

Homily for May 27, 2001
Solemnity of Ascension of the Lord,
Cycle C

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts of the Apostles 1:1-11
Ephesians 1:17-23
Luke 24:46-53

Not just our souls but our bodies too are made glorious

This Solemnity of the Ascension of Jesus into heaven makes us mindful of our bodies; mindful that our bodies are not something we have but part of who we are.

We are not just a collection of muscles, bones, and organs where a soul resides. We are persons. And our remembering and making present again Jesus' death and resurrection focuses not on an immortal soul but on a transfigured world of glorified bodies. That's why the famous theologian Karl Rahner called the feast of the Ascension, "A festival of the future of the world." For we believe that Christ's body – and our bodies – will last forever, transformed by God.

This view of the body effects how we understand the Eucharist, the Mass – even how we understand Jesus Christ. As one theologian writes: "the Body of Christ offered in consecrated bread and wine is not some *thing*, but some *one*...the ultimate intent of celebrating Eucharist is not to produce the sacred species for the purposes of reservation and adoration, but to create the united body of Christ which is the Church." The body of the Christ is not only *on* the table, but also at the table and *around* the table.

If we look at the history of the Mass from the days of the apostles to our own time, we see there have been

many changes in the way our Church has understood the Eucharist. But throughout that long tradition is the same belief of the real presence of the Risen Jesus in the Eucharist and the centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the Church – the Mass is the most important thing we Catholics do. It creates the Church.

For the first seven or eight centuries of the Church's life, the Eucharist had been the people's Eucharist. The Eucharist was people gathering in community (often in *house churches*) to express their praise and thanks to God and remember the saving deeds of Jesus and thus make Jesus present. This is precisely what the word Eucharist means: "giving thanks and praise."

Christians, gathered together for Eucharist, were conscious all the while that the Risen Jesus was in their midst as they did so. They never even bothered to ask *when* Christ became present. It was enough to know that he was with them. There was no Elevation of the Host and cup at the words of institution. The only elevation came at the end of the Eucharistic prayer as we do now: "Through him, with him, in him...". After the Eucharistic prayer, everyone shared in the meal. Following the meal, communion was taken to the sick. Later the custom developed of reserving the holy bread in a special place in the church to take to the sick in case this was necessary when Eucharist was not being

celebrated. Eventually it happened that people would go to the place of reservation for private prayer hence the development of the tabernacle in a special place for private prayer.

In the Middle Ages, roughly between 800 and 1000, something happened to the Eucharist. It became something quite different from what it had been in the beginning. From being the action of the people, it became an act of God coming down among God's people to be adored.

How did this happen? Well, first of all, as a number the Christians grew after the Church became the official church of the Roman Empire under the emperor Constantine; church buildings became much larger. The homey image of the community gathered around the Lord's table became less and less visible. Second, in the age of Charlemagne in the late 700's, many people of non-Roman background were baptized without adequate preparation. They went to a liturgy celebrated in Latin, a language they did not understand.

And third, for a long time the Church had fought against the persistent heresy of Arianism. The Arians denied that Jesus Christ was divine. In reaction to this heresy, Christian thought emphasized the divinity of Christ so much that his humanity was almost forgotten. The result was that Jesus became for many people a fearful figure. Having lost sight of the fact that Jesus had truly become part of the human family, people began to think of him solely as God – and as God who is our judge and who will punish us for our failings. Jesus who had welcomed sinners and forgiven them had become someone who was unapproachable and to be feared.

These factors working together brought about a different way of viewing the Eucharist. The priest began to celebrate Mass with his back to the people.

Few received communion. They began to look at the Jesus whom they felt now afraid to receive. More and more the priest did everything at the Mass. The people simply “attended.”

Let me offer an analogy of what was happening to the Eucharist back then. Suppose someone were to rewrite the gospels and transform the image of Jesus as presented in the gospels. Suppose that, instead of describing the Jesus who moved among people healing them, reconciling them, consoling them, inviting them to choose the Kingdom – suppose, instead, that the gospels presented Jesus as someone who sat in a house at Nazareth behind a glass window where anyone who wanted to could come and get a look at him. There would be Jesus, not acting in the midst of people – but just sitting there day after day, on view for people.

No one would dare rewrite the gospels in this way. Yet what no one would dare to do to the Christ of the gospels is what the middle ages unwittingly did to the Christ of the Eucharist. They took away much of the awareness of Christ in the midst of the people. The Mass had drifted from a human experience of community in Jesus, which did call for people's participation, to a divine reality that called for a priest to act in the name of Christ to bring him down from heaven. The priest became the only one to be acting in the Eucharistic celebration.

The people watched as silent spectators. They said their prayers. They watched the host lifted up for them to see. On occasion they received communion. For the most part though, they were not really a community, but a collection of individuals --watching something that was being done on their behalf. This approach continued even down to our present day until the Second Vatican Council. For many of us growing up receiving communion had little to do with

...Continued

any kind of relationship with the rest of the people in the church. Communion was seen as something between “Jesus and me.” When we returned from communion, we made this abundantly clear by burying our faces in our hands, to exclude from this exquisite moment all else, including the rest of the congregation. What happened in the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century in terms of the liturgical development became official policy of the Catholic Church with the Second Vatican Council’s *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, as well as the Liturgical Documents issued after the Council to help to implement those directives of the Constitution. What happened can only be called an unprecedented and explosive revolution in liturgical understanding and practice. The most important thing the Council did was to give the Eucharist back to the assembly, to the people of God.

It would be too strong to say that the Council took the Eucharist away from the priest and gave it back to the people. But it would not be too strong to say that it returned the Eucharist to what it had been in the beginning: an assembly of God’s people come together, under the leadership of a priest, to praise God, to hear God’s word and to “break bread” with the firm belief that the Lord Jesus was present among them – body, blood, soul, and divinity; the whole person of Jesus.

In today’s Eucharist, though a priest presides, the central actor is the Risen Jesus present in our midst through the action of the Spirit – acting as we act – as

the Body of Christ individually and collectively. The priest’s role remains essential: he is the Presider who leads the assembly, and in the person of Christ and behalf of the people asks God to send the Holy Spirit on the bread and wine and on the assembly.

Where we used to emphasize mainly the role of the priest, we now emphasize as well the role of the entire assembly. The priest presides over the celebration. But where we used to speak of the priest changing the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, we now see his role as a humbler one. He acts in the person of Jesus, asking God: “Let your spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy, so that they may become for us the body and blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ.” In other words, the priest asks God to send the Holy Spirit to do for us now what Jesus did at the Last Supper.

All the reforms of liturgy that have come out of the Second Vatican Council have had as their ultimate intent to make the Mass once again a human reality, namely, that people do; yet always a human reality that moves beyond the human to the Divine. By this I mean that what people do at Mass, they do with a profound realization that the risen Lord is present in their midst.

Jesus calls us to eat his flesh and drink his blood. We should avoid an overly literalistic understanding of these words. We do not literally eat flesh or drink blood. Jesus’ command to eat his body and drink his blood can only make sense if we understand the words body and blood as designating the whole person, the real glorified

Jesus as he exists today-body, blood, soul, and divinity.

Thus to eat his body and drink his blood is to enter into a true encounter with the person of Jesus. This is the full meaning of the Eucharist. It is a dynamic meeting with the Risen One.

But it is not a solitary experience. We do not come to the Eucharist simply as isolated individuals, but rather as persons who are members of the community, as persons who are the body of Christ. The Eucharist is not just Jesus with me, but Jesus with us, and all of us with one another. And we are not together hiding from the world: we are Christ's body in the world God created twenty-four hours a day, at home, at work, in every way.

In a word, Jesus' presence is not static: he is not satisfied just to be there. He is there to act dynamically in order to change our lives. At Eucharist we meet Christ and are challenged by him in the assembly of his people he is there to make us whole people. He is there to bring harmony and peace into our lives, our families, our country, our world.

All too often our understanding gets reversed. We think of the Eucharist as a kind of reservoir we come to and get the grace that will carry us through the week. - As if our world was graceless and profane. Rather, these acts of worship are what Karl Rahner calls the "Liturgy

of the World." By this he means that the experience of God is primarily to be found hidden in the midst of ordinary life, in our experiences of hope and doubt, responsibility, love and death. We gather together in worship, not to "refuel" lives devoid of grace, but because we need to celebrate all the grace-filled moments of our lives, which are so easily overlooked or ignored. We gather at Eucharist to be challenged to deeper awareness of what God is doing in our lives in this world, all week long, always and everywhere. The Eucharist opens our eyes to see what would lie hidden otherwise - God's saving deeds to our hands and to the hands of others. St. Augustine relates to the body of Christ in the Eucharist on the altar to the body of Christ that is the Church at and around the altar. In the fifth century he wrote: "If you are the body and members of Christ, then it is your sacrament that is placed on the table of the Lord; it is your sacrament that you receive. To that which you are you respond: 'Amen' (yes, it is true!), and by responding to it you assent to it. For you hear the words the body of Christ and respond amen. Be then a member of the body of Christ that your amen may be true."

Not just our souls but our bodies
too are made glorious.