

**Sermon200109**  
**Eucharist at SOSc Retreat**  
**Redemptrist Retreat Center, Tucson, AZ**

**Society Collect**

Almighty God, Creator and Redeemer of all that is, source and foundation of time and space, matter and energy, life and consciousness: Grant us in this Society and all who study the mysteries of your creation, grace to be true witnesses to your glory and faithful stewards of your gifts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**Colossians 1:24-2:7**

I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church. I became its servant according to God's commission that was given to me for you, to make the word of God fully known, the mystery that has been hidden throughout the ages and generations but has now been revealed to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone in all wisdom, so that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil and struggle with all the energy that he powerfully inspires within me.

For I want you to know how much I am struggling for you, and for those in Laodicea, and for all who have not seen me face to face. I want their hearts to be encouraged and united in love, so that they may have all the riches of assured understanding and have the knowledge of God's mystery, that is, Christ himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments. For though I am absent in body, yet I am with you in spirit, and I rejoice to see your morale and the firmness of your faith in Christ.

As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

**John 8:12-19**

Again Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' Then the Pharisees said to him, 'You are testifying on your own behalf; your testimony is not valid.' Jesus answered, 'Even if I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is valid because I know where I have come from and where I am going, but you do not know where I come from or where I am going. You judge by human standards; I judge no one. Yet even if I do judge, my judgement is valid; for it is not I alone who judge, but I and the Father who sent me. In your law it is written that the testimony of two witnesses is valid. I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.' Then they said to him, 'Where is your Father?' Jesus answered, 'You know neither me nor my Father. If you knew me, you would know my Father also.'

## Sermon

How many of you have a beloved mystery,  
 a question that troubles and delights you  
 because it provokes insights without ever being fully answered?

To be clear, this is not a perverse resistance to an answer.

I long with all my heart to know.

I just never seem to get there.

Nor is it just a poorly framed question like

“how many angels can dance on the head of a pin?”

Admittedly, that one may have had real value in the High Middle Ages,  
 when modal logic and Platonic Realism had more currency  
 than materialist physics.

No. A beloved mystery must be a question

sincerely meant and diligently pursued.

It is a quest.

My quest is this:

what is life, that I am mindful of it?

I am a biologist, so I’m concretely focused on the life we share

with animals, plants, and fungi, even bacteria –

the life of our bodies,

or, if you like, our metabolism.

I can’t be sure that there is a rigorous,

analytic or empirical answer to the question,

but I can’t avoid using the word, ‘life,’

so it must mean something to me.

Life has value.

And, I have come to suspect that life, metabolic life,

has serious theological implications as well.

Not some abstract mental or spiritual life,

but the concrete life of flesh and blood,

the bodily life Christ took on in Jesus,

and shared in bread and wine.

It is an ancient mystery,

asked around the world,

not just by Christians.

Why must we eat other living things?

Why can’t we, like plants, live off of light?

Why must we kill to eat and live?

It takes on special significance for Christians  
 in the Incarnation – God with us,  
 in the Eucharist – Christ’s body and blood  
 and in Church – membership in the Body of Christ.  
 These are metaphors, of course, but they are not just metaphors.  
 As with anything else in scripture,  
 it bears playing out literally before reaching too far into symbolism.

So, when we speak of the Body rooted in Christ,  
 and held together by the Spirit, the very breath of God,  
 what did that mean to Paul,  
 and what might it mean to us?  
 I cannot pass over this question as a theologian  
 without passing through it as a scientist.  
 The biological question turns out to be quite difficult to answer.  
 What is life?

What makes a body a body, and not just a lump of matter?  
 Every organism persists through time,  
 despite a constant turnover of matter,  
 cells and tissues, gained and lost,  
 formed and reformed.  
 It brings whole new meaning to *Ecclesia semper reformanda est*.  
 The body must ever be reformed.  
 The difference between living tissue and dead tissue  
 is not in its composition,  
 nor even in its origin,  
 but in its action and how it relates to other tissues.  
 The same is true, I think, of Christian life.  
 I do not live to myself or for myself.  
 I am not a Christian because my parents were Christians,  
 though my faith could not exist,  
 at least not in its present form,  
 had it not been passed to me through them.  
 I am not a Christian because I have been baptized,  
 though that act planted a seed in me.  
 I am a Christian because of my faith, hope, and love,  
 because of curiosity and community.  
 I did not make these things;  
 I was grafted onto them, and into them.

I was, quite literally, incorporated into the Body of Christ.  
     As I am fueled by bread and wine,  
     So I am fuel for the church,  
         I am accepted, transformed, and put to use.  
 It is an uncomfortable metaphor,  
     being so very common, so very material, so very... visceral.  
 I shy away from the baseness of it.  
 And yet, the more I look at the question,  
     the more I ask about God's metabolism,  
     the more I realize how fundamental this idea is scripture,  
         to faith, and to community.  
 I am dead to self, but alive in Christ.  
 I am rooted in Christ, the living water.  
 I am grafted onto the tree which is Christ.

And the mystery of life in Christ is the same as the mystery of metabolism,  
     because I am material and local,  
     just as God was material and local  
     and local bodily life is essential to who we are,  
     but they are not the fullness of who we are.  
 My physical, temporal self lives,  
     being part of something dynamic, persistent, and transformative.  
 My body lives because it is continually remade.  
 My church lives because is continually remade,  
     continually interacting with the world,  
     breathing in and breathing out.  
 It is not the frozen seed of isolationism, slowly consuming itself.  
 Nor is it the gluttonous blob of colonialism,  
     consuming all it meets while resisting change.  
 It is alive and real and,  
     though we cannot see it,  
     constantly changing into something new and wonderful.  
 And we, all the while, are growing with it.