

31st Sunday
11/5/2023

PRESENCE, SACRIFICE AND COMMUNION

Last Tuesday night children dressed up in costumes made their way through their neighborhoods. Last weekend some adults may have dressed up in costumes and attended parties. In both events, people pretended to be what they aren't and there can be some fun in that. It can be part of a game.

But there is a problem when people pretend to be something they're not and it's not a game. This is what Jesus goes after in the gospel. The Scribes and Pharisees sought to observe the Law of Moses so exactly and precisely that we'd call it obsessive compulsive and besides, they got it wrong. Jesus criticizes them not for their words but for their example.

This gospel leads to a rather basic question. *What's a phylactery?* That's not part of our normal conversation. The Old Testament speaks of making the word of God, *a sign on your hand and a pendant on your forehead*. Like walking around with a huge rosary, calling attention to oneself and putting others down, pretending to be what one is not. Jesus didn't say phylacteries were bad. He may have used them himself; the problem is when such things are misused.

This can happen in a religious setting, and that is what Jesus specifically condemns but there are other places this can emerge. A number of Jesus' struggles were with religious people in general and religious leaders in particular. That may make some of you a little nervous. It might make me more than a little nervous. We can have phylacteries in our own lives, not leather boxes but perhaps cars or clothes or things, or titles or positions we can use to explicitly or implicitly imply we're better than others, to look down on others whether in a religious or secular setting.

Jesus calls us beyond the confines of our ego and insecurities and insists that if we are going to be competitive, it is to be in serving others. It is in building up others rather than ourselves. Jesus didn't just talk about this, he did it by pouring out his life in service, in washing the feet of his disciples and most of all, through his passion, death and resurrection, through what we call the Paschal Mystery. And Jesus

continues to make that self-gift here in the Eucharist. The Eucharist may be understood as presence, sacrifice and communion.

Jesus makes himself present to us in many ways. When people gather in his name, through those who minister in his name, in his word and in others, particularly those in need. But Jesus also makes himself, his body, blood, soul and divinity present to us under the form of bread and wine in the Eucharist. We call this the real presence of Christ, not because the other ways aren't real, but because it is a continuous, abiding presence.

Some people struggle with this idea of the real presence, but it's been there since the beginning of the Church and I don't know about you but as I have reflected on it more, I am glad that Jesus gives us his Body and Blood under that form of bread and wine. It's much more palatable. Because of that real presence, we genuflect before the tabernacle. That's why we have a tabernacle. That's why we have a sanctuary lamp burning near the tabernacle. That's why we are to receive Communion with reverence. That's why we show care in purifying the vessels.

At Mass, we enter into the moment of the one sacrifice of Jesus. To make a sacrifice is to give of oneself. In ancient Israel, people would give of what they had. They could sacrifice grain or a sheep from their flock or an ox from their herd. But on the cross Jesus didn't just give what he had, he gave who he was. He made a total gift of himself.

At Mass, we don't sacrifice Jesus again and again as some people may claim but rather we enter into that moment of Jesus' one, perfect, complete, saving, life giving sacrifice. Here, Jesus gifts himself to Father for us and to us. Here he invites us to give ourselves to Father and to him as well.

The Eucharist is about Communion, being united to Jesus who comes to unite. Our own St. Therese pointed out that the final resting place for the Body of Christ isn't in a golden vessel but in the hearts of those who receive him. With every worthy Communion, Jesus unites himself to us; but it doesn't stop there because we're united with those around at the same celebration; but it doesn't stop there because we're united with other believers under the ministry of a successor of the apostles that we call a bishop; but it doesn't stop there as we're united with believers throughout the world under the ministry of the successor of St. Peter who is the pope.

And it doesn't stop there. The Eucharist unites with those who have died and are being prepared to enter into heaven, those in purgatory who we remember in every Eucharistic prayer, and in a special way, during the month of November. And it doesn't even stop there. At Mass, we're united to the heavenly liturgy with the Virgin Mary and all the angels and saints worshipping God in the eternal joy of heaven.

It can be fun on a holiday or as a game to pretend to be what we're not. The problem is when we pretend to be what we're not and we're serious. The problem is when we misuse what we have to hurt others and inflate ourselves. The Eucharist is a gift where through presence, sacrifice and communion, Jesus continues to love and serve us as we are called to love and serve him. In the Eucharist, Jesus shows us how to live, not in the prison of our own ego but in the joy of self-gift, in the way of generous, love that leads to eternal life.