

The Body and Blood of Christ (C)
(1Corinthians 11:23-26 / Luke 9:11-17)
23.06.2019
Broken bread

Jesus takes the bread, blesses it, breaks it and gives it to his disciples. This sequence of gestures is at the heart of our Gospel reading. For his part, St Paul received these words and passed them on to the first Christian community. And since then, these words have been faithfully repeated in the Church in the memorial of the Eucharist.

Still today, in our Eucharistic celebrations, the priest who presides takes a host, blesses it, breaks it and then shares it with us.

If we want to enter more deeply into the meaning of the Sacrament of the Eucharist we have to pay attention to the words and the actions entailed.

In our first reading we heard “that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’” The fact that St Paul speaks of “one loaf” is important.

This bread represents our lives, yours and mine, the whole of who we are, personally and collectively. At the beginning of the liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest will say that the bread is “the fruit of the earth and the work of human hands” (n. 23). These words do not concern only the people who baked the hosts for the celebration. The bread is about the many people whose work is arduous and unrewarding, the many men, women and children who are enslaved, it is about all people and the laborious aspect of their lives.

So the first question I must ask myself when I come to church for communion is whether or not I bring my life to the altar and lay it there in this humble piece of bread? Or am I just a bystander, somebody who keeps my life for myself, or lives it behind closed doors? The question for all of us is this: do we participate in the event which takes place before of us?

In an authentic Eucharistic celebration, we should do as St Paul bids us do: “Take your everyday, ordinary life – your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life – and place it before God as an offering.” (Rm 12:1, *The Message* of Eugene Peterson)

Then when the bread is blessed, when the Spirit is invoked on the bread that we form together, we become the Body of Christ. St Cyprian describes the process as follows: “Just as numerous grains are gathered, ground, and mixed all together to make into one loaf of bread, so in Christ, who is the bread of heaven, we know there is but one body and that every one of us has been fused together and made one with it.” (*Letter* 63:13.3)

So our participation in this celebration is not about our coming here as individuals to enjoy our small piece of salvation or tick the box of our insurance policy to have a place in heaven. We all gather together and become one in order to celebrate our unity and to become seeds of unity in the world. As St Augustine writes: “Bread doesn’t come from a single grain, but from many. (...) In the visible object of bread, many grains are gathered into one just as the faithful form ‘a single heart and mind in God’ (Ac 4:32).” (*Serm.* 272).

So Jesus takes one loaf of bread, blesses it and breaks it. What is striking here is that the first Christians and the early Church have kept the mention of the breaking of bread. At the very core of our celebration, while we are all dressed in our best attire, while everything is clean, while there is gold and silver on the altar, the reality is that, on the altar, there is also

brokenness. Today because of the individual hosts we use for our celebration, we have lost something of the symbolical meaning of one loaf of bread being broken for many.

On the altar there is our brokenness in the brokenness of Christ. We believe that it is by his wounds that we have been healed (cf. 1P 2:24). This implies that our brokenness, inhabited, transfigured by the Spirit can become a place of healing and restored communion.

However this promise of healing and restoration for ourselves and for the whole world will be a reality only if we consent to become anew, and over and over again, what we receive in the sacramental signs of bread and wine. St Augustine reminded his people: "It is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table! (...) Be what you see; receive what you are!" (Id.) and we could add: "Become what you receive!"

What does it mean for us to become the body of Christ, to become broken bread for the salvation of the world?

Jean Vanier gives an answer to this question: "It was through his littleness and pain, his brokenness and death, that Jesus had saved them. (...) He had overcome violence, not by shunning or ignoring it, but by receiving it and then transforming it into tenderness and forgiveness." (*The Broken Body*, p. 59-60)

In our liturgy we will be told that this Sacrament is for the sake of many (cf. n. 103). Here the pronoun *many* is an echo of Caiaphas' words when he prophesied that Jesus would die "not for the nation only, but to gather into one the dispersed children of God" (Jn 11:52). Let us be careful, the Sacrament of the Eucharist is not only for some chosen ones, supposedly worthy of it and attending Sunday Services. *Many* is the whole world, all men and women who long for reconciliation and crave for tenderness.

Like Moses descending from Mount Sinai with his face shining from his meeting with the Lord, we should leave this celebration reflecting on our faces, by our words and deeds "the tender mercy of our God" (Lk 1:78), mercy which finds its highest expression in forgiveness.

At the end of the day, each time we receive communion, we should always ask ourselves the question St John Chrysostom posed to the people of Antioch: "Now if we are all nourished of the same bread and all become one, why do we not also show forth the same love, and become also in this respect one?" (*Hom. 24 on 1 Corinthians*)