

Today's feast almost seems like an appendix to the liturgy of Holy Thursday, and solemnizes what we believe in every liturgy; it also provides a wonderful overture to the resumption of Ordinary Time. The feast originated in the visions of St. Juliana of Mt. Cornillon [Liege in Belgium] (1193-1258), a prioress of a double monastery, a mystic, poet and musician who wrote the original liturgy for the feast. It was primarily a processional feast which quickly spread throughout Christendom. The Eucharist was carried throughout a town or village, and the processions grew into dramatic reenactments of the whole course of salvation history. The risen Christ, present in the Eucharist and in the Church, accompanied people throughout their ordinary lives, and in many parts of the world the feast is still celebrated with traditional rituals involving music and dance. The feast is a classic example of liturgy "from below," as each culture paints the festival in different hues. Today we see a secular version of processions as diverse people gather to remember another person who died a violent death and to take their stand against injustice and racism.

God as the leader and companion on a people's journey emerges from the first reading. Moses addresses a people about to enter the promised land and summons them "to remember" the saving deeds of God, and reminds them that it was by God's power and love not their own that they

had been released from slavery, while warning them of the perils that await if they abandon God's command. It was a journey from slavery to freedom "through the vast and terrible desert," where God "fed you in the desert with manna, a food unknown to your fathers." This journey unfolds as the people often grumble about the journey, wish that they were back in Egypt and disobey the covenant. The Eucharist of which the manna is a prototype is food for a people on life's journey who are often fragile and failing, not a testimony of fidelity nor reward for virtue.

I would like my comments today be considered an extended reflection on two verses from the readings which can become a continual mantra in our prayer:

*"the bread that I will give
is my flesh for the life of the world."*

*we, though many, are one body,
for we all partake of the one loaf.*

The Gospel today concludes the longest chapter in the Gospel of John, which spans the feeding of the 5000, the calming of the turbulent sea and the Bread of Life discourse. The combination of marvelously supplied food and walking on water echoes Moses' miracles in the exodus after which then Jesus contrasts Jesus and Moses. Moses did not give true bread from heaven because those who ate the Manna died whereas Jesus will give the

true bread from heaven so that whoever eats this bread will never die.

Jesus' teaching reflects Old Testament tradition that Wisdom is food that nurtures life. In Proverbs wisdom invites hearers to a feast, "Come, eat of my bread and drink of the wine I have mixed" and in the book of Sirach the sage states "One who fears the Lord will obtain wisdom; She will come to meet him like a mother, and like the wife of his youth she will welcome him. She will feed him with the bread of understanding, and give him the water of wisdom to drink (15:1-3. Many interpreters feel that the bread of life offered by Jesus in the first part of the discourse is his teaching like wisdom which is the bread of life and it is only in the final verses of the Gospel that "my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink," and that Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

These words of Jesus have been strong evidence for the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist and continue to offer hope and consolation in the face of suffering and death. Given John's preference for symbolic language eating his flesh and drinking his blood offers further profound insights. The prolog to the whole gospel builds to the proclamation that "the word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, full of grace and truth" (1:14). The whole story of Jesus is one of his flesh dwelling among us and just as wisdom was food for life, so too is the story of Jesus. By eating his body we make his teaching and his life the pattern of our own and drinking

the blood of Christ evokes the suffering Jesus as blood flowed from his side on the cross. In a Corpus Christi homily Pope Francis beautifully captured the profound meaning of this discourse. "Nourishing ourselves from that "Bread of Life" means entering into harmony with the heart of Christ, assimilating his choices, his thoughts, his behavior. It means entering into a dynamism of love and becoming people of peace, people of forgiveness, of reconciliation, of sharing in solidarity.

Eternal life is the promise of today's Gospel, "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day:" so often words of consolation at the death of a loved one. Eternal life in John is not simply in the future but already possessed by believers: "Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgement, but has passed from death to life." Eternal life in Jewish thought is not the same as "everlasting life," but rather fullness of life in the Messianic age. It is not simply victory over death but victory over everything that is deadly. A better translation might be authentic life or fullness of life. Jesus has come that his followers may have life, and have it in abundance.

The brief second reading from Paul crystallizes a major theme of the feast. In this section of 1 Corinthians Paul is involved with various disputes among his fractious community over eating food offered to idols and attendance at pagan banquets. Today's reading is a snippet where he

argues that all sacrifices, Christian (10:1-17), Jewish (v. 18) and pagan (v. 18) establish a form of communion (koinonia) with the god to whom the sacrifice is offered. In sharing the cup of blessing and breaking bread together Christians celebrate communion with the body of Jesus because “The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.”

Like ripples moving outward from a stone thrown in a pond, for the next three chapters Paul underscores the social dimension of the body of Christ. In addressing problems over the celebration of the “supper of the Lord,” Paul castigates people in the community with greater resources and social standing who humiliate the “have nots” by bringing and eating fine food to the Lord’s Supper without waiting for the poorer members to arrive. Paul says “this is not the supper of the Lord that you are eating” and warns them ²⁸Examine yourselves, and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For all who eat and drink without discerning the body, eat and drink judgement against themselves.” To discern the body is to be aware of the social implications of a celebration. Later in chapter 12, he offers a profound reflection on the body, and boldly tells the Corinthians, “For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ” and repeats this when discussing the weaker members of the community, “If one member suffers,

all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” At the Carmelite liturgies as people would process for holy communion, I had the realization that the body of Christ was the host in my hands and the people who come before me.

Three weeks ago we witnessed the desecration of a member of Christ’s body as George Floyd struggled to breath as his life was pressed out of him in a scene that haunts my memory. He was a baptized member of Christ’s body and had spent part of his life helping young people. As our feast originated today in people marching together to honor the body of Christ, in recent weeks we have seen thousands marching in grief and memory over another shattered member of the body of Christ. Yesterday morning I read a remarkable letter from Bishop Frank Nubuasah SVD, Bishop of Gaborone in Botswana. He met a young George Floyd at a baseball game when he was studying in the United States which began a life-long friendship. The letter is powerful and a poignant instance of love and unity in the body of Christ. Hearing of his death bishop Frank wrote: “My heart is heavy as I sit in my prayer corner to write you this missive knowing well that others will read it but you will not. We humans through a representative of ours made sure that your eyes were closed and would not open again. That is however not true, your eyes will remain forever seeing the fire you started at death. The revolution that your sacrificial death inspired and the new movements

and alliances against racism, classism and discrimination are growing. You lit a fire that is burning for peace and change. So, my friend, when you hear the chant, "yes, we can" know that we are doing it in your name and for you. Gone, but very much here! On the mother continent we would call you, the living dead. " The bishop concludes the letter with a stunningly beautiful thought: Right now, I am angry because I am human and never thought humans can stoop so low. A huge welcome awaits you in the Father's house andYou just have one more task to perform. It is to prepare to welcome the notorious four who killed you into heaven when their time does come and show 'em round the jolly place we call heaven. Michelle Obama said "when they go low, we go high." (I will miss you George. You can now breathe eternally the breath of love. Rest in Peace!)

Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood
has eternal life,
and I will raise him on the last day.

And If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it.

Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.