

HOMILY HOLY THURSDAY 2012 HT-W/XII-PC

At the heart of the Eucharistic Prayer, the priest bows before the altar with the host in hand and says: Take this all of you, and eat OF it. One of the tiny changes in the new Missal that passes unnoticed by most people is the insertion of the little preposition "of" before the word "it" in the words of institution just cited. Until last Advent, the priest said "Take this all of you and eat it." Such a miniscule modification might be thought unworthy of the bother of introducing and even less worthy of consideration, but there is an alteration of meaning of no small import here.

Eating of something implies that only a part of it, as opposed to the whole, is consumed by the eater, whereas simply eating something suggests the entirety is taken in. To borrow a Scriptural example, we are told that Adam and Eve were forbidden to eat OF the tree of knowledge of good and evil, rather than eating the tree itself; obviously the divine Lawgiver had no concern that they would devour the entire tree, root, fruit, leaf, and branch. Moving to the context of the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus presented his apostles with a loaf of bread which had to be broken into several pieces in order that the many disciples present could each have a share. And so each member of the assembly would eat of the loaf, taking only a part; none would eat the whole loaf in toto.

At a deeper level, the language about eating of it, that is, of the Eucharist, touches on a more profound reality. What is really consumed at the Eucharist is not mere bread nor wine. It is in fact nothing less than the body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ. It's really quite awesome, what is offered at Holy Communion. To appreciate the gift that is granted here, we must back up a few steps. God himself, an ocean of goodness and truth and beauty and light, the uniquely perfect being w/o beginning or end, an infinite immensity of glorious beatitude, somehow, somehow came to be contained in the historical personage of Jesus of Nazareth in a miracle theologians call the hypostatic union. In turn, this amazing divine man makes himself fully and totally present under the humble appearance of bread and wine in the Sacrament of the Eucharist in another miracle theologians call transubstantiation. If you think those words--hypostatic and transubstantiation are hard to pronounce and difficult to spell, you're right; but my dear friends, the mysteries they describe are infinitely more complicated, in fact, they are simply incomprehensible to the human mind. Our brains simply aren't big enough to wrap around the presence of God in Jesus or of Christ in Holy Communion. God alone understands the Incarnation and the Real Presence; human beings must be content to accept these mysteries on the basis of faith in God's inerrant, infallible Word: in laymen's terms, Jesus said so, and that's good enough for us. And as our intellects are limited in their powers of apprehending the mystery of the Eucharist, so also are our hearts incapable of fully imbibing the sacred treasure it conveys. However holy we may be, we can't totally receive all the grace contained in Holy Communion. We can't really eat it, that is, we can't completely consume it in one bite. Not at one meal; not over the course of a million communions. When it comes to the Eucharist, we can

only eat OF it, that is, we can only appropriate a small fraction of the boundless riches of grace it offers.

Take this all of you and eat of it. Again, we return to the historical origins at the Last Supper, where one loaf was offered to the multitude. All ate of one loaf, for the many were called to become one in Christ. Even today, the members of the Church are collectively known as the mystical body of Christ as the Eucharist may be called the sacramental Body of Christ. The reception of the sacramental body of Christ by the mystical Body of Christ is meant to foster the unity of the latter; by receiving communion the union of the Church is strengthened.

The common element running through all this--from Incarnation to Passion to Eucharist to Church is love: the reality of love given, the command of love to be offered. The love of God is what impelled the Son of God to become incarnate and dwell among us in the person of Jesus Christ. This very love led him to lay down his life on the cross for our sins. And it is this same love that is made present in the Sacrament of the altar. At every Mass we are offered this love. But the process does not stop w/ God's self-offering to us. Love is offered in the hope that it may be loved in return. So we are also called to respond to God's love by loving our God w/ all our heart, soul, mind, and strength; moreover, we are also to turn and extend this love to others, most especially to our brothers and sisters in Christ. The love of God that we are talking about finds beautiful expression in the practice of humble adoration before the Blessed Sacrament; and so all are invited to stay and pray before the tabernacle this evening after the liturgy is concluded. The love of neighbor we are talking about is the love that puts self at the service of others, so beautifully illustrated by the footwashing ritual reenacted at this Mass. Let's pray that as we eat of Christ's body and drink of his blood, the divine love which inspires these sacraments will evoke love in our hearts, that the love of Christ may draw us all together more firmly as brothers and sisters in the family of God.