

Holy Thursday 2008
St. Ann's Cathedral

Once, I read about a recollection a priest had upon celebrating Mass at the House of the Sisters of Charity's House of the Dying in Calcutta. When it was time for Communion, he related how honored he felt as Mother Teresa was coming forward to receive the Body of Christ. When she was directly before him, another more profound realization struck him. Seeing the way she looked upon the consecrated Host, he realized that the wonder was not so much that he would be giving Holy Communion to a living saint but that he was holding in his hand the Body of the Lord.

The priest went on to share about the deep faith of the Sisters of Charity and their devotional life. She believed in the "real presence" of Christ in the Eucharist. With the eyes of faith, she saw the living Christ under the appearances of bread and wine. At the same time, he came to another realization. He realized the connection that Mother Teresa and the Sisters of Charity had understood with the Eucharist and the needy people they served so devotedly and untiringly.

It is a good example for us as we celebrate this Holy Thursday liturgy. If we are fully to appreciate the Eucharist, we must appreciate the connection between the real presence of Christ that is before us "on the altar" and the real presence of Christ that stands "before the altar." Mother Teresa grasped and was grasped by this full Eucharistic reality. Her life was a life of prayer that focused on Christ in the Eucharist. And her life was a life of Eucharistic service that responded to the neediest of people. At her Home for the Dying, she brought in the broken bodies of over 50,000 dying people just so they could die with some kind of dignity. She understood an essential connection.

In the Eucharistic Prayer, we profess that the gifts of bread and wine are radically transformed. In this prayer we remember how Jesus, on the night before he died, united a sacred meal with the events that would take place in the next few days: his passion, death and resurrection from the dead. Through our participation in the sacred meal, we become one with Christ and all that he has done and continues to do for us. While this celebration is a memorial, it is more than just a memory. While this celebration of the Eucharist presents us with the symbols of bread and wine, it is more than "merely" symbolic. The Eucharist is Jesus' whole self: body, blood, soul and divinity. It must be this way for Christ is the total-giver. As he gave himself totally for us on the cross, he gives himself totally to us through the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

This essentially is the significance of the washing of feet. The washing of feet was an action normally done before the meal and by a slave or servant. Jesus assumes this role himself to demonstrate how he is giving himself to his disciples because of his love for them. He empties himself to be their servant. And, of course, he would embody this most concretely the next day on the cross at Calvary.

Peter at first rejects what Jesus is doing. He doesn't understand. When does begin to have an insight into what Jesus is doing, he tells him "not only my feet, but my head as well." I think most of us are very much like Peter and must continue to try to understand. To come to communion and receive Christ demands that we understand the essential connection of service that our communion requires. As Jesus has done for us, so must we do for others! To receive Eucharist is to accept the challenge to reflect Christ in our day to day worlds.

As Jesus is food and drink for us, so must we be food and drink for a hungry and thirsty world. The unemployed hunger and thirst for meaningful work. The mistreated and abused hunger and thirst for justice and freedom from oppression. The guilty hunger and thirst for forgiveness and reconciliation. The unborn hunger and thirst for their first breath and their mother's milk. The infirm hunger and thirst for compassion and caring. The lonely hunger and thirst for the touch of another's embrace.

Whenever we celebrate the Eucharist, we do well to remember that it is the most radical action we undertake in life. The Host we receive is Christ! The Precious Blood we receive is Christ! This same Christ asks us to address the roots of injustice in our world. This same Christ invites us actually to live as God's people. This same Christ requires us to hear the cry of the needy and to respond to their lament. This same Christ challenges us, not only to seek forgiveness, but to forgive as we have been forgiven. To celebrate the Eucharist, this holy meal memorial sacrifice, asks that we adore God through lives that have become Eucharistic, lives that are broken and shared for others.