

My dear friends,

Several of you mentioned how helpful the Christmas homily was last week. Since it holds great importance for understanding the gift of the Eucharist in our life, I am putting it in the bulletin this week for anyone who may have missed it or would like to reflect upon it further:

Our celebration today of the Feast of Christmas lies within the year we have dedicated to the Eucharist, and so in honor of this special year I would like to invite us to reflect on the intimate connection between the mystery of Christmas and the Holy Eucharist.

At the moment Mary said “yes” to the angel and conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, God ‘tabernacled’ himself within her for nine months, receiving from her a body, formed from her own. During this time Mary’s body was like a tabernacle, for within her womb dwelt the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of her son, Jesus Christ--just as in our tabernacle behind the altar dwells the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

At Christmas we celebrate the moment when the tabernacle of Mary’s body opens to give birth to Jesus, and the Body of Christ becomes visible on earth for the first time. The body He has assumed will now be used to manifest and make visible God’s redeeming love to the world. And one powerful way that this redeeming love will be communicated will be by making Himself our food in the Eucharist. The manner of Christ’s birth anticipates the gift of Himself as the “Bread of Life” to all generations. For Bethlehem, the city where He was born, means “house of bread,” and the manger in which he was laid was a feeding trough for animals.

Mary now holds in her hands what she carried for nine months in her womb, the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ, of the infant Christ. We can only imagine with what love and tenderness she held him, and the faith and adoration that filled her heart. But there is something here that should fill our hearts with great awe and wonder. What is the difference between what Mary holds in her hands at this moment, and what we hold in our hands and receive on our tongues at the moment of Holy Communion? There are basically two essential differences.

The main difference is the ‘mode’ by which Christ is present, for we receive Him in a sacramental, spiritual mode--and yet the reality is still the same--it is really and truly the personal, substantial presence of Jesus Christ: Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. This means that we become at the moment of communion, like Mary during her pregnancy, tabernacles of the Body and Blood of Christ.

This ‘substantial’ presence of Jesus only last about 20 minutes, the time it takes for our bodies to consume the Eucharist. Jesus remains present with us spiritually, and all the graces of our Communion with Him remain--but He is not substantially present within us as He is in at the time of Holy Communion. After Mary gave birth, our Lord continued to be with her spiritually, and all the graces of that privileged time of pregnancy remained with her, but she had to wait for the first Mass after the resurrection, perhaps receiving communion for the first time from the hands of St. John, to again have within her the ‘substantial presence’ of Jesus that she had during the time of her pregnancy.

The second difference lies in the fact that the infant Mary holds in her hands had not yet suffered His passion and death, He had not yet risen and entered into His glory. Which means that in Holy Communion we receive something more than what Mary had: for the Eucharist not only unites us with the death of Christ, but we receive the risen and glorified Christ--we receive Christ in the fulness of His Paschal mystery. For this too Mary had to wait until her first Holy Communion.

Besides becoming tabernacles like Mary, there is something more we share in common with her: and that is faith. To many people Mary's infant looked like a normal, ordinary child. It was only by faith, faith in God's word about the child, that Mary, Joseph and the shepherds believed in His divinity. We are called upon to exercise the same faith, for to our senses the Eucharist has all the appearance of ordinary bread and wine. Like Mary we put our faith in God's word--"this is my Body, this is my Blood"--we believe that at the consecration the bread and wine go through a miraculous, substantial change. As the Holy Spirit came down upon Mary to work the miraculous conception of the God-man within her womb, so in the Eucharistic Prayer the same Holy Spirit is invoked and comes down upon the gifts of bread and wine to miraculously change them into the Body and Blood of Christ.

While this reflection is good for our faith, it also has profound implications for our life because of the effects of Communion within us. God does not take from us, as He did with Mary, the body He now has that is uniquely His, but He does ask us to offer Him our human nature, our human life, which He impregnates with His own life by the Eucharist and other Sacraments, to again make His love visible in the world through us. Now He uses our face, our hands, our bodies to bring His love into the world.

May we always receive our Lord, like Mary, with the great love and tenderness, with faith and adoration, allowing Jesus to cradle Himself more deeply and fully in our life, so that He can use us to make His love more visible in the world.

God love you,
Fr. Steven