

Holy Thursday. 2010

We are approaching Easter, and what it means for most people, religious or not religious, is “the gathering of the clan.” On Easter and again on Christmas we gather as families to eat and enjoy each other’s company. And for many families that also means an extravaganza of food and its presentation. Grandmother’s plates and China are brought out for their once or twice a year showing, and the table is a feast for the eyes even before the food appears on it. In short, for these special times only the best will do, both with respect to the food and its presentation.

There is a certain parallel with the liturgy in this regard. On special liturgical feasts such as Easter and Christmas the presentation of the Eucharist is more elaborate, just as is the case in our family feasts. But there is one exception in this parallel. The Church does not save its best food for the great feasts. On the contrary, she serves it every day. The presentation may be less elaborate, more stripped-down, more ordinary, but the food remains its best food each day, the body and blood of the Lord.

There is a danger here. If we feasted each day of the year on steak or salmon or lobster, what would happen? These expensive meals

would become ordinary for us. They would not be special, and we would become careless with respect to them. The same thing can happen with the Church's best food. Because it is—or can be, if we so choose—our daily food, it can become ordinary for us, and we can become careless with respect to it.

You know, I believe, that in the early church its members met on Sundays to celebrate the Eucharist. Then in time the Church began to celebrate the Eucharist not only on Sundays but on weekdays. But by the Middle Ages people decided that the Eucharist was too special to receive each day or even on Sundays, and so they did not go to Communion except once a year, for the church eventually made it a rule that Catholics had to receive Communion at least once a year, and during the Easter Season. Then in the time of Ignatius of Loyola, that is, in the 1500s, the Church began to encourage its members to go to Communion more frequently and at an earlier age. About a hundred years ago Pope Pius X introduced the rule that children should receive Holy Communion once they reached the age of seven, the age of reason. From then on frequent communion, both for children and adults, became the norm.

That is good, but there is a danger. We can begin to take the Eucharist for granted because it is our daily or every Sunday fare. It is ordinary, not special.

So let us remind ourselves of how extraordinary a thing the Eucharist is. We believe it is Jesus' way of being present to us in a material way, under the forms of bread and wine. We believe that in receiving it we can become assimilated to Christ. Augustine taught that in and through receiving the Eucharist we ourselves become the body of Christ. Thus for him the most important transformation taking place in the Eucharist was not the changing of the bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord but rather the transformation or changing of us into the living body of Christ. In fact, we could say that if we are not changed into the body and blood of the Lord, the changing of the bread and wine into Jesus' body and blood has not achieved its purpose, for Jesus is present to us in this way in order to change us into himself. And this change, this transformation, consists basically in a change from a selfish way of living to a selfless one. We now look to see how we can serve each other, how we can wash each other's feet. May this change take greater and greater hold of us each day!