

Second Sunday after Epiphany
January 18, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
John 1:35-42

Years ago I was called to the emergency room at a local hospital, and when I arrived at the patient's bedside, she had already died. Next to her stood her husband and young son, and when I asked what had happened, they told me she had just had an operation and had been sent home to recuperate. They brought her back after she had had an incident at home; and now the father had to explain to his boy that his mom would never come home again.

I later found out that her death had been caused by the medicine she'd been sent home with. I noted the irony that something that had been given for healing and life had instead caused disease and death. I don't remember if it was a misapplication, a bad interaction with another drug, or an overdose; but that event reminded me of St. Paul's warning about receiving Holy Communion—that, if we receive unworthily, we eat and drink judgment upon ourselves, and the medicine that gives life can instead cause death (1 Corinthians 11).

As St. John the Baptist makes clear in the Gospel today, Jesus is the Lamb of God. We confess this in the Agnus Dei at every Mass, and it harkens back to the Passover, when each Israelite family, on the night before the exodus from Egypt, placed the blood of their sacrificial lamb on their doorpost. That night the angel of the Lord passed over the houses that had made the sacrifice and eaten the lamb, but slew the firstborn son in the Egyptian houses, those houses without the blood, those houses that had not partaken of the sacrificial lamb. Those who receive the Lamb of God in Holy Communion will likewise be protected from death, as Jesus reminds us: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:54).

St. Paul provides us with the proper context for the receipt of the flesh and blood of the Lamb of God. In our Epistle today he tells us that our bodies are meant for the Lord and the Lord for our bodies. We are meant to receive Holy Communion. Moreover, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, and we are thus called to shun immorality in our bodies, lest we sin against the body of Christ Himself. Here we think of St. Mary, the first human tabernacle of the Lord and how God prepared a pure vessel, full of grace, to receive the Body of our Lord and Savior. We, too, St. Paul is telling us, are to be pure vessels if we are to worthily receive Jesus.

This concept is very easy for us to understand when we consider the sacred buildings and vessels we have set aside for the reception of the Lamb of God in Holy Communion. We recoil at the very idea of using this space for anything other than worship, even though the hardwood floors and high ceilings would make it great for basketball or music and dancing. Our aversion to such sacrilege is even stronger when we consider the chalice and paten, which contact our Lord's Body and Blood at every Mass. Only the most hardened anti-Catholics would think to eat and drink with them as they do their everyday dinnerware.

Well, just as we set aside this building and our sacred vessels for use in the Holy Mass, intent that nothing profane should be done with them, so we must consider our own bodies. If we would not profane the sacred vessels, how much less should we profane our sacred bodies, which are members of Christ's own Body and temples of the Holy Spirit! We prepare sacred vessels onto which we place the Lamb of God. We ought to prepare sacred vessels, we ought to be sacred vessels, when we receive the Lamb of God's Body and Blood.

It should come as no surprise that the Lamb of God could have a deleterious effect if placed within a human vessel unprepared to receive Him worthily. We know that when an impure vessel comes into contact with pure contents, the contents themselves become contaminated. But that is not the case when the contents are the Lamb of God. God can't be contaminated; the pure and sinless victim is forever pure and sinless. Thus, the other possibility here is the reality, when we take the pure Lamb of God and place Him in our impure bodies.

That is, it is not always the case that the impure contaminates the pure when the two come into contact. What can also happen is that the pure obliterates all impurities. Think of bleach and how impurities do not contaminate it. Rather, the bleach in its pure form obliterates the impurities. The Lamb of God is not like bleach because He is not caustic, but the effect is the same: If we take the pure Lamb of God and place Him in an impure vessel, it is not the Lamb of God who will become contaminated. Rather, the impure vessel will be destroyed.

We avoid this possibility by not receiving Holy Communion if we are in a state of mortal sin. In order that we may be pure and unstained, worthy vessels into which the Lamb of God may be placed, we make our way to confession to receive absolution before we receive Holy Communion. This is why, for example, the divorced and civilly remarried—those whose first union has not been annulled and whose second was not blessed by the Church—cannot be admitted to Holy Communion. Since their first spouse is still alive and they have taken another spouse, they have, according to Jesus, committed adultery. They are in an objective state of sin, and thus their bodies are not pure vessels into which we can place the Lamb of God. Moreover, if we did admit them to Holy Communion, we would risk causing them illness and death. The medicine of life, misapplied, would lead not to healing but disease, not to salvation but damnation.

Therefore, we see how merciful is Holy Mother Church in warning her members not to approach the altar rail to receive the Lamb of God if they are in mortal sin. She does so because she desires life for her children, not death. This mercy extends to the whole world in her refusal to admit to Holy Communion those who have not made the profession of faith and been baptized or, in the case of Protestants, been reconciled to Holy Mother Church. The policy is not exclusionary but merciful, based on the reality that Holy Communion is in fact the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. Holy Communion is the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, and it should be taken for the health of one's body and soul. The Church doesn't want to misapply this precious medicine in order that it cause injury, even death. God forbid that a misguided intention to be inclusive should issue in the obliteration of even one body or the damnation of even one soul. Jesus' great love for us means He does not want us to receive Him if we are not ready, if our bodies and souls have not been purified to receive the spotless victim. It is better that we call sinners to repent and reform their lives so that this medicine from the Lamb of God, His very Self, may have the effect our Lord desires—life with Him forevermore.