

Corpus Christi.09

A friend told me recently that he met a woman who had been a Catholic but had now become a member of the Jehovah Witnesses. She told him that when she was Catholic she could not wait to get out of church and found a Mass which took forty minutes too long. But now she can pray and sing and listen to her pastor for two hours or more and still want more. My friend could not understand that. I think I can understand it a little, even though I am speaking from massive ignorance concerning the Jehovah Witnesses' services because I have never attended them. I am presuming, however, that their services are like the services of evangelical churches where there is preaching but then public praying and witnessing. People take an active part in the service, and the service itself, though it has to have a basic structure---time for reading the Scriptures and time for the pastor's preaching---is otherwise more free-flowing than our Mass. And so this woman is probably much more involved than she was when she attended Mass.

Our Mass is so structured, and the priest plays such an important part in it, while you, the lay folks, have rather minor roles. The priest, and only the priest, unless there is a deacon, is allowed to

preach. He also leads the prayers. You, the laity, may read the Scriptures and help with the distribution of Communion. But that is it. And most of you probably say to yourselves: That is just fine with me. I don't mind the fact that I have a minor role. It is enough for me.

The fact that you feel that way is perfectly understandable, especially if you are in my age group. When we grew up, the laity had no role at all in the Mass. We watched what the priest did and listened to what he said, and we followed what he was praying in Latin in our English translation in our missals. Or if we did not use a missal, we prayed privately, maybe even saying a rosary during the Mass.

Then came Vatican II and its document on the liturgy. Now we were told that the Mass was really the prayer of the entire community, not just the Latin prayers of the priest and our own private prayers happening at the same time. And to help us to take part, two great changes were made: the priest now prayed in the vernacular and he faced the people. And now you, the laity, were given a speaking part. It consisted of the praying of the Gloria and Creed, the Holy, Holy, Holy, the Our Father, the Lamb of God, the

Amen responses to the prayers, and the other responses to the priest's wishes of greeting and peace to us.

This was really a revolution in the celebration of the Mass. But those who pushed for it told us that they were not introducing something new but rather recovering something what was very old. The Mass was originally the action of the community. Everyone was part of it. But over the centuries you, the people, lost your speaking part and became simply spectators. And then the Mass lost its communal nature. It became the action of the priest at a far-away altar who faced away from the congregation and spoke a foreign language. What he was doing was repeating the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross in sacramental form by offering the body and blood of Jesus to the Father. And then the people became so in awe of the miracle of the change of the bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord that they would simply pay the priest to hold up the host and the chalice a little longer so that they could see them and adore them. But they would not dare to receive the host in communion. Communion became a rarity.

Pius X in 1910 pushed for the more frequent reception of communion, and that has happened. Then Vatican II made the other changes which would restore the laity to an active role in the

Mass. Has that succeeded? I think it has. For example, you all respond to the prayers. Some of you don't sing, and that may be good or bad. But I see remains of the older attitudes. For instance, when some of you are a little late for Mass, you kneel down to say your private prayers even though the congregation is already praying the Gloria. So it is clear that you do not realize that you are part of a drama and must play your proper part even if you are late. And some of you still don't see a contradiction in sitting as far away from the altar as you can. So you don't see that that does not really harmonize with taking part in the action of a community. For if you were conscious of the communal nature of this action, you would want to look be a little closer to the main actors so as to play your own part more easily.

But we have done pretty well. And maybe we are inching closer to such active participation that the time will pass more quickly and we will more easily understand why our former Catholic friend can spend two hours at church and think nothing of it.

But today, as we celebrate the feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord, perhaps we could stress the communal nature of communion. In the past many of us thought of receiving communion as the ultimately private act, my intimate union with Jesus. It is that, and

will always remain that. But it is also a communion with our fellow celebrators of the liturgy. Because we all eat the same bread, we become the body of Christ as a community. We are the communal body of Christ. That should draw us together in love, the love of Christ. That should make us a community whose bonds of love are godly. That should help us in our personal relations with each other. We are sisters and brothers in Christ, members of his body. And it should also turn us as such to our world. We go out to meet the world as a community, as the body of Christ.

Maybe we see that. Maybe we know that. But maybe we don't know and see it strongly enough. Today, as we celebrate the gift of the Lord's body and blood, let us pray today that we will see and understand even more clearly what it means for us to be his body and blood in our world today.