June 18, 2017

Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ

Dt 8:2-3, 14b-16a
1 Cor 10:16-17
Jn 6:51

by Mark Pranaitis, C.M.

It might seem a bit of a stretch but I would like to connect this celebration of the Body and Blood of Christ to Good Friday. This is easier to do than readers might think. Follow me here.

Deuteronomy reminds us of how our ancestors in faith were formed by God as a people through their journey in the dessert. God fed them and gave them drink there, helped them taste freedom, and taught them to live “by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.”

The descendants of this formed-and-fed-by-God people are listening to Jesus in the Gospel. They live in a condition we today call “food insecurity.” This is not an unusual condition. For them to hear Jesus declare himself “living bread” which comes with the benefits of living forever, well, I am sure many wondered where the Bread of Life Bakery was so they could buy a loaf or two. Of course, it isn’t that easy.

Jesus isn’t the divine baker and wine maker. He isn’t the magical caterer, capable of feeding the multitudes from a single food truck. Rather, he is the one who takes up the cross and sacrifices his life so that others might live. Which leads me back to Good Friday where we have the most intense experience of the Body and Blood of Jesus.

Spiritual authors have long have reflected on the skimpy number of Jesus’ followers who witnessed his crucifixion. In John’s Gospel we find present “his mother and his mother’s sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala” along with the disciple “whom he loved.” That is five people, four women and one man.

But, crucifixions were public events. Other people were there. Had any of the others in the crowd that formed to watch heard Jesus declare himself the bread of life? Had any of them been reflecting on the stories that made it into Deuteronomy and making some connections? Did any of them simply ask “Who is this poor guy and what did he do?”

At this year’s Good Friday service I found myself looking around at the others who gathered at the foot of the cross and who took in the sight of the body and blood of Jesus. I am sure the preacher to whom I was listening would have scolded me because he wanted me focused on Jesus and his suffering because it was FOR ME. But, in my prayerful imagination I saw a crowd around filled with people who suffer. I locked eyes with a Muslim woman who had several
children huddled around her. I heard the cries of the Latina woman whose husband was deported. I saw the bone-tired bodies of people who work construction jobs, pick vegetables in the fields, and clean chickens in poultry factories.

The question for me as I receive the Body and Blood of Christ this Sunday is am I willing to share this meal, this life, as well as eternal life, with these people too?

Mark Pranaitis is a Vincentian priest currently serving as Special Assistant to the President of Catholic Charities USA in Alexandria, VA. He has served in a variety of settings during his 23 years as a priest.