

The Twenty-Second Sunday in Ordinary Time August 28, 2022

For the past several weeks, the second reading has been taken from the Letter to the Hebrews.

The Letter to the Hebrews is one of the most interesting books of the New Testament mostly because we know so little about it. Though it's often referred to as "Paul's Letter to the Hebrews", scholars really do not know who wrote it. Some speculate that it may have been written by one of Saint Paul's companions such as Luke, Barnabas or Apollos.

The other curious thing about the Letter to the Hebrews is that it is not really a letter at all. Scholars tell us that it is a sermon that was written down and circulated among the early Christian communities. That means that it was probably read during Mass, when Christians gathered on the Lord's Day to celebrate the Eucharist, as we do today.

Throughout this sermon, the author presents Jesus as the fulfillment of all the promises of the Old Testament. All the stories of the first few books of the Bible, all the Psalms, and all the prophets, point to Jesus Christ. It was His coming that the prophets foretold. And it is through Him alone that we can make sense of the Hebrew Scriptures.

This helps us to understand today's second reading. The first few lines of this mysterious passage are pointing back to the covenant that God made with Israel on Mount Sinai just after they had been led out of slavery in Egypt. Remember that God appeared to them in a column of cloud by day and a column of fire at night. It was a fearful sight. So fearful was it that the Israelites were warned that if they touched the holy mountain they would die. Only Moses was allowed to meet God on Mount Sinai and to bring down the tablet with the Ten Commandments.

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When Moses read the words to the people, and they agreed to follow them, he set up an altar and sprinkled blood on it and then on the people to symbolize that they were now God's people.

Today's passage tells us that there is a different form of worship for us who believe in Christ. While God revealed Himself in fire and smoke back then, He reveals Himself in Jesus Christ crucified and risen now. While no one could come close to or even touch the sacred mountain back then, we can receive God Himself in the Eucharist. And while the blood that was sprinkled on the people was animal blood that couldn't really save them, we have been sprinkled by the blood of Jesus Christ which assures us that our sins are forgiven.

Whenever we gather for Mass, today's second reading comes to life. Our worship here on earth is connected with the worship that is going on in heaven. We are not alone here. Though we cannot see them, we are surrounded by "countless angels in festal gathering." All the saints in heaven - "the assembly of the firstborn enrolled in heaven" ... "and the spirits of the just made perfect" - are worshiping with us. We join them in praising "God the judge of all" and Jesus, whose death on the cross and resurrection made this all possible.

This is what the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us about the Mass: In the earthly liturgy we share in the foretaste of that heavenly liturgy...where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God.... With all the warriors of the heavenly army we sing a hymn of glory to the Lord...." (CCC 1090). The Mass is not just a prayer service. It is not just a way for Christians to get together. And it is not optional. Rather, it is the way we on earth unite ourselves with heaven in praise of God.

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In a most wonderful way, it is through the Mass that we encounter the Risen Jesus. When we receive the Eucharist, it is His Body and Blood that we receive. It is no mere symbol. It is not only a remembrance of Him. But it is really Him. He comes down from Heaven to us in a miraculous way to transform us by His love.

It is so important that we understand this and get it right. Jesus Christ Himself is really present in the Eucharist. We receive His entire being - body, soul, blood, and divinity - when we receive Holy Communion.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells us that we should always take the lowest place. And that is exactly what He does at every Mass. He comes to us in the most humble way possible - in the form of bread and wine. Why does He do that? So that we will have no fear in receiving Him. He could reveal Himself to us here in fire and smoke as He did on Mount Sinai. But we would run away from Him. Instead, He wants us to come to Him with trust, like a child, to receive Him in faith.

Though Jesus tells us that we should seek the lowest place, I'm going to suggest that the same doesn't apply to where we choose to sit when we come to church. Catholics notoriously prefer to sit as far away from the altar as possible. Well, I'm inviting you to move up to a higher position. By sitting in the front, it will be much easier to pay attention. This is especially true for families with young children. It is much easier for children to understand what is going on if they are sitting in front and much less likely that they will be distracted by the people sitting in front of them.

Also, there is an additional benefit to sitting in the front pews. It will give you more time to pray after you receive communion.

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So, if you have trouble paying attention during Mass, come up to a higher position in the front pews.

In this place, we are accompanied by angels, saints, the souls of those who have gone before us, and our Risen Savior Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is moving among us, opening our minds to God's word, and stirring our hearts to worship Him. It is that same Holy Spirit who will transform simple bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. That is the mystery we celebrate every time we gather for Mass. It is nothing less than God's love made present in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our communion with Him in the Eucharist transforms us so that we can bring that love beyond the doors of this church into the world.