

**Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year B
(Sept. 10, 2006)**

Why Go to Mass?

A long time ago in the year 304 in North Africa, a number of Christians were arrested for gathering to celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday. When the proconsul asked the owner of the house why he allowed these people in his house, he replied that they were his brothers and sisters. This did not satisfy the proconsul who insisted that he should have forbidden them entry. To that the owner of the house replied, “Without the day of the Lord, without the Eucharist, we cannot live.” For these early Christians not to have the Eucharist would be like being dead, and they were willing to risk the worst punishment, even martyrdom, to be able to share the body and blood of Christ.

Last Sunday in our first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy we heard Moses say to the people, “What great nation is there that has gods so close to it as the Lord, our God, is to us whenever we call upon him?” For Moses and the people the nearness of God was the greatest blessing that could be bestowed upon them. Well we can say today that the God of Moses and the people he is addressing has bestowed upon us an even greater gift. That same God is even closer to us because he has gifted us with the Son who has taken on our flesh and blood and bone and has lived our life, shed our tears, felt our pain, and laughed our laughter. He has become one of us. But even more than that the Son, Jesus, our Savior, has given us a still greater gift, the gift of himself in the form of bread and wine, the Eucharist that those early Christians were so eager to share that they were willing to risk their lives to come together for their Sunday celebrations

Today here at Holy Trinity we are beginning a year of prayer at the Eucharist. During this coming year on one Sunday every month the homilies at all the Masses will be about the Eucharist and will try to help us all to come to a clearer understanding of what it is we do when we come here. Why do we come? Why is the Eucharist so important a part of our lives? What difference does it make whether I participate in the Sunday

Eucharist or not? In conjunction with these homilies our adult education program will present a series of talks on the same themes that are being considered at Mass. Our hope is that this better understanding will also help us to pray better at the celebration. That's why we are calling it a Year of Prayer at the Eucharist.

The theme for this first Sunday is: Love and Serve the Lord. Love and serve the Lord. That's one of the forms of dismissal that the priest uses at the end of Mass: "Our Mass is ended. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord."

So in a sense we begin our considerations of the Eucharist not with the beginning of the Eucharistic celebration but with the end, the dismissal. Why? Because it tells us one of the major reasons why we come to church in the first place. So let's take a closer look at that.

St. Augustine preached a sermon back in the fifth century about the Eucharist and he emphasized a truth about the sacrament that I would like to propose for our consideration today. He said,

"What you see is bread and a cup. This is what your eyes report to you. But your faith has need to be taught that the bread is the Body of Christ and the cup is the Blood of Christ. . . . If then you wish to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle as he says to the faithful, 'You are the Body of Christ and his members. . . .' You reply 'Amen' to that which you are, and by replying you give consent. For you hear, 'The body of Christ,' and you reply 'Amen.' Be a member of the body of Christ so that your 'Amen' may be true. . . . Be what you see and receive what you are." (Sermon 272).

St. Augustine is emphasizing what we already know but perhaps do not often reflect upon. At the Eucharist we share the bread of life, the one bread that makes us the one body, the Body of Christ. For Augustine as well as for St. Paul, an extraordinary thing happens. When we digest ordinary food, it becomes part of us. So, too, with the bread and wine that have become the Body and Blood of Christ. They become part of us. But with the Eucharist there is this miracle that what becomes part of us changes us into itself. As Augustine says, "We become what we receive." This is awesome, a marvelous reality and a great and wondrous mystery. It would be good for all of us to take some time just to think and pray about

that, to let ourselves be lost in awe and wonder as we contemplate what happens here.

So when at the end of our Eucharistic celebration the priest says, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,” we must realize that we do not leave here simply as individual people. We leave here as the Body of Christ. St. Augustine and St. Paul both draw the logical conclusion: since we are the Body of Christ, then the only reasonable thing to do is to act like the Body of Christ. What we have become we bring to other people. We bring the love, the compassion, the understanding, yes, even the healing of the Lord.

But, Father, someone might say, we can do all those things without coming to Mass on Sunday. Yes, of course we can. But because we have been here something awesome has happened to us, and when we leave here we go with a grace and strength that we would not have if we had not come. We go as a community, united in faith and love. We go as the Body of Christ, and as such we go with a power we would not have individually.

At the end of Mass today, when you hear, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord,” I hope you will respond with a very hearty and heart-felt “Thanks be to God” because of the great grace God has given all of us and because of a deeper appreciation of what it is we come here to do, but most of all, what it is that happens to us all and what we take with us when we leave this church.