

The Body and Blood of Christ (B)
(Exodus 24:3-8 / Mark 14:12-16, 22-26)
07.06.2015

From attendance to participation

After the last Irish referendum, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin stated courageously that our Catholic Church is in need of a “reality check”.

On this day when we give thanks for the Sacrament of the Eucharist, the first thing we should do is to acknowledge that many of our fellow Catholics will spend this day like any other day, without a thought for Christ and for the Sacrament of the Eucharist. For many baptised Catholics, Mass has become a boring and uninspiring duty that they fulfil only for baptisms, weddings, funerals or month’s minds of relatives and friends.

As an answer to this challenging situation, most of the time, we ask ourselves what we can do to make our liturgies more attractive; priests try to work at their sermons and choirs their repertoire.

However even if these aspects of the problem are worth considering, there is still a crucial element which is often forgotten: our participation to the liturgy, our personal and active involvement in what is going on in the sanctuary, on the altar.

Sometimes we may give the impression that to come to Mass is just about enduring the readings and the sermon and receiving the consecrated Host. We look at the priest from afar and we remain in an attitude of non-committed presence, silent and discreet. It is hardly surprising that many of our contemporaries do not see the point of coming to church on Sunday!

I think that if we want our celebrations to be more meaningful and relevant the first thing we have to do is to reflect on what we put of ourselves into them.

Let us be clear, the Sacrament of the Eucharist is not just about the Holy Spirit transforming the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord.

It is also about us being transformed into the Body of Christ, and we are transformed insofar as we bring our lives into the celebration. If we are mere outsiders or spectators, keeping our lives to ourselves, we cannot expect the Sacrament to make a difference in our lives.

Have we forgotten that when the bread and wine are on the altar, they are supposed to symbolise our lives, the multitude of lives gathered together around the altar? We are the bread and wine called to become the Body and Blood of Christ.

St Augustine is very clear on the subject when he preaches to the people of Carthage: “If you are Christ’s body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord’s table” (*Serm.* 272), “the fire of the Holy Spirit came upon you (...) and you became the bread of the Lord. There you are on the table and there you are in the chalice” (*Serm. Denis 6*).

The whole dynamic of our celebration supposes that we bring our lives and join them to the sacrifice of Christ so that they may become his Body. Our stories, our hopes and our concerns, our past and our present are brought together on the altar. Our bodies are a living sacrifice – this is what the gifts of bread and wine are meant to enact.

A few months ago I was sharing what I just said with a group in the guest house, then one woman exclaimed: “Nobody ever told us that!” I do not know if she was right, what I know is that during our Eucharistic celebrations, each time we use the Eucharistic Prayer

number 3, we ask God “to become one body, one spirit in Christ (and) to make of us an eternal offering to him”.

At the heart of its celebration the Church implores God to join our sacrifice, the gift of our lives, to the Sacrifice of Christ. And this explains why St Augustine can say that in the communion to the Body and Blood of Christ: “It is your own mystery that you are receiving. You are saying ‘Amen’ to what you are” (*Serm.* 272).

In the consecrated Host and Wine, we receive our lives made new by Christ.

It is important to add that what we are doing during our celebration is highly personal, it is about our very lives, and yet it is not an individualistic process, we do not bring our lives on our own and for our own benefit alone.

All our lives are made one in the unique sacrifice of Christ. On the altar, the diversity of our gifts, experiences and backgrounds are united to form the one Body of Christ. The early Christians used the image of the bread made of many grains and yet gathered into one loaf to signify our unity in the Sacrament of the Body and blood of Christ.

Coming back to our starting point and the present crisis in our Church regarding participation at the Sacrament of the Eucharist, it seems to me that while for many the celebration has become devoid of a vital connection with their real lives, we must begin by bringing our lives more consciously into our Eucharistic celebrations. Mass is not about attendance but about participation. The shift from attendance to participation is important because we are meant to be part of the liturgical action by bringing our lives to the altar.

This liturgy is an opportunity for us to give our lives to God anew, to join them to the sacrifice of Christ so that they may be transformed and empowered, so that we may leave the church today to pursue our journey in life with a renewed sense of purpose and meaning.

In giving ourselves freely during this Eucharist, in uniting ourselves with Jesus’ gift of himself, we will learn to give ourselves freely to others in our daily lives, we will grow in generosity towards one another. The challenge which awaits us is to live Eucharistic lives in the world, beyond the walls of this church building.

In the words of St John Paul II, as we partake “of Christ's self-giving love”, may we commit ourselves “to live this same charity in all [our] thoughts and deeds” (*Veritatis Splendor* 107).