

Vigil of Pentecost – A Cycle

June 4, 2017

INTRODUCTION: Our first reading today is from Genesis. The passage you will hear comes right after the story of the great flood. Those who survived the flood decided to make sure they would be able to escape floods in the future, and they thought building a really high tower would do the job. Notice the satire here. In their pride, they are going to build a tower up to the heavens. It couldn't have been too high because God had to "come down" to see what's going on. He confuses their speech to put an end to their prideful building project. Being unable to communicate with one another, the building program stopped. God's ultimate desire, however, is to unite all people in his love. So when the Spirit came down on the disciples at Pentecost, a miracle that made it possible for everyone, no matter what language a person spoke, to understand the message of the Apostles.

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The Church goes all out today with a special color (red, taken from the tongues of fire), a special vigil Mass, a variety of readings and with a sequence (a poetic prayer) on Sunday. The only other feast that requires that a sequence be said or sung is Easter. Today's feast celebrates the completion of Jesus' saving work with his sending of the Holy Spirit.

In preparing my homily, I was impressed with how many ways the Holy Spirit is active in our lives. In the sacraments, for example, the Spirit is present at our baptism. As Jesus says, "no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." (*Jn 3,5*)

When we worship God, the Spirit is praying within us. As Jesus told the Samaritan woman, "the hour is coming and is now here when the true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and truth, for the Father wishes such as these to worship him." It may surprise you to know that in prayer, especially in the Mass, you are being helped by the Spirit to pray. For St. Paul says, "we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes" for us. (*Rom 8,26*)

When our sins are forgiven, it is through the power of the Spirit. On Easter Sunday night, Jesus appeared to his disciples and said, "peace be with you," then he breathed on them and said, "receive the Holy Spirit, whose sins you forgive will be forgiven them."

At Mass the Spirit speaks to us in the Scriptures for Jesus said "the words that I have spoken to you are Spirit and life." The Spirit is present to change bread and wine into Christ's body and blood, for as the priest extends his hands over the bread and wine he says: "make holy, therefore, these gifts, we pray, by sending down your Spirit upon them like the dewfall so that they may become for us the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ." (*the Second Eucharistic Prayer*).

Even at times of sickness or at the last hours of a person's life, the priest anoints the sick person with this blessing: "through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit."

Almost all of our prayers at Mass are addressed to God the Father through our Lord Jesus Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. I know all of this is familiar to you, but I thought it might be helpful to see all together some of the many ways the spirit leads us to holiness.

Also the Spirit is equally involved in our everyday lives. In the Church, the Spirit gives many different kinds of spiritual gifts to the Church community. (*1 Cor. 12,4*) In our personal lives and in our dealings with one another, the Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control. (*Gal. 5,22-23*)

It is easy to picture the Father and Jesus but not so easy to picture the Spirit. It's better to picture the Spirit by what the Spirit does (just as it's easier to picture the wind by what the wind does than to picture the wind directly). I hope you can see the Spirit does a lot. On Pentecost the Spirit changed the disciples from being fearful witnesses into brave and fearless preachers of Christ's victory over sin and death. May the Spirit continue to work on us, turning us into fearless witnesses of God's goodness to us. Amen.

Feast of the Holy Trinity – A Cycle

June 11, 2017

INTRODUCTION: (Exodus 34,4b-6.8-9; II Corinthians 13,11-13; John 3,16-18)

Leo Tolstoy said: "The only thing that we can know is that we know nothing and that is the highest flight of human wisdom." Our knowledge about God is cloaked in mystery and we only will come to understand it (someday) by approaching it with blind faith. Often people say seeing is believing. Our faith teaches us that the opposite is true: believing is seeing. In other words, we only can begin to grasp the mystery of the Trinity by believing in it.

Some archeologists believe that the first human beings believed in one God - sometimes called the Sky God before humans developed a system of worshipping a multitude of gods. By the time of Abraham, in the land of Sumer where Abraham lived, people worshipped over 700 gods. Imagine trying to please 700 gods and thinking terrible things would happen to you if you neglected one of them. Only Moses and his Hebrew followers in the 13th century BC (and I should add the Egyptians for a very brief time in the 14th century BC) worshipped a single God. Christianity took its belief in a single God from the Jews. Our God is God alone – there is no other. We profess it every week: "I believe in One God..."

HOMILY

"The only thing we can know is that we know nothing," certainly applies to the Trinity. We believe in ONE God, but in the one God there are three persons. Many examples have been used to illustrate the Trinity. The most famous example is the shamrock. C.S. Lewis, in his book, *Mere Christianity*, courageously attempted to explain how God could be one in being but three in persons. His explanation is pretty heavy, but if I can paraphrase it in my own words. He says we live in a three-dimensional world and that's all we know. Who is to say there are not other dimensions we do not yet know of, but which we will someday know and understand?

You may ask, if we cannot imagine a three-personal Being, what benefit is there in talking about him or trying to understand him? The thing that actually matters is being drawn into that three-personal life. God is always on the watch to draw us to his own self.

First of all, the only way we can make sense of the gospels is to accept that God is one in nature, but three in persons. We inherited our faith in one God from the Jewish people. When Jesus came, an observant Jew, he revealed to us new ideas about this one God. Jesus spoke of God as Father, yet Jesus showed himself to be God. He healed people, raised the dead, forgave sins and gave the apostles the authority to forgive sins; he cast out demons, interpreted the Torah (the law of God) with authority, and he spoke not as if he were the Father, but as if he were equal to the Father. In John's gospel he says, "I and the Father are one," and "he who sees me sees also the Father." Jesus tells the Jews "before Abraham was, I am." (Abraham lived approximately 1850 years before Christ.) In addition to what Jesus said and did, he spoke of the Holy Spirit as ANOTHER advocate who was neither Father nor Jesus, who would speak with authority, and who would take what belongs to Jesus and declare it to the disciples.

How to integrate all this with faith in one God took a few centuries as Church fathers debated, as various heresies arose, as wars were fought over this issue, as blood was shed - especially in the long process of overcoming the heresy of Arianism which taught that Jesus was not equal to the Father.

It should not surprise us in the least that God is too great for us to fully understand. If we perfectly understood what God is like, we would be as great as God. We just accept what is a mystery.

Why should the Trinity matter? Simply because God wants to reveal God's self to us just as two lovers want to share with each other their hopes and dreams and joys and fears. God wants us to know him as well as is possible because he loves us and wants us to love him. The Trinity also matters because it is the only way that we can know the greatness of Jesus and the love Jesus has for us that our God humbled himself totally for our sake. The persons of the Trinity are united in love, and God is a model for how he would want us to be – united as one, loving and caring about each other.

The Body and Blood of Christ – A Cycle

June 18, 2017

INTRODUCTION – (*Deuteronomy 8,2-3.14b-16a; I Corinthians 10,16-17; John 6,51-58*)

The setting for our first reading is on the east side of the Jordan River across from the Promised Land. Moses' job of leading the people of God is just about finished. He is giving them some last minute instructions before they cross the Jordan and enter the Land and he goes off to his eternal reward. His fear is that the people, once they get comfortable in this new land, will become complacent and forget the God on whom they

depend. So he tells them to remember - remember the journey from Egypt, remember the long time they spent in the desert, and especially remember the food with which God fed them - the manna. This reading (especially the mention of manna) is meant to introduce us to the main focus of today's feast – how, since the time of Jesus, God sustains his faithful followers with the flesh and blood of his Son, Jesus, the bread of life.

HOMILY: Let me start off by wishing Happy Fathers' Day to our fathers. I have a poem that gives tribute to fathers: "Mender of toys, leader of boys; changer of fuses, kisser of bruises; mover of couches, soother of ouches; pounder of nails, teller of tales; hanger of screens, guide for our teens; fixer of bikes, chastiser of tykes; raker of leaves, cleaner of eaves; drier of dishes, fulfiller of wishes. O, bless him, dear Lord." Happy Fathers' Day. You might have been thinking the poem also fits the role of mothers (and it does) so my wish is for all parents. We all know that in so many ways, the jobs of mothers and fathers are similar. So, I pray a blessing on all parents. And now on to our gospel.

You don't need me to tell you how important food is for our health and well-being. However, you do need Jesus to tell you how important it is to have spiritual food. It is something that nourishes and sustains God's life in us. If you were to go home and open your Bibles to John, Chapter 6, you would find a most wonderful chapter on food. The chapter starts off with Jesus miraculously feeding 5000 people with five barley loaves and two salty fish. The people who participated in this marvelous free lunch wanted to make Jesus their king. Free food for the rest of one's life seemed like a pretty good deal. Jesus knew handing out free fish sandwiches wasn't the mission his Father gave him to do. So he sent his disciples back to their boats and back home and he went somewhere where the crowd couldn't find him. Jesus eventually caught up with the disciples by walking on water. When the crowd caught up with him, he tried to teach them that he was the food that would feed and nourish them. This means he wanted them to let him teach them, he wanted them to believe in him.

His hearers grumbled over what Jesus was saying that he was the bread of life. They expressed their doubts about his sanity. Jesus didn't change what he was telling them, but he only tried to make what he was saying more **emphatic**. His hearers thought him to be even more crazy when he said they needed to eat his flesh and drink his blood. This is the spot in Chapter 6 where you would find today's gospel reading. The passage requires little explanation. Jesus was very clear: we are to eat his body and drink his blood. There was no hedging, no mention this is merely a symbolic gesture.

The words "the bread I will give is my flesh" are equivalent to the words Jesus uses in the other three gospels when he said "this is my body." At the Last Supper the bread he did give was his body – his flesh. Eating his body will bring eternal life. In these eight verses, the word: life, live or living is mentioned eight times. It reminds me of a doctor saying to a patient "if you take this medicine or have this procedure you will have a good life ahead of you; if you refuse you will die in a very short time for Jesus said: "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink of his blood you will not have life within you." It could not be clearer than that.

I think we all try to explain this mystery – and it is a mystery. I think of it somewhat like a vitamin pill. The human race survived for thousands of years through getting the right vitamins, but they really didn't know about vitamins until the late 19th century. Up until then vitamins were a mystery. Or I think of energy that food gives us – I like to think of divine energy replacing the limited energy that's in a piece of bread or cup of wine when the priest says the words of Jesus: this is my body and this is the chalice of my blood. If divine energy is present, then God is present and God's life is eternal. I think the Eucharist is really a test of faith, a test that tells us we really believe in the power of Jesus and the power of his words. I believe when Jesus spoke, things happened. When he said this is my body, this is my blood, they were changed just as when he said to a blind man to see or a lame woman to stand up or a dead person to rise up. Moses preached to his people "remember." Let us pray that we will remember all that Jesus did and continues to do for us to keep us in union with himself.