

## REFLECTION

Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ

June 9, 2007

Given by Jeannie Berwick

This spring, shortly into our visit to our Sister Parish in Chiapas, Mexico, we drove a short distance from the Jesuit Mission and parked the truck on the side of the road. We walked up a steep hill, made slippery by the recent rains. At the top, through an opening in the trees, stood Pedro, welcoming us with a warm smile. His extended family had gathered in the concrete patio outside his home to greet us. Because of the rain, we had arrived a bit late, and he laughed in relief when he saw us coming. A few weeks before, he had enthusiastically made plans with the Mission staff to host us for lunch when he learned that people from his Sister Parish in Seattle were coming to visit. When we hadn't arrived at the appointed hour, he worried. His family had prepared lunch for us, and he didn't know what he would do if we didn't show up. His almond-shaped eyes crinkled and danced as he laughed.

Pedro is the kind of man who can look straight into your soul with a gaze so gentle you feel you've known him your whole life. He is a Tseltal man, an indigenous Mayan of Chiapas, Mexico, and an active member of our Sister Parish. After we had coffee and conversation among the burlap sacks of newly harvested coffee - in the main room of his house - Pedro showed us his chicken coop, worm bins, vegetable garden and "Super Magro" organic compost solution. Pedro is a "Caretaker of the Earth"; he and his family are volunteers in their community. They are sharing what they learn about sustainable agriculture and reviving the traditional Tseltal celebrations related to sowing and harvesting and caring for God's Earth.

After the "tour" of the small garden and hen house, Pedro told us that he felt deep gratitude for our visit, that his heart felt alive and happy. We gave him some simple gifts in the name of St. Therese Parish: the Valentine's Day cards you helped make; a framed portrait of St. Therese for the village chapel, and prayer cards made from photographs of St. Therese parishioners. We explained that St. Therese Parish was the "Sister Parish" of the people of the Jesuit Mission. We told him for almost ten years now, we have been praying for each other, visiting each other, and learning how to be brothers and sisters of God's family. Pedro smiled, tears in his eyes, and said that knowing that the community of St. Therese prays for him and the people of the Jesuit Mission in Chiapas gives him strength to continue his work, "as long as God gives him life."

Pedro then gestured for us to enter the rustic family kitchen. Next to the wood-fire hearth where Pedro's wife and daughters were cooking homemade tortillas, the table was laid with a simple lunch: black beans, chicken soup, fresh chiles and a little bag of salt. In bowls made of large dried gourds, the tortillas were piled high, steaming and begging to be eaten. According to Tseltal custom, guests eat first, while the family waits. Only after guests have eaten their fill will the family eat.

Around the table were the five of us from St. Therese Parish, Jesuit Brother Chema, Sr. Trini and Verónica, a lay worker with the Jesuit Mission. As we ate, I couldn't help but feel welcomed, even at home. The generous hospitality of Pedro and his family, the simple food - the fruits of the family's labors - the palpable presence of God - this was a Holy Communion, this simple meal on top of the hill in a tiny corner of a place called Chiapas.

Today we celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ. We share Eucharist around this table each Sunday, but today we are asked to consider what it all means. There has been plenty of theological discussion on this question over the course of Christianity's history, lots of it very difficult to understand. I found an account by Fr. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest, scientist and theologian, to be particularly helpful. In his Mass on the World, Teilhard de Chardin recounts his experience on a wind-swept steppe in Asia. He wanted to celebrate Mass, but he had no bread or wine. He decided to proceed

anyway: "I have neither bread, nor wine, nor altar; I will raise myself beyond these symbols...I will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you the labours and sufferings of the world." Bread as our labors; wine as our pain. These were the offerings Teilhard de Chardin made to God. He asked God to help him step into the mystery that links us all together: "We are all of us together carried in the one world-womb."

The Eucharist then is an invitation to unite our hearts with humanity around the world - Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, even nonbelievers. Desmond Tutu, retired South African bishop and Nobel laureate, says that Jesus' love is a "radical love," one that doesn't separate or judge who deserves it and who doesn't. As Tutu so simply says, "**All, all, all** are invited."

In the late 1990s, at the peak of the war against the poor in Chiapas, a group of indigenous deacons and their wives and a priest traveled to a refugee camp several hours away from our Sister Parish to visit a group of Tsotsil indigenous who had been displaced by the violence. Conditions at the camp were horrific - people were living on the bare ground, exposed to the winter temperatures that often dipped to freezing at night, terrified of more violence by roving paramilitaries, and hungry. The people wanted to celebrate Mass, but they had no bread and no wine. They decided to proceed, using a corn tortilla as a symbol for the Body of Christ.

For the indigenous Mayans of Chiapas, bread is "kaxlan waj" or the "tortilla of foreigners." Bread does not hold the meaning that it does for us in the West, that is, as something that nurtures our hunger. But in Chiapas, the corn tortilla does. Among the indigenous Mayans, one doesn't eat, if the meal doesn't include tortillas. So at this Mass, celebrated under a plastic tarp in a refugee camp with a corn tortilla instead of the traditional wafer, the presiding priest invited those present to offer their prayers. An elderly man, with tears running down his wrinkled cheeks, said, "Thank you, God, for feeding me in your house."

Our unlikely connection to our Sister Parish in Chiapas, Mexico is, in the end, the response to God's invitation to sit at the table together, to make room in our hearts for all the people of God's family, to step out in "radical love" and risk relationship. Maybe that's what this Feast of Corpus Christi is all about. We celebrate this table where everyone - all of humanity, all of creation - has a place, everyone is fed, and everyone is at home.