

“Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your personal savior?” How do you respond to that question? Uneasily, if you are like me for much of my life. The question seems far too direct and intense.

“Personal savior” talk suggests the kind of display common to the “altar calls” for those of us old enough to remember of Billy Graham’s athletic stadium crusades broadcast on television or still today employed by groups of Christian fundamentalists. “Come forward and witness that you are claiming Christ as your redeemer” those gathered are bid. Then the long lines of men and women, coursing through the aisles like blood through arteries, drain down to the stage, pulpit or altar to make public their dependency on the Lord.

But, how many of us have ever thought about the fact that we as Catholics engage in a similar practice? Each Sunday, and for some people daily, we have a ritual of leaving our pews, proceeding to the altar, and receiving the body and blood of Christ. This weekend our First Communicants will be called forth by name, to come and stand before the altar and be the first among us to “accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior” in the act of Holy Communion.

Perhaps we have gotten too familiar with it, but it is easy to overlook how extreme our dogma and ritual appear to others. Just look at the facts. As Catholics we believe that Jesus Christ, “body, and blood, soul and divinity” to use the traditional language expressing the reality and the fullness of the presence of the person of Jesus in the Eucharist, is, “wholly and substantially present” under the appearances of bread and wine. We believe that what happens here at Mass is more than fellowship. It is more than historical commemoration and remembrance. We profess that through ritual prayer and action in the Holy Spirit, we re-enact the saving mystery of the passion and death of Jesus, and this very mystery becomes our food. By receiving Holy Communion we profess that Christ’s saving us is our sustenance. We could not live or survive without it.

If we believe in the real presence, what do we actually think takes place in the Eucharist? We hold that the full reality of Jesus Christ enters our body. He is our food. He actually becomes part of us and we a part of him. We are reenacting the central story of our redemption: that the eternal Word, the Son of God, would take on human flesh and dwell among us. The One who sent the Word, God the Father, now looks upon us and sees within us the real presence of Jesus. We become what we eat and drink! In this we are saved! We, in turn, look upon each other, even the least or most despised, and see the face of Christ. Now as the Body of Christ in the world, we are, in turn, sent to the worlds of our daily life to continue his mission of kingdom building, of transforming the world by the power of the grace of God, the Holy Spirit, speaking and acting in us. Now that is intense. That is radical.

The reception of Holy Communion makes no sense if we do not intend it to affirm that Christ is our personal savior. What could be more personal, more intense, than to say, “You are my food and drink, you are my own very flesh and blood? Simultaneously, our reception of Holy Communion is incomplete if we do not intend it to be a means of on-going configuration to the mind and heart of Christ in the values and lifestyles we embrace, the words and actions in which we engage, the witness we give to others as we leave this place, the effect we make in the world. We are called to be like Saint Paul in today’s reading from Acts who witnesses to the radical transformation of his life by his encounter with Jesus and his acceptance of Him as his “personal Lord and savior” and with the church St. John addressed in today’s epistle whom he reminds that Christ’s Spirit now dwells with them.

If the sacrament of the Eucharist is not taken intensely, personally, and radically, it does not make much sense at all. Jesus in today’s gospel reminds us of the organic unity that exists between him and us. “I am the vine, you are the branches. You who live in me and I in you, will produce abundant fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” This is not a tame claim. It is a bold assertion that we have no being, no life, apart from Christ. “Live on in me as I do in you.” This is what it means to have Christ as our personal savior.

(With thanks to John Kavanaugh, SJ from *THE WORD ENCOUNTERED: Meditations on the Sunday Scriptures*. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York (1996), pp. 61-64)