

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST (B)
Exodus 24:3-8 Psalm 116 Hebrews 9: 11-15 Mark 14: 12-16, 22-26
By Jude Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

I don't remember the first time I tasted wine; I was too young. While I can't say when, I can tell you with some surety how it happened, because as I got older, I saw how my younger siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews got their first taste of wine. At a holiday or special meal, a parent would take a crusty piece of Italian bread, dip it in his or her own glass of wine and give it to a youngster to suck on and then eat. As we got older, say ten or twelve, we would be given a teaspoon of wine in a whiskey shot glass—our first "glass" of wine. Later, much later, we graduated to an "adult" glass of wine with our meal.

I think we kids got to associate the graduations in the amount of wine we were given as signs of our fuller acceptance into the adult circle of the family. The full glass told us we were adults and, as adults, were expected to behave as responsible and full-fledged members of the family.

At this meal today, set initially at the feast of unleavened bread, I think we are like children around the table trying to mature and become full members of our new family—as Jesus' brothers and sisters. We have been eating this bread and, for many years now, drinking from this cup. We are being shaped and formed around the table. We know we still have a long way to go and hope that little by little, this bread and wine will enable us to change---let go of whatever habits and ways of acting that are not befitting a family member. Happily, this meal holds out a promise of completion, for someday we will eat and drink together with our Lord in the fullness of his reign.

Before our meal begins today we listen to the gospel and Jesus' words, "this is the blood of the covenant which will be shed for many." In the eucharistic prayer we will hear the words spoken over the cup, "this is the cup of my blood which will be shed for you and for ALL so that sins may be forgiven." "Many"—"all"? Who are these people Jesus has in mind? The Jewish disciples around the table would have understood the "many" to be the Gentiles, those not at the table. The "many" referred to the very people the religious leaders told the Jews to avoid so as to keep their religious purity safe.

How about us, we who are gathered around this table? Who are the "many," the "others," not at our table today? In our comfortable parishes the "many" may be the less financially secure, the poorer dressed, the foreign newcomers whose language, customs and education set them apart from us. In a poor white community, the "many" may be those who have just arrived and threaten our jobs; for the black community they may be the Latinos; for Asians they may be their African-American neighbors, etc.

Jesus is not just blessing our parish community with his "real presence" in this eucharist. The meal, if we hear his words, is also a challenge to include the "many"; to make them welcome and a part of our worship, working, and social worlds. On the cross where Jesus poured out his blood, his arms were stretched out to embrace all. As we raise the cup at this eucharist, we ought to look over its rim to see who is here with us and think of those we have avoided but must now include—the "many." We were also included in Jesus' embrace; we at this eucharist who are asking for forgiveness and inner growth. We also remind ourselves that his loving embrace extended to those who would never think of entering our church building. He bled for the polite and schooled; but also for the loud, boisterous and unkempt; the perfumed, manicured and hair sprayed, but also for the tattooed, tongue-pierced and shaved heads. Mark's gospel invites us to Jesus' vision. Someday he will come, and we will drink the "fruit of the vine...in the kingdom of God" with him and one another. Jesus anticipates the "many" who will be one with him there. We have work to do, for eating his body and drinking his cup means his outreaching-vision is becoming ours.

We don't all have to become the same at this meal—how boring that would be! But we do have to be open to God's presence in those gathered around this table. We all eat the same food; we hope it draws us close to the risen Christ and closer to one another. Lord knows we need help! We are a divided community: those favoring quiet and "respect" before, during and after the service; others wanting to "build up the community" by visiting members they only see here at the eucharist; those wanting more social concerns preached; others saying the pulpit is "no place for politics; some want a new church building; others a parochial school. There are political liberals and conservatives, the newly married, recently divorced and the long-time widowed. Some come on a Saturday or Sunday evening to "get mass in," others come at eleven am to hear the choir at the more "traditional mass." And so it goes, we all gather at the table—not always thinking the same theologically, politically, culturally or liturgically. Nevertheless, we hope that eating this meal

and drinking the wine will make us one "in Christ." We hope that, as Hebrews says, "the mediator of a new covenant," the one who died to reconcile our alienation and wipe out our sin, will "covenant" us anew with God and each other.

In eating the bread and drinking the cup, we hope that we can look beyond our differences and see the body of Christ we already are--- and are becoming. We hope we are growing up, becoming mature Christians, around this table. We come to the meal knowing our personal and communal shortcomings. We want to change, and this is the meal that affects the change for which we long. The Word we heard proclaimed has shared a vision and opened our eyes to a not-yet reality, a kingdom coming, but not yet fully arrived. Come, let us eat, for we hunger and thirst for the day when we will drink the cup in the new and complete kingdom.

Today the eucharistic ministers will repeatedly say, "the body of Christ," "the blood of Christ." I have gotten into the habit of looking at the person to whom I am offering the eucharist. I consciously remind myself that each person receiving the eucharist is the body and blood of Christ and is coming to receive his life so as to become even more conformed and shaped into this identity. It is as if we eucharistic ministers are saying, "You are the body of Christ and this food, and drink is helping you more and more to become Christ in the world." We used to have a big procession on this feast. Many parishes still do. Whether we have one or not at the beginning of this liturgy, we will have one at the end when each person processes out into the world to be the Body and Blood of Christ. Today we celebrate Christ, and we celebrate our true reality as well.

QUOTABLE

(On the use of stories and illustrations in preaching)

...whenever we include a "slice of life" in a sermon, we are making implicit theological claims whether we know it or not. By the kinds of experiences and images we choose to employ in sermons, we are forming, implicitly or explicitly, specific connections between the nature of contemporary life and the character of the gospel. A sentimental sermon story, for example, implies that the gospel itself is sentimental. A sermon full of experiences evolving only clergy telegraphs the message that real faith is reserved for the ordained. Or suppose that a preacher decides to relate in a sermon several stories of people who learned to trust God in the midst of difficult and painful circumstances. If this preacher is honest about these experiences, the accounts will include some of the ambiguity and unresolved questions surely present whenever people struggle from suffering toward faith. A

truthful relating of the experiences, in other words, carries with it the theological claim that the “yes” of the gospel does not instantly make the “no” of human doubt and struggle disappear. If, on the other hand, the preacher files the rough edges off these experiences and transforms them into stories with simple, happy and purely victorious endings, an unrealistic triumphant picture of the gospel is conveyed, with little room for unfinished suffering and continuing struggle.
---Thomas G. Long in, The Witness of Preaching.

JUSTICE NOTES

(These weekly quotes may be helpful in your preaching or may also be added to your weekly parish bulletin as a way of informing your faith community on some social issues.)

The U.S. Catholic bishops on the Christian response to poverty:

- Perhaps the first step that needs to be taken in dealing with poverty is to change some of our attitudes to the poor
- Everyone has special duties toward the poor, all who have more than they need must come to the aid of the poor.
- Seek solutions that enable the poor to help themselves through such means as employment.
- The policies we establish as a society must reflect a hierarchy of values in which the needs of the poor take priority over the desires of the rich
- Share the perspectives of those who are suffering.

—from the U.S. Catholic bishops' 1986 pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All" (quoted in, "Catholic Wisdom on: Option for the Poor", from the Claretian Publications, "Catholic Wisdom" series.

POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty."

Thanks, Jude Siciliano, OP

Please write to:.....

- Patrick Moody #0463160 (On death row since 7/20/95)
- William Morganherring #0180479 (7/22/95)
- Thomas M. Adams #0001694 (9/2/95)
- Leslie Warren #0487180 (10/6/95)

-----Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606

ANNOUNCEMENTS

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Thank you.

“Blessings on your preaching”

Jude Siciliano, OP

FrJude@JudeOP.org