

**Homily for June 22, 2003
Body and Blood of Christ**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Exodus 24:3-8
Hebrews 9:11-15
Mark 14:12-16, 22-26**

We become what we receive in Holy Communion.

What were once two feasts, Corpus Christi and Precious Blood, are now one celebration. Originally one feast honored the body of Christ, which was first broken, then glorified, and is now given to us in sacramental form. The other feast praises the blood of Christ, poured out for our salvation. Together, they celebrate the incomparable love that God has for us in Jesus Christ. They remind us that, “The mercies of the Lord are new every morning.”

In his book, *With Burning Hearts*, Henri Nouwen observes that when Jesus enters the home of his disciples, it becomes his home. When he is invited to a meal, Jesus, the guest, becomes the host. The blessing is said over the bread, and he breaks it and hands it to them.

The gospel today, Mark 14, tells of a very special meal that Jesus shared with his disciples. The meal is a celebration of the Jewish Passover, but in the Christian context, it became far more than that. Once again Jesus becomes the host. He took the bread and wine, the common things there on the table, and lifted them into

a new dimension as sign and symbol of himself. “This is my body, take and eat. This is my blood, take and drink.” In the Mass, we now call that the consecration. The priest is not a magician changing bread and wine into Jesus, as children sometimes think. The church understands the action of Jesus with his disciples as prompted or energized by the Holy Spirit. Jesus said himself in his lifetime, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” And the Eucharistic prayer we pray at every Mass invokes the Holy Spirit to make the bread and wine the sign or sacrament of Christ present in his saving passage through death to life. The Church absolutely defends the fact that this is a real presence of Christ under these forms of bread and wine – truly a privileged location of the experience of God.

But the presence of the Lord in Holy Communion is for a purpose – it is as food to be eaten, to be consumed. Unlike the food we usually eat, which is changed into us, nourishing us physically to be Charlie, Sandy, Susan and George, this holy food changes us into itself. We become what we receive in Holy Communion, sharers in the mystery of Jesus’ passage through death to life, empowered by the Spirit to live that life.

When we come forward to Holy Communion, the priest or minister holding the host or the cup says, “The Body of Christ: The Blood of Christ.” But he is saying

this both of the bread and wine and of the person receiving Communion. Our amen is said not only to the real presence of the Lord in the bread and wine, but it is said also to the real presence of the Lord in us and in the gathered people.

In accord with the directives from our Pope and bishops, we are asked, of course, to make a slight bow as we approach the cup and the bread as a sign of reverence and respect. Likewise, before receiving Holy Communion, at the sign of peace we greet one another, recognizing the presence of the Lord in our midst.

The amen we say at Holy Communion is more important than often appears. It really means, "I accept and welcome my role as a member of Christ's body. I am a Christian, a disciple. And what Saint Paul once wrote is true of me and of all my brothers and sisters: 'I live now – no, not I, but Christ in me.'"

It is in the Eucharist that we find the most intense sense of the presence of God in our lives, and the encouragement to live the Eucharistic life. This is how we become the body of Christ. And thus united with Christ we go forth to continue his work in the world. The bread, which is his body, has now become the Church, which is his body. And we are the members. Certainly we are not perfect in expressing that truth, but we are a work in progress, attempting to be open to the transforming work of the Spirit.

And so we meet the Lord Jesus Christ at the table, this table at which he is the host. We come desiring to be like him. And that means to follow him wherever he leads, to build a Kingdom. A poem said it well:

"Once we were strangers, divided, alone,
Hate and distress built a wall stone by stone.
Now at a table that bread did we share,
Joins us to Christ in a circle of care.
So build us a table and tear down the wall!
Christ is our host. There is room for us all."

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in Holy Communion.**