

**Understanding Sacramental Sign The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ/A**

Sunday, June 22, 2014 10:45 AM Dt 8:2-3, 14b-16a; 1 Cor 10:16-17; **Jn 6:51-58**

(So while the bread and the wine symbolize the death of Jesus, they actually are the living, glorified presence of the risen Christ, giving himself to us as food.)

It is common today for us to stress the common beliefs and practices across the wide spectrum of Christianity, and yet there are still very real and **specific differences that divide the various branches of the Christian family**. And one of those very divisive factors is, sadly, **the mystery of the Eucharist**. This is a shame and it's also **ironic because the Eucharist is the sacrament of unity**. In the Catholic take on unity, the sacrament not only expresses the unity of the Church, it actually creates it. That, of course, is consistent with our belief that **sacraments** have divine power; they are, in fact, **acts of Christ through human mediation**. So they are **human signs, but they convey divine meaning**.

But because they are signs **they have to work through understanding**; they are not magic. If I don't understand that a red octagon means stop, nothing in the sign itself will compel me to stop. I have to understand what it is saying, and the same with sacraments. If we don't get what God is saying, what meaning God is conveying in the sacraments, nothing in them will compel us to do or to be or to become anything different from what we already are. In other words, they are not magic. They force nothing. It works through our understanding and permission, in other words: our intellects and our wills. So it is very important, it is crucial for the Church as a whole to understand what God is saying, and then for each of us individually, **insofar as we can, to understand the meaning of the sacraments**.

**So what does the Church understand by the sacrament of the Eucharist or the mystery of the Eucharist?** The first is that **it is a sign of Jesus' gift of his life on the Cross**. Now death is part of life. Every living thing dies, but **violent death is not part of life**. There is nothing necessary about it. And when reflecting on the violent death of a human being, there are various ways we can explain it or describe it. We could say it's a tragedy, or we could say it's a crime, or we could say it's a punishment, or it's an injustice, or we could say it's an accident. Those are different categories that could apply to a violent death, that could be any one of them.

But **Jesus** did not describe his violent death in any of those categories. He **described his death, his violent death, as a gift, as a gift given up for you**. He described his blood as "poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins." This is what the Church understands God is saying in the Eucharist. **Jesus somehow saw his death as a gift expressing thanks and cleansing his followers from evil, bringing to them forgiveness and peace and reconciliation**. Further, he **invited his followers to join with him by sharing in a meal** so that when we gather together for the Eucharist, we are doing what Jesus did. **We are thanking the Father**. And **we are offering Jesus to the Father**, because that's what Jesus does. And in so doing, **Jesus also makes it possible for us to offer ourselves to the Father**. **We become one with him in communion**. And this is actually a very great privilege.

We must never forget what the actual context of this ritual is. **It is the context of a meal,** a formal, celebratory, ritual meal. Now for Jews the Seder contained the history of the Exodus and expressed and defined who they were. Why are Jews, Jews? Because of what God did at the time of the Exodus. That's how Jews understand the Seder meal. For us very similarly. **For Catholics the Eucharist contains the history of Jesus' redemptive work,** his death that freed us to live. And that defines who we are. **While the bread and the wine symbolize the death of Jesus, they actually are the living, glorified presence of the risen Christ made present on earth by the power of the Holy Spirit, and giving himself to us as food.**

Now you may have heard people say, "Well, I'm spiritual, but not religious." Well, what's the difference? Well, **religion** in addition to being spiritual, which of course it is, also **contains two other components: belief and belonging.** And both of these are very hard for a lot of modern people. Belief is very hard because they are so confused by the messages they receive from our society and our culture, which are very materialistic and which do not perceive **the goodness and the beauty and the wonder of the creation,** but that perceives the creation as simply an accident, a product of chance. Belonging is also very hard for modern people because of the message that they are getting that, well, you can survive on your own; in fact, it's better. We can just live for ourselves. We don't have to belong to anything and anyone.

**The Eucharist conveys in sign what we believe and it expresses to whom we belong, and it is to God.** Thus, the Second Vatican Council could call it **"the source and summit of our worship."**