

Homily for June 8, 2003
Pentecost

By Father Charles Bowes

Acts 2:1-11
1 Corinthians 12:3b-7, 12-13
John 20:19-23

At every Mass, we enter the timeless moment of Jesus' saving deeds.

When I was studying to become a priest, I failed an examination one day. There was only one question on the exam, and it was, "What constitutes salvation in Jesus Christ – is it Jesus' birth, death, resurrection, ascension or the sending of the Spirit?" I marked down that it was Jesus' death and resurrection that saved us. I was wrong. It was all of the above.

That's right, we talk about Jesus' birth and death and resurrection and ascension and Pentecost, the sending of the Spirit. But that's for our sake – that's for our human minds to try to grasp or grapple with the saving deeds of God in Jesus. The reality is that these many separate events are really one saving deed. And today, we are celebrating the saving deed of the sending of the Spirit.

The readings abound in their description of that Spirit. There is the powerful wind, the noise that filled the whole house. There is the bundle of tongues of fire that separated self over the Apostles. There is the gift of languages and the thousands believing in the streets.

There is a second scenario, the contrasting picture of Jesus standing among them on the evening of that very same day, Easter day, with the doors closed, saying: "Peace be with you! As the Father sent me so I am sending you." Breathing, just breathing – not even blowing – breathing over them, saying, "Receive the Holy Spirit, for those whose sins you forgive they will be forgiven."

In a third approach, Saint Paul is speaking about the influence of the Holy Spirit in our lives. "No one can say," he wrote, "Jesus is the Lord except in the Spirit." All the services rendered to each other, all the works we work, all the gifts and talents we use, they are all from that same Holy Spirit. All these different events described are really one event – one saving deed, connected with all the saving deeds of the Lord Jesus – the birth, the life, death, resurrection and ascension. Another way of saying the same thing is that Jesus grows no older, but is forever caught in the one moment of his saving passage.

What is more, at every Eucharist we enter again that timeless moment – that saving passage. We do not multiply Jesus' death and resurrection by all the Masses that are said. No, there is only one saving deed – one timeless moment that we enter.

The high point of that entrance into the saving deeds of Jesus at every Mass is the reception of Holy Communion. True, the Lord is no less really present in the gathered people and in the Word proclaimed and in the presence of the minister – but in Holy Communion all the words and gathered people get connected in the one bread and one cup. It is the high point of every Mass, and we surround it now with special reverence in accord with the most recent directives from the Pope and our bishops for receiving Holy Communion and preparing to receive Communion as well.

From now on, only the priest is to break the bread and pour the wine at Mass. For some years now, the various ministers of Communion have been assisting in that act. Instead, the priest alone will do that and distribute the bread and wine to those ministers for distribution to all of the faithful present. During the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine, we shall be singing the litany called the Lamb of God as we usually do, but it will be expanded a bit in order to accommodate the action of breaking and pouring. This is in keeping with the increased use of silence and the expansion of the Liturgy of the Word through the book of the Gospels – all around it means more reverence and respect paid to what we do in the presence of the Lord in our midst. For we become what we receive here – as many grains of wheat are ground to make one loaf and many grapes are crushed to make one cup, so we, though many, become one, the Body of Christ.

As a way to reflect a little more fully upon what we are called upon to do in receiving Holy Communion, I'm going to invite you again to close your eyes and sit up straight as best you can and reflect upon the words

of the Lamb of God which I shall chant now, using some of the expanded chant that we'll be using in preparing for Holy Communion.

Here is a question for reflection: "What comes to mind or what feeling do you have when you hear this chant of the Lamb of God?" Here are some comments made in other settings in response to that question: "For me it's the heart of my faith – to be able to receive the living God – it means everything to me."

Another response: "I always knew receiving Holy Communion was special, and that was one of the reasons I wanted to become a Catholic."

And another response: "Somehow I've always wanted to bring all my troubles and my joys and sorrows to Holy Communion with me, for I know somehow the Lord takes away or eases or helps me bear my burdens."

When we gather at Mass, we discover that the Body of Christ is not only on the table but also at the table and around the table. "There you are on the table, and there you are in the chalice," St. Augustine preached in his homilies after Easter, instructing the newly baptized. So while we reserve the sacrament after the Mass for the dying and for the sick and for private devotion, the ultimate intent for celebrating the Eucharist is to create the united Body of Christ, which is the Church – thus, we become what we receive.

At every Mass, we enter the timeless moment of Jesus' saving deeds.