

Body and Blood of Christ 2006

I made a promise the other day, a promise that VISA is betting \$500 I'll make good on: VISA allowed me to book my flight on line, and I gave them my word that I would later on write a check for that amount to them. A simple transaction, so common that we probably rarely think of it as being a "promise," but that's what all credit is based on: the promise that, if the desired goods are delivered now, the payment will come in time. Promises are an integral part of human society: without them, I don't know how society would function nor how people would live. We make a promise every time we sign a contract, every time we pledge to do something for someone, each time we say we'll be there for someone. We make and receive these promises because we believe that the other guy's word can be honored; if nobody trusted anybody, think of the impasses that would eventually stall our lives. I know that right now I've got my ticket in hand because VISA trusts me when I say the check will come.

Within our life of faith and the history of salvation, there are promises made which rise far above the mundane transactions of the day to day grind. Within religion, there are sacred promises and agreements which occur, and the most solemn of these are considered covenants. The promise becomes sacred because it involves God; the promises are sacred because they invite holiness into our lives. And all of us make these sacred promises; all of us have entered into a covenant with God. The first promises came at our baptism, at which time we either promised or had parents and godparents promise on our behalf, that we would learn the faith, keep our faith, and live a Christ-centered life. The vocations of marriage and the religious life revolve around the sacred promises of the vows which are taken. Married couples promise to remain in the marriage until one of them dies, they promise to remain faithful to each other and to honor and respect each other. Priests and religious promise respect and obedience to their superiors and to the successors of their superiors; we promised to faithfully pray the Liturgy of the Hours, and to give witness to our faith through celibacy, giving ourselves not to any one person but instead to belong to the entire people of God. These sacred promises, vows, are never to be taken lightly; they require months and years of discernment and preparation precisely because they are so challenging. But if challenging, they are all the more rewarding; they are made in exchange for the greatest good of all, God's graces to help us become holier.

The covenant of the old law, then, was seemingly simple, and straightforward: said God to the Israelites: "I will be your God, and you will be my people." But that covenant was kept through a series of laws and sacrifices: if they observed the law and the sacrifices then they would in turn enjoy God's favor. But none of those were ever the perfect sacrifice: they gave no promise of heaven, no guarantee of eternal life. The old law established God as Lord, and prepared the people for the coming of the Messiah. But as the reading from the letter to the Hebrews illustrates, it paled in comparison to the new covenant: for if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God. And, continues Hebrews, for this reason he, Jesus, is the mediator of the new covenant; not one of bulls and goats, but of his one perfect sacrifice. It is an everlasting sacrifice, because it does not need to be repeated over and over again, to sanctify those who have come after his sacrifice is completed; the offering Jesus made on the cross was so perfect that it purchased back from Satan people of every age. It achieved all that any sacrifice can achieve; for this reason, Jesus does not have to be sacrificed again; rather we say in the Mass that it is the same sacrifice offered in our time and place. His sacrifice on Calvary was and remains perfect; there is no need for Jesus to be sacrificed over again, and no need for any other sacrifice in order for man to reach his salvation.

On this Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, the great annual celebration of the Eucharist and of the True Presence which is at the forefront of our Catholic faith, it is appropriate for us to consider the promises which comprise this covenant, promises on both our part and on Jesus' part. Jesus, in this covenant with us, promised to conquer death so that it no longer means the end of life, but rather now signifies the beginning of the life to which we should all strive, eternal life in heaven. And it means that Jesus opened the gates of heaven, by never wavering in his love for his Father or for the humanity which rejected him when he came. It means that Jesus would send the Holy Spirit, to enliven his Church, strengthen his believers, and draw us all into his Mystical Body. It means that Jesus would provide us with the graces we need to live holy lives; it means he will offer us the mercy we need to have our sins forgiven, as long as we turn back to him with contrite hearts. And Jesus has already delivered on his part of the covenant; everything which I have named, he has already done. So now the covenant rests on us; we enter into this sacred promise beginning with baptism, but we enter anew each and every time we receive Holy Communion. That's why communion is the most important moment of any day, any week, or of any lifetime if we really think about it. When we say "amen," we're renewing a promise. We promise to love God and love others; we can't approach our Eucharistic Lord in communion if we willfully and obstinately hate somebody else; it's one of the reasons why we have the Sign of Peace immediately before communion, as a symbol of that letting go of any and all animosity we may hold against others, letting go so that we can approach Jesus with pure hearts and wills. We promise to serve in whatever way we may be called to serve in the Mystical Body; to discern what works God is calling us to do to spread the faith and to build up the faithful. If all we ever do is tell God "no," and insist that our only vocation is to turn up at Mass once a week, well, I think we may be fooling ourselves, but not him, and not others. By receiving Jesus' Body and Blood, we state, we promise, to avoid sin and to be truly repentant of the sins which we have committed. Receiving Jesus, even just being in his True Presence, is the most important thing we can do in our lives, because with everything else we do, we touch human lives; here, we draw near to the divinity which is proper to God.

Mass is more than merely a service: it is an exchange, of words, of prayers, and of offerings. We offer God bread and wine; he changes it into the Body and Blood of his Son; we offer the Eucharistic sacrifice to him; he offers us his Son in what physically appears to be bread and wine, and in doing so, promises us everything that the Eucharist has to offer. God promises grace; we promise the reception of his graces. God promises to be faithful; we promise to be loyal. God offers us mercy; we promise belief in him. Consider what is truly being offered to you as you approach our Lord; consider not only that Our Lord is present in what appears to be bread, but that he is active, and that he is offering us not only the perfect gift of himself, but many other gifts and graces as well. If you think that we receive all of his promises by merely placing a host in our mouths, think again: we receive Jesus all right, and along with him we receive his undying love. What does God ask in exchange for so great a gift? Our love, and our faithful adherence to all that he has revealed to us. May we always receive this gift worthily; may we always receive Jesus properly; may we always receive him trustingly, and may we always receive him reverently. And may we always remember all that God has promised to give us through his Son's Body and Blood. Let us enter this covenant, by promising to conform our lives and our selves to be more and more like our Lord—generous, unselfish, and holy as he presents himself to us in his Holy Eucharist.