

by **Therese Sherlock, CSJ**

Place a fresh-baked loaf of bread and a cup of wine at the center of your group. Jesus chose these everyday, familiar foods as signs of his nourishing and challenging love for us.

Explore the sign of wine by passing the cup to anyone in your group who wishes to make a blessing, such as: “May this wine give us a taste for God’s word,” or “May this cup pledge my commitment to live Jesus’ way.”

When all who wish have asked a blessing, pass the cup around the group and drink from it. Pray together from Sunday’s second reading, 1 Corinthians 10.16-17.

LEADER: When we gather for Eucharist—

ALL: Is not the cup of blessing which we bless a sharing in the blood of Christ?

Corpus Christi is one of those feast days everyone liked where I grew up. Like Palm Sunday and Ash Wednesday, it was an active time. We walked in procession around the town. The first communicants for that year got to wear their communion dresses and drop peony and rose petals on the road.

There were several stops in the processions where Father blessed us with the monstrance. The women decorated those places with flowers, linens, and

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

carpets. The day was a feast for the senses with people to SEE, flowers to SMELL, music from the choir to HEAR. When the procession got back to church we all got to EAT—the Eucharist, the Body of Christ.

The other signature events of late spring and summer are weddings. Strangely enough thinking about Corpus Christi and marriage together has helped me understand the Eucharist in a new way.

In British novels, the couple makes vows according to the old Anglican prayer book. After declaring their intentions, the man places the ring on the woman’s finger and says,

With this ring, I thee wed.

With my body, I thee worship.

With all my worldly goods, I thee endow.

Body means the whole person—body, mind, spirit. This is what the husband is entrusting to his wife. He promises to give his body, mind, and spirit—

his whole self—in love and reverence and awe to her.

Corpus Christi celebrates just that kind of promise from Jesus. He says, “This is my body given for you,” We know my body means his entire self, his ministry and preaching and healing and his ultimate acceptance of death.

When Jesus tells us at the last supper, “Do this in remembrance of me,” he isn’t telling us to just remember his death. He wants his friends to remember his love for them that was his whole life. He could have said, “With my body, I thee worship.” I have given and am giving my whole self to you.

When we gather at Eucharist, we remember Jesus’ life given for us. We gather to give each

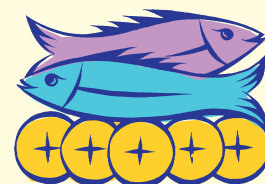


other the strength and courage to try his kind of self-giving ourselves.

And we come together over and over again, so that we become more and more like him. Until, finally, we can't do it any other way. We keep pouring out our lives, as he did. This is what makes Jesus present. We are Jesus' real presence in the world.

● **What is at stake for Christian communities in the way we celebrate the Eucharist?**

GOSPEL



Jesus is real food and real drink.

JESUS 1: I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

NARRATOR: Jesus' listeners disputed among themselves.

THE JEWS: How can this man give us his flesh to eat?

JESUS 2: Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise

them up on the last day; for my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink.

JESUS 3: Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.

JESUS 4: This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. Those who eat this bread will live forever.

John 6.51-58

Whoever eats of this bread will live forever.

John's gospel, the one that evolved longest before being written down in the A.D. 90s or later, tells only of Jesus' washing his friends' feet at their last supper together, not of sharing bread and wine. Instead, the fourth gospel carefully places its reflection on the Body and Blood of Christ in chapter 6, which centers in Jesus' words, "I am the bread of life."

Chapter 6 begins with a sign, John's term for a miracle. Jesus feeds a crowd so large that the disciple Philip explains it would take six months' wages to buy the food. Jesus takes a boy's two fish and five barley loaves, gives thanks, and feeds the crowd this everyday fare of the poor. His disciples gather

12 baskets of leftover bread fragments; the bread becomes more abundant in being shared.

The 12 baskets are a symbol. Twelve is the number of the original tribes of Israel. The disciples who gathered the 12 baskets represent the new community of Israel. The baskets of food are ready to share and multiply down the centuries into an abundance for all, including us who gather in Jesus' name.

● **What does this feeding sign say to you?**

As Sunday's gospel passage begins, Jesus contrasts himself with the manna Israel's ancestors ate but died. "The bread that I will

give for the life of the world is my flesh," he says. The word *flesh* repels Jesus' hearers.

They object, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" Six times in Sunday's gospel Jesus insists believers must eat his flesh and drink his blood. Why does the narrative press repeatedly such an extreme and disturbing literalism?

In John's gospel Jesus deliberately draws people into dialog through misunderstanding. In this case Jesus offends and intrigues his listeners by stating that his flesh will be bread for the life of the world.

Faith can begin in misunderstanding. We misunderstand Jesus if we think the eating bread and drinking

wine that Christians do are cannibalism. However, Jesus did choose eating and drinking as the signs through which his followers can identify with him, with his whole self, with his wholehearted giving of himself in his death. When we eat and drink, the food and drink become part of us and nourish us. In this sacrament of faith Jesus becomes part of us. His self-giving act of love becomes our real, nourishing, and transforming food.

I taught catechism to middle grade kids. One Sunday we read the gospel about Jesus, after his resurrection, appearing to his friends in Galilee. They had gone fishing and weren't catching a thing. Jesus called to them from the beach and suggested trying the other side of the boat. They got so many fish their nets almost broke. "That man is Jesus," John whispered to Peter. When they got to shore, Jesus was cooking fish over a little fire.

"Why did John think it was Jesus?" I asked the kids.

"Because of all the fish," they said.

"Anything else?" I asked.

"Because he made breakfast for them," one girl said. "Jesus always ate with his friends."

Jesus always ate with his friends, and so do we. That is what makes us Catholic.

● **How has participating in Eucharist nourished and transformed you?**

● **What have you learned during the Covid-19 epidemic about being the Body of Christ in the world for those in need?**

For John, those who do not eat and drink the signs of Jesus' self-giving love are not in relationship with him. They do not have eternal life. They will not be raised up on the last day. They do not abide in him nor he in them. They do not live because of Jesus.

John's gospel equates faith in Jesus with faith in Jesus' signs. Faith that this blood is real drink and this flesh is real food is the same as faith Jesus is really from God.

Eucharist is a performative sign, a commitment we live out. Jesus is bread broken for the life of the world. To share the Body of Christ in this sacrament is to commit to give one's self for the life of the world as Jesus did.

In making a cup of wine the pledge of pouring out his lifeblood for us, Jesus

makes the wine our means of pledging commitment and faith. Jesus makes broken bread a sign of himself in his total act of self-giving on the cross. To eat this bread and make it part of us is to make faith in Jesus our sustenance.

Our community isn't just fellowship. It is gathering to put our own offering of our lives on the same altar as Jesus. It is to say, "This is my body given for you." It is to join the line of people receiving nourishment from the hands of each other.

It takes the whole Christian community to remember Jesus' gift of himself and to make him present today. Each of us is the feast of Corpus Christi, a source of blessing and nourishment and revelation of Jesus' good news to those we meet today and this week.

● **What is the most life-changing Eucharist you have experienced?**



Israel lives by faith in God's creative word.

The name *Deuteronomy* means *second telling*. It is a retelling of the escape from Egypt, the wandering in the desert, and God's making of the covenant at Sinai with Israel. The retelling has a purpose—to call a new generation to keep up the covenant relationship with God.

The retelling asks a new generation to imagine they are the ones God leads through the desert for 40 years and tests with hunger and thirst. The people's hunger and thirst is for more than food and water. Their hunger is for God, whose creative word nourishes their spirits and gives them more life than water.

Israel's testing

Moses spoke to the people:
“Remember how for 40 years now the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness, in order to test you

by affliction and find out whether you intended to keep God's commandments. God let you be afflicted with hunger and then fed you with manna, a food unknown to you and your ancestors, in order to show you that one does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

“Remember your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery; who guided you through the vast and terrible wilderness with its poisonous snakes and scorpions, its parched and waterless ground; who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock, and fed you in the wilderness with manna, a food unknown to your ancestors.”

Deuteronomy 8.2-3, 14-16

- **What words of Sunday's gospel and first reading do you find especially nourishing and life-giving?**
- **What helps you to stay alive spiritually in our culture?**

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PRAY

Explore the sign of bread by passing the loaf to anyone in your group who wishes to bless and give thanks for it; for example, “Bless this bread which represents the many ways our ideas nourish one another,” or “Bless this loaf which contains crushed and baked wheat seeds that have become a new reality.”

When all who wish have blessed the loaf, have each group member give the next person a piece of bread with a special personal wish or word of blessing. Then pray together:

LEADER: When we gather for Eucharist—

ALL: *Is not the bread we break a sharing in the body of Christ?*

LEADER: Because the loaf is one—

ALL: *We, many though we are, are one body for we partake of the one loaf.*



DO SOMETHING



- **Visit Feeding America.org to learn about food insecurity in the United States. One in seven people struggle with hunger, 53 million in 2021. On the website, click on Map the Meal to check on hunger in your area and across the U.S. Feeding America offers many opportunities to volunteer in its 200 food banks, 60,000 food pantries, and its meal programs.**

POPE FRANCIS has caused us to look with fresh eyes at **FRANCISCAN SPIRITUALITY**. This small book is meant for small groups but will equally benefit an individual. Read a sample chapter at goodgroundpress.com.

