

BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST - A - 2008
“Why would he do this?”

It is important to ask the right question. After World War II a group of servicemen were touring St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome, and like most tourists who have ever been there, they were in awe by the majesty and size of it all; the massive dome, the Bernini Columns around the high altar and so on. Finally, one of the soldiers asked the tour guide, *“How much does it weigh?”* That was not the right question. While there must be an answer, what difference would it make? Granted, the human mind is inquisitive and wants to know such things. In fact, we can’t help ourselves. We have to ask questions like the one raised in today’s gospel passage. *“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”*

They might as well have asked Jesus how much would the bread he is talking about weigh? *“How?”* is not the right question, although the human mind wants to have an answer. And so, for centuries, the church wrestled with the “how question” and finally adopted an answer developed by St. Thomas Aquinas that we now call transubstantiation. To understand this answer one has to understand Aristotelian philosophy. I’m not going to go there today. But, I have to say, most people have to accept that answer on faith as well, as the concepts of substance and accidents, for example, are not so easily grasped, either. The crowds might as well have asked how Jesus had cured the blind man, how he had raised the dead to life, or how he had calmed the seas. Come to think of it, they did. But really, all we need to know is that Jesus took bread in his hands and identified himself with it, and that this bread was changed into his living presence. That’s all.

So Jesus in today's gospel reading, doesn't try to answer their question, "how?" He answers a far more important question, in fact, the question they should have asked in the first place. Why? Why did Jesus take bread and identify himself with it? Why did he institute the Eucharist at the Last Supper? Why did the early church continue to do what Jesus did, taking bread and breaking it? Why did the Eucharist become the center piece of Christian worship? It's interesting that, at the end of this gospel story, Jesus asks his closest followers if they also want to walk away from him with all the others who couldn't believe that he could give them his flesh to eat. And Peter, on behalf of them all, points to the answer of the question, why. "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of everlasting life.*" The Eucharist is about life and living.

The "how" of the Eucharist doesn't hold a candle to the "*why*." Jesus wants us and all of humanity to live life in union with him and with one another, and so he intimately unites himself to us who believe. And, lest we forget, then he asks us to do what he did; to take bread and break it, and to offer it and ourselves with it, to the Father. As Jesus surrendered himself to the Father and gave himself out of love for us on the cross, we are to surrender ourselves to the Father and give ourselves out of love to others.

We have come to Mass today for many reasons, but we are invited by Jesus so we will be transformed by the love of God into a people who will make the love of God real in our world. How many of us came with that in mind, to change? The words of institution do more than make Jesus present on our altar. They make the action of Jesus present, as Jesus offers himself to the Father. "*Do this,*" he said, "*in memory of me.*" Eucharist is a verb. It is not so much a time for us to adore Jesus, as it is a time for us to stand at the foot of the cross with Mary and the other women to offer ourselves in

union with Jesus to the Father. It is at that moment that we take the words of Jesus and make them our own, “*Not my will, but your will be done,*” and “*Into your hands I commend my spirit.*” We surrender ourselves to God as we offer the Eucharist as it is at that moment that we remember what Jesus did for us, and continues to do in us through his Spirit. It is then that we remember what love looks like when it is expressed most perfectly; it is an act of giving of oneself to others in love. And we remember that giving ourselves to others in love is the key to understanding what it means to be a true Christian, a human being at its very best.

What a shame this magnificent prayer has become such a bone of contention in the church, a lightning rod for polarization, a litmus test to determine if one is truly orthodox or not ... by how we do it. Clearly, how we do it is not as important as why we do it. We don't do it to witness to orthodoxy, nor to show everyone how creative we can be, either, but to witness to our unity in Christ. Our doing it together should trump our differences. This summer, as we travel, we will go to Mass in other places. We must respect those local communities. If people stand where we go, we stand. If they kneel, we kneel. Together, we enter the prayers. We don't let someone say them for us. The priest doesn't pray the Mass for us, but with us. When our prayer is to be sung, we sing. (Except for Mark Milkoscia, who should never sing in church.) We are all a part of the action. It is the most extraordinary prayer given to us to pray.

When we receive Holy Communion, we hold the Body of Christ in our hands. This means, of course, since we together are also the Body of Christ, that we somehow, mysteriously, hold one another in our hands. Let's be respectful. Let's be welcoming. Let's show reverence, even. Let's be gentle. Let's be loving. Let's be nourished by Jesus in us and around us, in

the sacrament and in the people across the way, to our left and right who have not walked away, but are here because they believe Jesus alone has the words of everlasting life.

May this Eucharist we now celebrate continue the transformation of our hearts.