

RONALD ROLHEISER OMI - HOLY THURSDAY AND THE EUCHARIST

One of the things we celebrate during Holy Week is the institution of the Eucharist. This mystery, as we know, makes God present, real and physical, in the world in a multiplicity of ways. What happens at a Eucharist?

Among other things, what happens at every Eucharist is that, as a community, our reality as the Body of Christ is intensified. What is meant by that?

In Scripture, the phrase "***the body of Christ***" is used to connote ***three*** realities simultaneously: ***Jesus***, the God-man who walked the roads of Palestine for 33 years; ***the Eucharist***, which continues to give concrete physical flesh to God, as Jesus did; and ***the community of believers*** who also, like the Eucharist, continues to make the physical reality of God present in the world. All three of these are the body of Christ. Moreover, when Scripture speaks of the latter two realities, the Eucharist and the Community of believers, as the Body of Christ it is not using the term metaphorically. It ***never*** says that we are ***like*** the Body of Christ, or that we ***represent*** the Body of Christ or ***replace*** it, nor even that we are the ***mystical*** body of Christ. It simply says that we ***are*** the Body of Christ.

This has implications beyond what we normally realize. It doesn't just mean that in the Eucharistic species, the bread and wine, we have the real physical presence of Christ, but it means as well, and this is where we often water it down, that, in the community of believers too we have God on earth as really as that God was once physically present in Jesus. The community gathered for worship, and even when it is not at worship, is really the anointed, physical, real presence of God on earth. That sounds strong, and it is. Like the incarnation itself, this conception both stretches and scandalizes the imagination. It stretches it because we cannot conceive of what is so infinite and perfect in something so finite and flawed. It scandalizes because the imagination balks at the concept of a God that is so accessible, so tied to the ordinary, and so bound to human flesh with all its flaws.

Yet that is our belief and that is the mystery of the Eucharist. To try to explain it more simply: At the Eucharistic prayer at the liturgy, the priest

says the words: "This is my body. This is my blood." When he says those words, and in the invocation to the Holy Spirit that usually just precedes those words, he is not only asking that the bread and wine be changed into the reality of Christ, he is also, and just as much, asking that the people present, the congregation, be changed into the body and blood of Christ.

St. Augustine, in a homily he gave to Christians who were receiving the Eucharist for the first time, once said it this way: *"You ought to know that what you will receive, what you ought to receive daily, the bread that you see upon the altar which has been sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ. The cup, or more accurately what the cup contains, sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ. By these, the bread and wine, Christ wanted to entrust us with his body and blood which he shed for the forgiveness of our sins. **If you receive this well, you are what you receive.**"*

Augustine goes on in the same homily to point out the meaning of the symbolism of the loaf of bread and the cup of wine that serve as Eucharistic species. A piece of bread is made up because individual kernels of wheat have been crushed and brought together and then, under heat and fire, baked into one loaf. Likewise for the wine: It is made up of individual grapes that have been crushed and thus brought together into one cup. The unity that results is, in each case, contingent upon a certain giving up of individualism. This is part of the transformation that the Eucharistic prayer asks of us, namely, the breaking down of our own egos, agendas, and bitter lack of forgiveness, so that we can be one with others in a community. Later on, in that same homily, Augustine tells those receiving communion that they should receive it in this way, *"so that you have yourselves in mind."*

In another homily he uses even stronger words. He tells the neophytes who are about to receive communion: *"Be what you see and receive what you are."* (*Estote quod videtis, et accipite quod estis.*)

Receive what you are! That is the real imperative within the Eucharist. What Jesus wanted to give us at the last supper was not just his presence and God's forgiveness under the species of bread and wine, but that same reality in the faces, hands, and bodies of those who partake of that bread and wine. At a Eucharist, we, not just the bread and wine, are meant to change.