

Eucharist and Death

Jack Dowling, SSS

November

My dear Madame . . . you are now at Saint Romans with your silkworms. Enjoy it and may God bless your little silk creatures. Isn't it an image of the Christian life; an inert seed, a state of death, breakthrough, resurrection, life, ascension, work, palace, - in our case, heaven.

To Mme. Natalie Jordan

May, 1864

Preface

At an annual retreat in 1860, Father Eymard offered to the sister community he founded a deeply eucharistic reflection at one of the conferences. Drawing on an analogy from nature, the grain of wheat, he explains the nature of a eucharistic life. A bit of the quote:

My Sisters . . . become like the grain of wheat, the substance of which is totally transformed. The grain of wheat is cast on earth and there it dies and its life springs from its death. From this death comes forth a seed. The grain becomes a plant, it becomes the wheat. Then we gather the ear, put it in a mill and it becomes flour. We make a Host and then it becomes the Body of Jesus Christ. That is what you need to do to become the Body of Jesus Christ.

Father Dowling picks up on this theme in this profound reflection on the dying and rising to new life of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

Introduction to the Theme

In the northern hemisphere, November can be a somber time symbolizing well the regular descent into death of all things natural. In the southern half of the globe, it can be the harbinger of a new start. This double-edged symbolism of November also holds for death itself. For death can be seen as diminishment and ending, but also as the beginning of new and richer life.

This twofold significance of death, as end and as beginning, as old and as new, is what we wish to contemplate during this session. We especially want to consider the relationship of death to the Eucharist which celebrates both the dying and rising to new life of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of all who die and rise with him in this sacrament.

Opening Prayer

Lord God, we ask for the gift of prayer as we begin to meditatively read some texts of sacred scripture that deal with death, dying, and rising, especially in relation to the celebration of the Passover of Christ in our eucharistic liturgies.

(The leader reads the following texts slowly and meditatively.)

1. Then the Lord said to Moses, “I will now rain down bread from heaven for you (Exodus 16:4).
2. So they said to him, “What sign can you do that we may see and believe in you? . . . Our ancestors ate manna in the desert . . . So Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (John 6:30-33).
3. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day (John 6:54).
4. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever (John 6:58).
5. I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer (Luke 22:15).
6. “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes (I Corinthians 11:25-26).
7. Why do you seek the living one among the dead? He is not here but has risen (Luke 24:5-6).
8. She (Mary Magdalen) said to them, “They have taken my Lord, and I don’t know where they have laid him.” When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus there, but did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” She thought it was the gardner and said to him, “Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” (John 20:13-16).

Song

“Unless a Grain of Wheat,” by Bob Hurd, Music Issue in Today’s Missal-Oregon Catholic Press

Work Exercise

1. What is the first image or idea that the word “death” brings to mind for you?
2. Try to describe death, either using a personal brush with it, or by reflecting on your experiences of the death of a loved one or acquaintance?
3. What does the expression, “Jesus died for me,” signify for you? What about, “Jesus rose for me?”

The work exercise is followed by a small group sharing and a large group sharing.

Teaching

1. The sacred scriptures often portray death as in some related to sin. Yet there is also an acknowledgement that death as we know it is a natural process. It is the outcome of the interplay of various forces and energies in our world and in our bodies; “for everything there is a season . . .” (Ecclesiastes 3:1). Temporality is part of the human condition, yet as persons we yearn to live forever. We do not look forward to death as an ending unless it is an end to unbearable suffering.
2. Jesus responds to this desire in the “bread of life” discourse in Saint John’s Gospel (ch. 6). After the feeding of the large crowd in the deserted place, many people are asking Jesus for more, with the reminder that Moses had done the same for their ancestors in the desert. Jesus replied that ultimately it was not Moses who had given their ancestors bread, but his Father. Nevertheless, these ancestors died even though they had eaten the bread in the desert while those who eat the bread that Jesus will give will live forever. Gradually as the discourse plays itself out it becomes clear that this living forever promised by Jesus is a life in the company of Jesus and the one whom he calls Father. It is also made abundantly clear that this living forever is dependent on a real, though sacramental, eating of Jesus’ body and drinking his blood. The sacramental eating of Jesus results in a communion with him and the Father. If one is faithful to this communion and its commitments one will live forever.
3. Besides the “bread of life” discourse, the gospel accounts of the Last Supper also emphasize a connection between eating this special meal and the significance of death - the death of Jesus. In Luke’s gospel, Jesus states that he eagerly awaits the celebration of the Passover feast with his disciples. It is immediately after this special meal that he undergoes his passion. In John’s gospel, the Last Supper is portrayed as a farewell banquet in which Jesus first performs the ritual act of washing the guests’ feet, the duty of a slave, thus raising them to the rank of friend (“you are no longer slaves but friends because I have shared with you everything I have heard from my father” [John 15:15]) and then tells them he is ready to die for them. Somehow, the roles of slave and friend have become interchangeable, and close communion with Jesus in this banquet is going to be joined to a communion with him in his death.
4. Saint Paul also speaks of the connection of the Eucharist to the death of the Lord in the context of his reprimand to the Corinthian Christian community for its members’ lack of charity when they celebrated the Lord’s Supper. He reminds them of the sacredness of their actions in their liturgies and reinforces this reminder with the phrase, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the *death* of the Lord *until he comes*” (1 Corinthians 11:26).

5. (Here it would be helpful if the leader could distribute copies - or alert the participants beforehand to have these passages marked in their bibles - of Luke 22:14-20, John 13:1-11 and 15:11-15, and 1 Corinthians 11:17-26. Give the participants an opportunity to read these texts. See if they can make any connections between these texts themselves, and between the texts and the theme of Eucharist and death.)
6. The preface to the eucharistic prayer of the liturgy for Christian burial refers to a Christian belief that death marks a *change* in one's life - not its end. Many of the texts which narrate the appearance of the risen Lord illustrates this same teaching.

In Luke's gospel, female disciples of Jesus come to the tomb early on the first day of the week. They find the tomb empty and are puzzled. They are terrified by the appearance of angels who ask them why they seek the *living* One among the dead. When we seek someone we need to look in the right place. The message of the angels is that a tomb is the wrong place to look for Jesus, the One who is most alive. But it is difficult to break old habits.

The gospel tells of a busy morning at that tomb, with other disciples also coming and going. Mary Magdalen is there, distraught because she thinks someone has taken Jesus' body away. She is so upset, she doesn't recognize Jesus, until he utters her name. This beautiful scene is reminiscent of the portrayal in Genesis of the first human, Adam, who when God has the animals parade before him, calls out their names. Here, the second Adam calls Mary by her name and she recognizes him. In hearing her name she knows who he is and she becomes a new creation, the first person recorded in the gospels to have become a member of this new people because the risen Lord called her by name and she recognized him.

7. The disciples on the way to Emmaus also have difficulty recognizing the risen Lord. They do so in the breaking of the bread. The disciples who are out fishing do not at first recognize the stranger on the shore who has started to prepare breakfast for them.

There is surely a message for us in this difficulty. After his death and resurrection Jesus' human life has been changed, not ended. So we need a new way of communicating with him. The scriptures and the whole history of Christianity tell us that one of the most important ways of communicating with the risen Lord is "in the breaking of the bread," the Eucharist.

8. Besides our fear of death caused by its appearing to end personal life, we also fear the loss of relationships dear to us that also are caused by death. Here again, the resurrection appearances of Jesus have something to teach us. These appearance accounts tell of Jesus,

who had died, interacting with persons who were still alive on Earth. He showed that in his risen state he could still be in communion with living human beings.

Our belief in the communion of saints is rooted in this communion with Jesus possessed by all his followers, whether they are in heaven or on earth. It is this communion which we celebrate in every eucharistic liturgy. Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is in communion with us and forms our bridge of communion with those who have gone before us.

Closing Prayer

(In the presence of the Blessed Sacrament if possible)

Song: “Unless a Grain of Wheat”

By Marty Haugen, Music Issue of Today’s Missal - Oregon Catholic Press

First Reading: 1 Corinthians 11:25-26

In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.

Period of Silence

Second Reading: John 20:11-16

But Mary stayed outside the tomb weeping. And as she wept, she bent over into the tomb and saw two angels in white sitting there, one at the head and one at the feet where the body of Jesus had been. And they said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping?" She said to them, "They have taken my Lord, and I don't know where they laid him." When she had said this, she turned around and saw Jesus there, but did not know it was Jesus. Jesus said to her, "Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?" She thought it was the gardner and said to him, "Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She turned and said to him in Hebrew, "Rabbouni," which means Teacher.

Period of Silence

Intercessory Prayer

(If prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament)

Benediction

Reposition

Closing Prayer

Jesus, Lord and Savior, nourishment and center of our lives,
empower us to feast joyfully at the table of your word and sacrament.

Teach us to understand all of human reality in the light
of your Eucharist.

Living sacrifice of praise, cleanse us in your saving blood.
Victim that has reconciled all to God, bring us to live in peace with one another.

Bread of life, wine of compassion, transform us into your body.
Inspire us to become true adorers in spirit and in truth. Amen.

Dismissal with some sign of peace