

Homily by Fr. Lukasz (Luke) Willenberg on the Body and Blood of Christ

St. Luke's Parish, Barrington, RI Jan 17-18 2009

This week we begin the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, more simply known as Christian Unity Week (January 18-25). Sometimes people would be asking me, "Fr. Luke, what the difference between us and all kinds of denominations of protestant Churches?"

Do you realize how many Christians are gathering together this weekend as they do every Sunday in all kinds of Churches around the world, not only Catholic Churches. But various many denominations of protestant Churches – if we go for example to St. John in town – is Christ there? Of course, Jesus says – whenever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there. What is the difference then when we come here to St. Luke's or to Roman – Catholic Church in general? What is the difference? Is Jesus Christ here? Spiritually, YES. Only that way? No Way. He is here physically. John's apostles in today's Gospel recognized Christ – John said – Behold the Lamb of God. The Bread and the vine here on this altar- become, become, not just represent but become His Body and His blood. What a gift. And we can, today as we start praying for the Christian Unity, – we can rekindle our faith in this mystery so we can worship it more fervently.

I just recently finished reading the book. Yes or No – Straight Answers to Tough Questions about Christianity. And yes there are lots of questions in life that we can not give a straight Yes or No answer to. But there are other questions too that are very black and white. For example a marriage proposal – ultimately it has to be Yes or No. There is no middle ground there, there is no middle area, you can say well. I wait a little while and we decide later on but in the end it has to be yes or no. And that is the same thing in our religion, that is the same thing with God. Because God offers us a marriage proposal – he says, "Are you going to be my people or Not? Am I going to be your God or Not?" – and there is no middle ground.

That is what God started to do in the OLD Testament – he entered into relationship with people that is described as the marriage – he brought them out of Egypt, and stabilized the covenant with them on the Mount Sinai when he gave them the comedments. And asked them Yes or No – are you going to obey these words, act according to them? And the answer was Yes. This is how God established a covenant. Covenant is more then a contract – in the contract we exchange goods and service – in the covenant we exchange persons. I am yours and you are mine forever.

My brothers and sister as we celebrate this week of prayers for unity among Christians we have to realize and appreciate this great gift that we too are the people of the covenant, People of the new Covenant. Jesus Christ established a new convent with us through his shed blood. That's the new covenant between us and our God established by Jesus Christ.

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Sometimes we tend to forget or get used to – that we are going to be here on this altar in couple of minutes with – His blood, his body - not a symbol – his body, his blood itself. And then we are invited to participate in this great mystery – to receive Jesus. Every time we come for Holy Mass we are renewing the covenant – Christ is saying – here is my body, here is my blood – poured out for you, crucified for you and when we take it in communion we are ratifying the covenant and saying - Yes – I entered into this marriage proposal with God – it demands Yes or No – and I am saying Yes, with all my being. That is what it means to receive communion – that is what it means to revive the very flesh and blood of Jesus. We are saying Yes to him. Yes I am going to live as your follower. When we come and receive Jesus – as he gives us his body we give him ours and we are saying – Yes I am yours forever.

You now that Jesus Christ is represented in the art or Christian piety by the Lamb. We say “Lamb of God” at every Mass. But what you might not know that he is also represented as the pelican – yes Jesus the pelican. Beautiful symbol – because the pelican feeds its young by wounding himself. That is what Christ does for us. He let himself be wounded for us – what a marvel.

And we are talking about the real change. We are talking about something that we called in the theological language - transubstantiation – yes. It means complete – total change that all of the bread and wine are transformed into his body and blood. It is not 50/50 – it is not a mixture of bread and presence of Christ. It is entirely Christ. You have never received bread and wine in the Catholic Church – never and you never will. We are not interested in giving out bread and wine – we are giving Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus Christ – we should be excited, full of wonder and marvel in our Souls.

St. Frances of Assisi was, I am sure all of you know, the lover of animals and nature. Usually when we think of him we see him with the birds, talking to the fish and surly he was all of that and we should follow his example by having respect for nature. But what is striking for me about St. Frances is his absolute love for Jesus in the blessed Sacrament – Jesus in the Tabernacle. And you know, what he would do today – if he would be alive and come here to our Church – he would come up to St. Luke's Church – he would go out on the parking lot before he would enter the church door. He would kneel down – and say: we adore Thee most Holy Lord Jesus Christ – here in all thy Church's throughout the world. And we bless you because by your holy cross you have redeemed the world.” Then he would get up and enter into the Church knowing that as he is inside – he is in the presence of Christ Himself – the blessed Eucharist – God in the flesh with us.

If you want to strengthen yourself as the Catholic – strengthen your devotion to the Blessed Eucharist – it is the heart and soul of our faith. And – if you want to utterly

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destroy your Catholic faith, if you want to lose your faith all together then begin to be careless about the blessed Eucharist. Begin just walking by the tabernacle like it would be a statue of some kind. Just walk by, do not even stop to genuflect, never come to visit it. If you want to destroy your Catholic faith come up and receive Holy Communion very carelessly as it would be McDonalds or Burger King. Do not receive Jesus like you are in transit – receive Jesus reverently – we should tremble this is an incredible, unspeakable gift and mystery that we receive.

Be careful. We today are falling asleep. We are falling asleep because we have in our midst such a gift that is only here in our Church, in our religion and we starting to treat it very casually, very forgetfully. We can not do it. This is the body, this is the blood of our Savior Jesus Christ.

That should lead us to some reflection about actual privilege of receiving our Lord. You have to be in the state of grace - some people say, even when they committed mortal sin; they say I feel I should receive. Do not let anything to keep you away from confession – If we commit a mortal sin we need confession before receiving Jesus in Eucharist.

Let me conclude by sharing with you a story a priest – friend of mine told me about visit he made to the ecumenical community called Taize. This is the community of Catholics and Protestants, who live together, pray together. So my friend visited this community and he rang the door bell and one of the protestant monks came to greet him and as soon as he saw him he grabbed his arm – father come with me quickly and he rushed him down the hallway - my friends thought that something happened , somebody is doing – but he took him to the Chapel – opened the door and there is that gigantic tabernacle surrounded by light and candles and flowers and people in prayer and adoration – and the monk went down on his knees and says – Father Look the Blessed Sacrament of the Catholic Church the real presence of Jesus in the world – and he began to weep. This is the man who is not even a Catholic – he had such a devotion and reverence to the blessed sacrament.

Let us pray for Christian unity and renew ourselves in gratitude and faith for this great mystery that we celebrate every week – and let us say with St. Francis – we adore you o Christ and we praise you here and in all the Churches throughout the world, because through your holy cross you have redeemed the world.