The Feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, Cycle B

Old St. Pat’s, 2021 (8:00 & 10:00)

For some reason when thinking about preaching today’s feast

 A single advertising slogan has stuck in my head

 Of course that is the goal of advertisers

 To lodge an enduring verbal or visual trigger in your brain

 That moves your subconscious to recognition

* It’s called brand loyalty -

 And then to action.

 That’s called spending your hard-earned cash.

 Sometimes this subconscious process

That psychologists now identify as “priming”

 Is trigger by slogans that touch deep values

 Like the enduring phrase from DeBeers “diamonds are forever”

 Or the insurance classic: “you’re in good hands with Allstate.”

 Other times effective slogans amuse us

 Like “Where’s the beef” from Wendy’s, or

 Alka Selzer’s “I can’t believe I ate the whole thing.”

 We respond to this hit of dopamine

 With subconscious approval of the product

 And a heightened instinct to buy when given the chance.

 The phrase that kept popping into my mind this week, however,

 Was not Nike’s “Just do it”

 Or the Army’s “Be all that you can be”

 But the spectacularly unsuccessful

 “This is not your Father’s Oldsmobile.”

 That phrase was rolled out in the late 1980’s

 When the cutlass supreme was introduced.

 Oldsmobile was trying to appeal to a younger generation.

 The blunder, however, was that most Oldsmobile customers

 At that time actually were fathers!

Despite the colossal failure of this ad campaign

 The phrase has morphed and thrived in public parlance:

“This is Not Your Father’s root beer”

 Was one of the first hard sodas on the market.

 The 2016 remake of Ben-Hur was touted as

 “This is not your father’s chariot race.”

 There was also the “Not Your Mother’s” cookbook series.

 And the “This is not your Mother’s Laundry” service

 Was quite popular on college campuses.

While hoping to avoid the backfire of the original Oldsmobile ad

 Or the theatrical disaster of the Ben-Hur remake

 I yet would like to submit that today’s feast

 Is not your parent’s *Corpus Christi* Feast.

Liturgy geeks – and yes, we do exist –

 Know that the feast of *Corpus Christi*

 Literally the feast of the “Body of Christ”

 Originated during the late medieval period in Liège France

 And in the 13th century was extended to the whole church by Pope Urban IV

 First celebrated on the Thursday after Pentecost

 And then the Thursday after Trinity Sunday.

 It was intended to be a kind of Holy Thursday celebration

 outside the confines of Lent without the shadow of Good Friday.

 This was a traditional day of eucharistic processions

 Of exposition of the blessed Sacrament

 And more widespread reception of holy communion.

One seldom noticed development in the liturgical year

 significant for rethinking this festival

 was the mid-19th century development of a separate feast

 “Of the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”

 That a feast around the Precious Blood might appear

 As a kind of liturgical afterthought

 Six centuries after the establishment of a feast for the Body of Christ

 is not surprising.

Roman Catholics have traditionally had a much stronger devotion

 To Christ’s presence in the bread.

 We don’t reserve the consecrated wine, but only the bread

 so eucharistic devotion is clearly focused on the bread.

 Even when you look at the history of elevations in the Mass,

 The elevation of the cup appears almost two centuries

 After the elevation of the host had been introduced.

While it might be a bit of an overstatement,

 I would suggest that Roman Catholics

 manifest a holy indifference to the cup and the precious blood.

 For over a millennium people received only the bread.

 When communion under both forms was finally allowed

 And the cup was actually offered to the people

– something I look forward again in the near future –

 Many people simply by-passed the cup.

 They had already received the whole Christ in the bread:

 Body and blood, humanity and divinity.

 There was no need for the cup, which seemed redundant,

 Especially because of it’s potential for spreading disease.

A little recognized change in the liturgical calendar

 Some 50 years ago, however, offers a pointed correction here

 And metaphorically brings me back to my Father’s Oldsmobile.

 After the reforms of Vatican II

 The official feast of the Precious Blood was eliminated

 And joined to the ancient festival of *Corpus Christi*.

 So technically today’s feast is not your parent’s *Corpus Christi* feast

 But the feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ.

Now you might be thinking to yourself,

 Wow, that is amazingly **un**interesting, or, even worse,

 The old priest has way too much time on his hands.

 Instead of abandoning him to researching outdated slogans

 Or liturgical minutiae …

 Maybe we can get him a membership in the Audubon society

 Or buy him some puzzle books.

 While I appreciate your concern about my mental well being

 I would contend that this seemingly innocuous piece

 Of liturgical minutiae

 should have major repercussions,

 Not only about the way we celebrate this feast,

 But also about its foundational eucharistic spirituality.

As some of you know, the “butterfly effect”

 Was language developed by meteorologist Edward Lorenz.

 In 1961 Lorenz was running an experiment on weather modeling

 In the process he discovered that even the divergence

 Of one thousandth of a decimal point

 Would render vastly different results.

 A few years later he delivered a celebrated lecture titled:

 “Predictability: Does the flap of a butterfly’s wings in Brazil

 Set off a tornado in Texas”[[1]](#endnote-1)

 Taking the covenantal cup of Christ’s Blood seriously

 Might seem like little a small flap in our theologies

 But the resulting whirlwind of insight and action

 Should not be overlooked, either in Texas or Brazil.

One of the clues to the influence of this little change

 Is apparent in today’s readings

 In which blood imagery appears quite prominent

 Especially in the first and second readings.

 Depictions of people being sprinkled with the blood of bulls

 Recalled in both of those readings

 Might strike us as at least strange

 If not offensive …

 On the other hand, last weekend on Memorial Day

 we recalled the ultimate sacrifice

 Of those who died for our freedom

 And unfurled tens of thousands of flags

 Whose red stripe reminds us that our freedom

 Was purchased with the blood of many.

 How many times have national poets and politicians evoked

 Images of the blood soaked fields of Europe and the Pacific

 Where the seeds of freedom and democracy were resown?

 How many other cities and towns, beaches and outposts

 Have been consecrated by the blood of heroes and victims

 Martyrs and the innocent

 Taking a stand for human dignity and human rights?

When we receive the consecrated bread at communion

 We not only welcome the Eucharistic Christ into our lives

 But commit ourselves in a particular way to being Eucharist.

 Many years ago my godson was preparing for his first communion

 After they had returned home from Mass

 A few weeks before that event

 As the mother was making pancakes

 Brian and his younger brother Cameron

 Began to argue about who would get the first pancake.

 The mother, thinking this could be a teaching moment

 For Brian in his preparation for first communion,

 Said to him, “you know Brian, if Jesus was here

 He would say ‘give my brother the first pancake.’”

 Without skipping a beat, Brian turned to his younger brother

 And said, “You be Jesus!”

 Not to put too fine a point on it

 The act of receiving the bread announces in no uncertain terms

 “You be Jesus”

Notably, the Cup proclaims a parallel yet distinctive truth.

 In the words of the biblical scholar Xavier Leon-Dufour

 The bread announces “what we are to become.”

 The Cup, however, does not do the same …

 We are never asked to be the blood of Christ …

 Rather, the cup reveals “how” we become Christs body”:

 By pouring ourselves out for each other

 In service, even suffering

 Not only in our living, but even in our dying

Our sacrificial stepping aside, letting go

So that others might flourish.[[2]](#endnote-2)

One of the great spirits of the English Church in the 20th century

 Was Cardinal Basil Hume, archbishop of Westminster.

 His care for folk, especially the marginalized and vulnerable

 Were legendary.

 In the early 1980’s Ethiopia was experiencing terrible famine

 Millions died of hunger

 Hume made a visit during this crisis and when he returned home

 Told this story:

On one occasion, I boarded a helicopter that flew me to a mountain settlement high up in the hills where people were starving and waiting for food, food which perhaps was never to arrive.

When I stepped out of the helicopter, a little boy of ten ran up to me and took my hand. He wore only a loin cloth around his waist. The whole time I was there, he would not let go of me.

As we walked around the settlement, he never spoke a word. But whenever we stopped to greet a group of people, he raised his free hand and pointed to his mouth and, with the other, he lifted mine and rubbed it gently up and down his cheek.

I was terribly moved. Here was an orphan boy, lost and starving, who had managed with two simple gestures to express our deepest hungers, our deepest hungers as human beings, namely our hunger for food and our hunger for love.

I have never forgotten this incident, continued the Cardinal, and, to this day, I wonder if that little child is still alive.

I do remember, however, that as I boarded the helicopter to leave this tragic place, I turned back and looked down and saw the boy standing there, gazing up at me with eyes of sadness and reproach.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Engaging in eucharist is an invitation to feed our own hungers

 For spiritual food and divine love

 But the specter of that cup of blood poured out for us

 Also missions us to feed others

 To pour ourselves out in menial tasks and great projects

 So that the world does not view us

 With eyes of sadness and reproach

 But instead sees this living body of Christ

 Fulfilling its baptismal commitment

 To satisfy hunger hearts and broken lives

 With bread and love born of sacrificial living

 Through Christ our Lord.

1. <http://static.gymportalen.dk/sites/lru.dk/files/lru/132_kap6_lorenz_artikel_the_butterfly_effect.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Xavier Leon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharist*ic *bread: The Witness of the New Testament* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. <https://clogherdiocese.ie/2011/06/bishop-macdaid-feast-of-corpus-christi-26-june-2011-homily/> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)