

May 25, 2008 – Corpus Christi Sunday
Prepared by Bro. Mark Gruenke, MM, Namibia and Brazil

Readings and main ideas:

1st reading: Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14-16	“People do not live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from God’s mouth.”
Responsorial psalm: Psalms 147:12-13, 14-15, 19-20	God brings peace to those who believe and fills them with the finest wheat.
2nd reading: First Corinthians 10:16-17	“Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.”
Gospel: John 6:51-58	“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him...whoever eats this bread will live forever.”

“It won’t work.” “You won’t be able to bring them together.” Unbelief, even anger, met the proposal made by our Maryknoll team that the small communities of the parish gather at the river. Our parish was big, a 100 mile by 60 mile tract in the Amazon of Brazil. Subsistence farmers, who were our parishioners, were sparsely scattered throughout the jungle. Transportation was difficult. Travel was mainly by foot or on horseback. For some of the farmers, it would be a three day walk to reach the river. The 40 small communities of our parish were isolated one from the other and the people who lived in one community were strangers to those who lived in another. Our parishioners had never been called to gather in this way before. In the past, it had always been the priest who had traveled to visit them. Furthermore, the doubters of the proposal claimed that the greatest obstacle to its success would be the people whom we were inviting to the gathering! The poor farmers of our parish, they said, were hard headed and mistrustful and that they would not come. Finally, to make matters worse, a wealthy politician was planning to have his own gathering on the same weekend in order to prevent what he understood as an attempt by us to influence his constituency.

We were calling the communities to gather on an August weekend. The location was a huge sand bar in the middle of the Tocantins River. One hundred grass huts had been built in that spot as a village for tourists. The huts were built to rent out during the vacation month of July. Urban relatives came every year from southern Brazil to visit their country cousins and to enjoy the sun, sand, and water of our region. As a favor to us, the huts, now abandoned, were left standing for our gathering.

Preparations were finished. The day to begin the gathering had arrived. Would the farmers come? Would they bring enough food to last for the weekend? The first small groups began to appear from out of the jungle. On their heads and on their backs, along with their personal gear, they were carrying the food for the common pot. They arrived in fives, sixes and sevens. There were adults and children, even babies at the breast. Enthusiasm was contagious. The singing that began on Friday afternoon never ceased throughout the weekend. Joyful song could yet be heard three days later when the communities evaporated back into the jungle on their homeward journey.

The weekend was filled with introductions, prayers, conferences, a bonfire, theater and dance. There was even time for a swim in the river. And on Sunday, our bishop arrived for the celebration of the Mass, the crowning moment of our gathering.

The turnout was so great that the kitchen could not keep pace with the multitude. We were served from one great pot – though more than one batch of rice had to be prepared to feed us all. The wait to be served was up to two hours for those at the back of the line, but no one complained. Song filled the air. When the community members left for home on Sunday afternoon, sacks of rice and a mountain of squash remained. The abundance of the gathering was evident both in spirit and in material goods.

Jesus' words in today's Gospel are very hard indeed. It is no surprise that many Jews were shocked and angered by what he had to say. They were men and women who were raised in a religion that was strict and clear in its beliefs. The demand made by Jesus that we must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to obtain everlasting life was repugnant to their ears. They understood his words to be blasphemous. Perhaps, those of us who have been raised since the cradle as Catholics are not as sensitive as we should be to the impact that his words carry. Perhaps we have softened them and watered down their meaning in our minds and even in our hearts. Yet Jesus is clear in what he tells us, when we eat the bread and drink the wine of the Eucharist we are eating his flesh and drinking his blood.

In today's Epistle we hear another strong statement. It is that by eating from the one bread we are all made one in Jesus and through him with the Creator. Are we unaware of the demands that this truth makes upon us? It is certainly different from the message conveyed to us by our politicians and the world leaders today. Oh, they might pay Jesus' words lip service, but most of them get their votes by promoting just the opposite. They create a mind set of "us against them." They promise us an ever greater share of the world's resources (implying, of course, less for the rest of the world). They are eager to identify for us who are our enemies and just as eager to tell us how they are the ones who can best save us from the enemies that they have identified. Their underlying message is one of doubt, division and selfishness. It is the exact opposite of Jesus' invitation to us to partake in the one bread.

In my story of the gathering at the river the local politician was not an especially bad man but he was a fearful one. He feared that he might lose his constituency. Whether our gathering at the river would be of benefit to the larger community was not the important question for him. His primary concern was to maintain his own position and power.

The gossipers and doomsayers of our parish lacked hope. They were resigned to their unbelief. For them unity was not possible. The challenge was too great. The many difficulties could not be overcome. They were certain that the poor farmers could not be brought together in community.

In this world filled with bigotry, racism, hatred, war, ecological degradation, greed and exploitation it takes great courage to believe in Jesus' words and to act upon them. Eating Jesus' flesh demands of us that we act courageously in a world filled with doubt and division. Do we realize that by consuming Jesus' body and blood we commit ourselves to share in his mission to make this a world where all are one in peace, justice, equality and in caring for creation?

We will only have the strength that we need if we nourish ourselves frequently upon the body and blood of Jesus. We must make his heart and his mind our heart and our mind, make his way our way. We must become one with him in his mission to bring the world in unity through him to the Creator.

For more information:

Exercise your power to choose leaders who seek unity this election year. Read more about the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions in Maryknoll's *Loving our neighbor in a shrinking world*, a resource developed by Maryknoll missionaries who witness the global impact of U.S. political and economic decisions. Through this resource, Maryknoll missionaries encourage voters in the 2008 elections to scrutinize candidates' policy proposals through the lens of those who, both in the U.S. and overseas, lack basic necessities, endure the scourge of racism, live with gender-based discrimination or feel the immediate impact of climate change.

Email for a copy, or find the election guide here:
www.maryknollogc.org/2008elections/index.htm

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