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**The Eucharist: Why We Do What We Do?**     Wednesday, November 17, 2010  
7:30 PM    COR Center    (Why we take and drink the blood of the new covenant?)

Well, good evening. The topic tonight: **Why We Do What We Do?** is rather broad, so I complained to Sister. I said, “Sister, **that’s an awfully broad topic.**” She said, “Well, you can just do whatever you want.”

Well, what I thought I would do is narrow it down a little bit. **Why do we do what we do in particular in regard to taking and drinking the blood of the new covenant?**—because the Eucharist is first and foremost an action of taking and eating and taking and drinking. Why is this? Why do we do this? It is not simply a meal. It is in the context of it, but it’s something much more than a meal. So the topic then I want to focus on is: **Why we take and drink the blood of the new covenant?**

On the surface, the whole idea of drinking blood is not very appealing. But we have to understand that although **Christianity** is a universal religion and is meant for all times and all people, nonetheless, it **cannot be understood apart from the context of Judaism and the life and culture that Jesus inherited as a Jew.** Now we find that blood is a very significant force in the life of the Jewish culture and it’s a very significant symbol in the covenant of Sinai. First of all, **blood was believed to be the vehicle of the life force**, and in one sense it actually is because it is **blood that brings oxygen throughout the whole body** and without that we would not live. So there is some truth in it. But it had more power than that.

First of all, in the Old Testament blood was used for sacrifice. But what did that mean? What was meant was that when an animal was immolated, that is, when it was bled dry, the life force of the animal went back to God. Why? Because God is the source of all breath, all breathing. *Ruah*, translated as spirit in our language; *spiritus* in Latin, *pneuma* in Greek, that life force returned to God. And upon that spirit or soul one could put a petition, so sacrifice was a way of getting to God because the life force would go back to God. That’s the first meaning of blood. **Blood was spilled in order to release the life force back to God.**

Secondly, **blood was used in various rituals of cleansing and sealing.** When the people agreed to the stipulations that Moses gave to them from God, he sprinkled them with blood. Now this is not, again, a very appealing image for us, but it was for them a sense of **participating in the holiness of the covenant that was being presented to them.** So **blood was used in various rituals.**

But even more importantly: **vengeance.** There is in every culture an issue of vengeance. **When people are offended they want some sort of retaliation.** Every single culture has this phenomenon, and every single culture has had to deal with it in some way or another. The idea of the **state was the idea of a monopoly on the force of vengeance so that people wouldn’t be carrying out private vengeance.** If you carry out private vengeance, you have the deterioration of your society. It can deteriorate anyway, but that would be a fast way.

Now **with blood vengeance there is a great deal of honor.** Some people look at the Middle East today and they say, “Well, look at all that hate.” Well, it’s not just hate. It’s often honor. People believe that their families and their clans and their tribes have been insulted or deprived and they have to set things right. It’s an honorable obligation they have, so they believe.

**Now in the covenant the participating tribes agreed that they would allow the covenant to do the avenging.** That is the meaning of the term: “‘Vengeance is mine,’ says the Lord.” “Vengeance is mine” does not mean that God is vengeful. It means that the individuals cannot be, that vengeance has to be worked through the legal system of the covenant. And the covenant was a legal system. It had stipulations and case laws and ways of dealing with all kinds of issues.

The Decalogue was the basic constitutional law for the covenant. It defined what would be avenged. And it was not a matter of whether one wanted to or not; it was a **principle obligation that the covenant communities would avenge the violation of the Decalogue.** And in principle every one of the commandments of the ten principal stipulations were capital offenses. In regard to the first commandment, “You shall have no strange gods,” that was not only a capital offense for the individual offender, but for his entire family to the third and fourth generation. So the **old covenant was rather bloody** in this way. We can often forget about this or act as if it wasn’t an essential characteristic—it was. It was an essential element within the very nature of the covenant of Sinai.

Question: asking about the blood on the lintel and doorposts at Passover.

That is a ritual of protection. So **there are various rituals because blood was sacred and it was believed to have spiritual power.** It could be used to **protect.** It could be used to **bless.** It could be used to **cleanse,** even though that seems absurd, but it could be. That’s in the story of the Exodus. There are various ones, but that is not actually that important. What is really important is that the blood was used—well, I’m using it in two different ways. **The animal blood was used in various ways. But then the human blood I’m speaking of now, the requirement to kill those who violated the law of God.**

So what we really end up with is **a covenant situation where God is the king.** And that’s exactly what some of the psalms actually say. “Yahweh is king. The Lord is the king.” There was no king until the time of Saul. And even when the people wanted a king against their tradition and Samuel opposed this, God came to Samuel in a dream and said, “It is not you they are rejecting; it’s me.” So the idea was that **God was the king and he would provide for justice for the people. And part of that was the avenging of all serious violations.**

Now when Jesus says, “**This is the blood of the new covenant,**” first of all, he is referring to his own blood, and he is referring to a covenant that is now being redefined and had been redefined in his own ministry. So first of all, now as in the past animals were used to get to God, now Jesus is saying **I am the one who will get you**

**to God.** And already we saw a sense of this in the story about **Jesus casting the animals out of the temple.**

Now some people think that Jesus was upset because they were having a bake sale. That wasn't the point. The point is that the sacrificial system required that people have animals available. Of course they were not allowed to buy them in Roman coin; therefore, they had to have moneychangers. Now Jesus did not only throw out the moneychangers, he threw out the animals too. This was a way of **clearing the way for a new understanding of the relation between God and people.** It is no wonder that the **Sadducees**, who were really the high priestly family, no wonder they **were not advocates of Jesus when he undermined their very existence as a temple priesthood.**

So Jesus is now the sacrifice that goes to the Father in his death because it's very clear that Jesus understood that he would die soon when he gathered his disciples together at what we call the **"Last Supper."** **It was very clear he was interpreting his death as a gift that he was giving,** a life he was pouring forth, and, yes, a sacrifice of himself, unlike the temple sacrifices that were not sacrifices of self, but of substitutes. He was coming as the **authentic Son of God, and he was offering himself as a sacrifice.** So that's the first thing.

The second thing is he is **offering his own blood in vengeance, in atonement. He is saying my blood now will atone for everything.** You need not seek further atonement. "It is finished." He says that when he dies. For many years I found this very difficult to understand. Why? Because it seems absurd to think that God would demand atonement in terms of the blood of his Son, as some Evangelicals say. Well, I don't believe it was really that God demanded it. I think it is we who demand it. Even in the beginning it was not God who wanted to execute criminals. **It is not God who demands vengeance; it's we who are the ones who want to retaliate.** We are the ones who want to inflict on those who hurt us a similar hurt or a worse one. It is we who want others to suffer because we have suffered. It's not God. **So from the very beginning the whole covenant and the whole system was set up so that we would feel that justice is being served.**

Now in this moment when he gives his blood so that sins may be forgiven, he is saying that **my blood will atone for everything, so you must now also forgive.** Now he had already taught that to his disciples when he taught the *Lord's Prayer*: "Forgive us our trespasses." Now that's an English word, and the Latin word is debita. Debita means debts. Loose our debts as we loose all those we hold in debt. And this is something that **runs the whole gamut of our whole sense of being owed something and feeling cheated because life isn't different or life isn't fair.** It could be that we feel cheated because our parents didn't give us enough money or didn't provide us a good enough education. Or it might be we didn't get enough attention or enough affection or it can go all the way up to someone has killed my mother or someone has killed my daughter or my son. There are many ways in which we feel offended. **Sometimes we are really offended, and other times we imagine we are offended.**

But the point Jesus was making is **in all cases we have to let go of debts because when we hold debts we are really binding ourselves.** That's why he told the story of the unforgiving servant. He was forgiven a large debt, and then he found another servant who owed him a mere fraction of that and throttled him and demanded immediate repayment. And when the fellow servants saw this and reported it to the master, the master said, "You worthless wretch! I forgave you your whole debt. Should you not have forgiven your brother? Now throw him into the prison where he will not leave until he has paid the last penny." Well **what is the last penny?** It's what we demand. **When we demand people pay us, then we put ourselves under a debt which we can't get out of.** And this is something we really have to think about. **Forgiveness is a way of freedom, and Jesus wanted us to be free as individuals, as communities, and as a society.** We can't be free without believing in his work and without pledging ourselves to be part of it.

Now it's very obvious that what he is expecting is not natural. It does not follow in any natural way from human nature. **It is a supernatural transformation that he is indicating and demanding.**

So **Jesus' blood becomes the sacrifice poured out so we can have access to God,** replacing the temple. **Jesus' blood becomes also the atonement of all crimes.** Thus, communicants come and take of the cup, and of course also of the body of Christ because the body and blood are together—one risen Lord. But we are talking here about the symbolism. When the communicants come to the cup they must surrender not only their right to private vengeance, but any further atonement, satisfaction, or retaliation. And this is a very tall order. **To be really and truly free of any demands on others is to be truly free.** It's not something that we come to too easily. So I think that is one thing we have to think about.

Secondly now, I am going to go into the idea of covenant, the new covenant. **Jesus spent much of his life arguing about the real nature of the Law of God** and what we see is that the Jews at the time of Christ had developed a very extensive oral tradition called the "Tradition of the Elders" or the Halakhah. That oral tradition was regarded on an equal par to the written tradition, which we read in the Old Testament, all six hundred-thirteen stipulations in all.

Now Jesus took a somewhat novel point of view. **He agreed that the six hundred and thirteen different stipulations were valid, but he did not agree in the oral Halakhah.** This alone put him on the **outs with the Pharisee party** because they were the ones that promoted the Halakhah. They were the ones that promoted the scholarship of the Law. They were the ones that formed various schools of thought that disputed these various issues. So he had already irritated and become **enemies of the Sadducee party,** and then he became an opponent of the Pharisee party, which is the vast majority of the people at that time. And then there was another group called the "**Zealots,**" and **then he also opposed them with his teachings on peace and meekness.**

Now when the young man comes to Jesus and says, "Well, what must I do to be saved?" He says, "Well, what do you think the Bible says? What does Scripture say?"

And he quotes Deuteronomy, chapter 6: “You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart, mind, and soul.” That of course is something any Jew would say. Jesus approved of that and says, “That’s absolutely right. Now the second one is like it.” Now that is not what a Jew would say, that the second one is like it. Now the second one he quotes is also in the Book of Leviticus. It’s chapter 19, but in chapter 19 it’s relatively, I don’t want to say minor, but it’s not a major stipulation: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” It’s one of many very good, wise sayings, but it is not like the first one. So **Jesus puts together two things that had never been put together in that way: the love of God and the love of neighbor.** Both are in the Old Testament, but not connected as such. He connects them.

Not only does he do that, but he says that **“the whole Torah and the whole prophets all hang on these two.”** That is not something any self-respecting rabbi would say. There were six hundred-thirteen written laws. I don’t know if they would say they are all equally important. Probably Deuteronomy would be the most important, but then after that they are all pretty important. And there were ten thousand interpretations already—oral interpretations. The Talmud, which is really the writing of the commentaries about all these, the Halakhah, the Aggadah and so on, plus some other additions, today run nineteen volumes—big volumes, and it’s small print. So when Jesus said this you realize he is cutting things down to a level that we take for granted because we were brought up this way. We were taught all this. We say, well, of course. But when you put yourself back in Jesus’ sandals and you **think about what he was saying during his life and in his time, you realize how radical it was. But this is the new covenant in his blood.**

Now it’s going to take his blood to ratify this covenant because **those who oppose it oppose it because of their faith.** It’s not because they were malicious or because they were evil or because they were terrible. It’s because they had faith different from his.

Now one of the things it says in Deuteronomy is anyone who changes the Law must be put to death. Well, Jesus changed the Law; right here he did. And not only that, but many other times, especially in regard to the sabbath. For example, he constantly healed on the sabbath—well, that was forbidden. **He did many things that went against the Law because he was always trying to make a point that what God really wanted was more than the Law.** The story of the Good Samaritan is a story about how these two very proper, this priest and this Levite, did what they were supposed to do; they followed the rules. They didn’t touch that body; that could have been dead. It was bloody anyway; blood is unclean. So and they were clean. They were kosher. They were going to the temple to offer sacrifice. They were doing their job. But that, according to Jesus in that story of the Good Samaritan, was not what God really wanted. **He wanted someone who would see need and respond to need. The one who was able to do that was the Good Samaritan.**

So the **covenant now is being redefined.** And not only is the love of neighbor equal to love of God and, in fact, the same as love of God, **the love of God envelopes the love of neighbor.** It isn’t as if loving God with your whole heart, mind, and soul doesn’t leave room for loving anyone else, because when you love God with your whole heart, mind and soul you can also love everyone else with your whole heart, mind, and soul. Loving

God is not something that divides you. The love you have for God isn't really from you anyway. You are being filled with love from God.

So not only are you to love your neighbor as yourself, and of course, again, he changed that law. It says in Scripture: "You shall love your countrymen but hate your enemy." He says, "But I say, **love your enemy.**" Now this is totally unique: that Jesus said love your enemies. No one, as far as I know, ever said that. It is something that is completely illogical, when you think about it. What does it mean to love, and how can you love enemies? But this is very important in his whole scheme of things. The reason is that **God loves his enemies**; that's the reason why we are supposed to because God does. There is nothing that anybody can do to turn away the love of God because God is love and God cannot be unfaithful to himself. This is the God Jesus is revealing in his ministry, in his words, in the way he treats people, and in his final moment, in his death actually—love your enemy.

Again, we are brought up with the belief that, yes, **we can be converted.** But this was something totally **new and different at the time of Christ, that the wicked can become good**—the story of Zacchaeus. The story of Zacchaeus is a profound story. It's a literal creation of Luke, but it's talking about the sort of things that happened in Jesus' life. Wicked people came and they changed; they converted to being good. They decided they were going to turn their lives around.

Now as far as I know, this was **not considered possible in the Torah**, although it was **predicted** that it would become possible. **Jeremiah** says God is going to take your stony hearts and replace them with fleshly hearts, but that would be in the messianic age. There is some mention in **Ezekiel**, I believe, about if a wicked man turns from his sins. But the problem is that he says—Ezekiel is still thinking the idea that God's retribution is instantaneous, so if a wicked man is wicked, then he will be destroyed.

Now the fact of the matter is **human experience can tell that wickedness is not always destroyed.** This is one of the problems with the old covenant, and this is one of the problems rabbis had to deal with: well, it's not always true. If someone was lame they said, well, that's because of something he did or his parents, or blind from birth—that's the retribution of God. God is just. God would not do something that was unfair. But on the other hand, it's obvious, and the psalms constantly speak of it, "Why, Lord, do you allow the evil to prosper?" You have to understand that those complaints, those **laments, are expressing the observation that life isn't as it's supposed to be, because the Torah describes what life is supposed to be.**

**Jesus now comes and expresses his belief that in fact God does not punish here on earth.** He does say there will be a punishment, a final judgment. But God does not punish here on earth. So he brings up the idea of the tower of Siloam that falls on some men and kills them. He says, "Now do you think that they were more guilty than anyone else in Israel?" His point is if you think that was a punishment, you are quite wrong. He says, "By no means." But that is what they thought.

So the idea of the wicked becoming good. Dismas—now that’s a name; it comes from tradition; it’s not actually in the Bible, but the so-called brigand or insurgent that was crucified next to Jesus. Jesus says, “You will be with me in paradise.” **So the wicked can become good. This is something Jesus believed and he practiced it. And this is something that our Eucharist is meant to express:** the wicked can become good.

Now in a sense this itself is already now a sign of the coming of the messianic age. Jesus actually never said I am the Messiah, but **in the way he acted he introduced the whole idea of the messianic age being present.** When John the Baptist’s disciples came to him and said, “Well, are you the one who is to come?” He says, “Tell John what you see: the blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the poor have the good news preached to them.” In other words, deduce for yourself; don’t take my word for it. This is something that each of us has to do: we have to deduce for ourselves and not believe only because of someone else. **We have to come into a personal relationship with God that really stands on what we believe. Jesus is presenting himself as the means for us to do that.**

**So when we come to the Eucharist, what are we doing? We are gathering as a community of faith and we are bringing our troubles, our broken lives, our difficulties, our concerns, our anxieties.** All that comes to the church with us, and that is being really put into the bread and the wine. In the Latin ritual it’s very clear that we do really offer the bread and the wine, but it isn’t really much because we really don’t have anything. We have our troubles. We have our problems. But **God comes to our rescue in the sense of the *epiclesis*, the descent of the Holy Spirit on the gifts. And our troubles and our brokenness and our difficulties and our anxieties are transformed into the bread that is from heaven through the power of the Holy Spirit. And the cup is transformed into the blood that Jesus pours forth in the holy of holies in heaven.**

That’s the image found in Hebrews, that Jesus enters into the holy of holies with the blood that he has shed on the cross and he pours it forth in eternal oblation. This is a reference to Yom Kippur, the Yom Kippur ritual. Well, now Jesus is performing an eternal Yom Kippur ritual and he, therefore, becomes our intercessor, the one who is **constantly interceding for us and imparting to us the grace of God and the forgiveness of God. That’s why we call him the High Priest.** The priest on earth in our Church is simply a sacramental representation of the heavenly High Priest. **It’s really the risen Christ who is gathering us together. It is the risen Christ who becomes our food so that when we meet in the Eucharist we are meeting the risen Jesus. But he is coming to us precisely as bread that has been broken because he is now sharing our brokenness and he is coming as the blood poured out. And what we are saying is we agree; he will be our sacrifice. We will have no other. He is our ritual. He is our intercessor. He is our atonement and our vengeance, and we will demand no more.**

**Now for three hundred years the Church insisted on this and would have nothing to do with any kind of violence.** In fact, one reason why the Jews and the Christians split was about this refusal of Christians to fight against the Romans when they attacked in AD 70, the result of which was to destroy the temple. The Christians would not fight because they understood Christ to say, “Resist not evil,” and so they would not. The Jews felt that they were not defending Judea and therefore they were no longer loyal Jews.

They had betrayed their country, which was true. **They betrayed their country in order to be loyal to their Lord.**

Later on, of course, when Christianity took over the empire by the conversion of the leaders and so on, then another situation arose, and **Augustine said, well, we have to find ways of defending our homeland.** Well, that wasn't the original situation, so that changed. But originally that was the idea.

In regard to capital punishment this is relevant. For, again, three hundred years the Christians, of course, had no state, so they had no exercise of any kind of **capital punishment** or anything else, but they understood it was not proper for them to demand any kind of vengeance or any kind of retaliation. Again, **after Constantine things changed and to some degree Christians adopted some of the practices of the Old Testament.**

Now today we hear our pope, not only our pope today but the former pope, **John Paul II**, indicated he would think it is time to return to the earlier idea that we **do not kill criminals**, not unless it's really necessary to protect the community. But if they can be sequestered and if they can be kept out of circulation, then we should leave them be out of **respect for their life and also out of a sense that it is not up to us to demand punishment. So that's part of the agreement that we take when we take the cup.** And, of course, as I said, when we take the consecrated bread that is the body, blood, soul, and divinity of the risen Christ, so it doesn't matter whether we take the cup or not, but **symbolically that is what it symbolizes.**

And we also **agree that the love of God is the center of our lives** and we agree that the love of God involves and **includes the love of neighbor**, and we agree that the love of neighbor **includes the love of enemies.** That also means that we accept the need to go inward as Jesus often said, "The Law says, 'You shall not commit adultery,' but I say any man who looks with lust at a woman commits adultery. The Law says, 'You shall not murder,' but I say, any man who has anger with his brother is already a murderer." So this is this **need to go inward and to find purity of heart. This is a transformation that has to be understood as only possible in the power of the Holy Spirit.** And when we come to the Eucharist we are saying yes to this, yes to **Jesus' role as our savior**, yes to Jesus' role as our **mediator**, yes to Jesus' role as **High Priest**, yes to Jesus' role as **the atonement**; we are saying yes to **his understanding of the covenant**; we are saying yes to **his understanding of love of enemy** and **his belief that the messianic kingdom has come and the wicked can become transformed.**

And we are agreeing that **we will let the Spirit work in us gradually**—it takes a long time—but we are agreed that the Spirit will work in us and allow us to be transformed into this image of Christ, and we believe that that is really possible, and that **we are called to holiness**, that holiness belongs to every single person. It is not just for some people, and it is not strange. There may be elements of some people's form of holiness that may be strange, but holiness itself is not strange at all. A holy life is a fully human life, and we are all called to it, and **we are all agreeing with this when we come to the Eucharist.**

So why do we do what we do? We do what we do because we really believe that Jesus is not only our savior but our model and the one who will show us the way to become like him and gives the power in the Spirit to be so. We believe that being is the basis of doing. **Christian life is not an agenda that we have to accomplish. It's more a change that we have to allow to take place within us, and then the fruits will come.**

I was recently having a conversation with a lady—she is here tonight, so she will know that I was talking to her—and we were talking about, well, some people think they don't have to go to Mass anymore. Well, that's true a lot of people think they don't have to go to Mass anymore. The sad thing is then they don't go! My point of view is **why wouldn't you want to go to Mass if you knew what it was?** If you realized that **God is offering you this opportunity to be transformed into godly people**, into holy people, and you realize it's **his work and not your work, but you simply have to be patient and willing, why wouldn't you want it?** So I will leave that with you as a question.