucharist.

Our catechism states that with respect to Holy Communion, this is the sacrament in which we "unite ourselves to Christ who makes us sharers in his Body and Blood to form a single body." (1330). Uniting ourselves to Christ, the catechism goes on to say that "The principal fruit of receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion is an intimate union with Christ Jesus. Indeed, the Lord said: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him." (1391). Through this, sins are also removed, as the Eucharist cleanses us from sin (1393).

First, it's important to remember how much God loves us. God did not have to come to dwell among us and die for us; but He did, all out of love for us. Ponder that when you receive Communion - about how God loves you so very much, and how He gives us this sign of His love to help us on our journey through life in becoming better people. Turn your sins and struggles over to Him in your heart, and let Jesus free you from them. Know that no matter where you are at in life, God loves you - and He sees the inherent goodness in you, which is why He is with you in life every step of the way. The Eucharist is fuel for the journey through of life. Sometimes receiving Holy Communion can be rather mechanical, but it is such a special moment where God is choosing to dwell within us, giving Himself to us.

Secondly, as the name suggests, "Communion" is meant to bond us closer to one another. As Saint Paul says in Romans 12:5, "we, though many, are one body." The catechism also tells us that the "Eucharist strengthens our charity" (1394). Communion is meant to unite us to one another, and as we reflect on receiving Holy Communion, we also need to ask ourselves how we grow in the fruits that we receive from the Eucharist. While we stand up for what we believe in and should speak our minds, do we try to listen to others and be tolerant with those who see things differently than we do, be it in politics, in the family, or at the parish or school? How do we reach out to those in our lives who may be hurting? How do we work on forgiveness? Do we look at others in our lives and see who may be spiritually hungry and then try to give them spiritual food with love and prayer? Do we look at the world with optimism and hope, seeing good in

people and try to help them, or just bemoan the world or judge others too harshly without trying to help them? Polarization runs so high and we see it even in our families, our Church universal and local, not to mention of course our country, our workplaces. Rather than focus on forming our various “tribes” hopefully we can strive to see God in one another.

Third, how do we sacrifice for others? We call Mass a sacrifice because we celebrate the sacrifice of Jesus’ Body for us all. Last week on Memorial Day, I shared in a homily the story of Salvo d’Acquisto. As a young officer in the Italian Army during World War II, he condemned himself to certain death so that others might have the chance to live.

Poverty was rife in the southern Italian city and so he lived with his seven siblings, parents and grandparents in a single-room apartment. He left school at the age of 14, as was normal for boys from his neighborhood, and enrolled in the Carabinieri, a unit of the Italian army which serves as a police force. The first few years of his career took him to Rome and then to North Africa. And then, when war broke out, he was sent to keep order in Torrimpietra, a small village just to the north of Rome.

Salvo was on duty on the morning of 23 September 1943; Mussolini had been overthrown a few months prior, and the new government secretly negotiated with the Allies to change sides. An Armistice had been announced earlier in September. Italy at this point was now on the side of the Allies.

He had just been to church for mass when he saw a group of feared SS soldiers approaching. Their officer immediately refused Salvo’s greeting, striking him hard instead. The SS man informed Salvo that one of his own soldiers had been killed in an explosion in a nearby village. He suspected sabotage was to blame and wanted revenge. The Nazis had chosen 22 local men. They would all be shot if Salvo could not find the man – or men – responsible for the alleged sabotage.

Salvo had to watch as the innocent men were made to dig their own graves. He tried to comfort the condemned and to reason with the SS officer. Eventually, Salvo himself “confessed” to the crime, saying he had caused the explosion and had acted completely alone. He stressed that the other men were innocent and should be let go. Perhaps surprisingly, the SS man took Salvo at his word. The 22 men were released and Salvo was to face the firing squad alone. He was shot just before dusk, with just one of the freed men staying around to watch his final, dignified moments.

After the war, Salvo’s actions became widely known. He was posthumously awarded the Gold Medal of Military Valor, Italy’s highest military honor. Perhaps more fittingly given his own strong Catholic faith, Salvo is being considered for beatification and is widely-regarded as Italy’s most important Catholic martyr. A quote attributed to him is “We have to conform ourselves to God’s will whatever the cost in suffering or sacrifice.”

And so as we receive Holy Communion and ponder the deeper meanings of the Eucharist, we can again remind ourselves if God goes this far for me out of love, how am I willing to sacrifice for my faith, my family, my country? Jesus loves us, but this love requires a response too - including taking up our Cross and following Him.

Indeed, there is so much involved in the Eucharist it's impossible to cover even the tip of the iceberg in a bulletin column. But, again, just think about that one word "you" the next time you're at Mass - "given up for you." In Communion, Jesus gives up His body for you, and gives it to you to give you strength. But this is also meant to bring us closer to one another as the people of God too; to help transform us into better people and conveyors of the grace we are given. It's such a wonderful gift, and my hope is we never take that for granted, and pass on the gift we have been given by growing in love for both our Lord and one another.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Paul

P.S. A heartfelt congratulations to the Saint Joseph's Class of 2021 whose graduation we celebrate with a special Mass this weekend. We had our last school Mass on May 27th, and I just also want to thank all of our teachers and Mrs. Kelly Roche our principal for their dedication and hard work in such a trying and challenging year. We managed to stay open throughout the year and have seen our enrollment increase as well. If you want to talk about "sacrifice" and people who live out what the Eucharist is daily, look no further than the amazing and dedicated staff of our school. Please keep our graduates and all of our teachers in your prayers, and here is hoping for a much more "normal" school year as we head into next fall.