

## 21ST SUNDAY OF THE YEAR - AUGUST 30, 1992 - BLESSED SACRAMENT

Two of the Scriptural passages we have just heard concern what we are doing here at this liturgy and provide us with an opportunity to reflect on an activity that is so familiar to us.

The Epistle to the Hebrews is an extended statement of the transposition of the old covenant which has been effected through the high priest of the new covenant, Jesus Christ. The ritual of Old Testament sacrifice is spiritualized, becoming the anticipatory type of the sacrifice Christ began on the Cross and completes in the eternal worship he offers the Father in heaven. The series of comparisons and contrasts drawn throughout the letter concludes with the one we heard today, between the impressive, indeed terrifying spectacle of the assembly at Mount Sinai at which Israel's covenant with God was struck, and the assembly of Christians. No longer terrifying, it is nonetheless impressive: "You have drawn near to Mount Zion and the city of the living God," only these are now interpreted to refer to "the heavenly Jerusalem." And the assembly is broadened out beyond living Christians themselves to include myriads of angels and the saints, the assembly of those first-born enrolled in heaven.

The text means that the worship we have gathered to offer to God does not involve only us. It is a moment in which we bring ourselves not only into this church but become part of the huge assembly gathered around Christ in heaven to give thanks to God. We say this every week, although perhaps we don't give much attention to it, when at the end of the Preface the priest asks God to join our praise with that of the angels and saints, and we all join in making our own the hymn to the thrice-holy God that Isaiah heard the angels singing. I don't suppose that we usually have much awareness of the larger dimensions of space and time of what we are doing here, but the tradition of thought and prayer that lies behind our worship today was aware of it. We are not alone in our worship of God, but are part of the long history and great assembly of those who were blessed by God before us, who are our mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, in the praise of God. It is the communion of saints, of people made holy by their common share in the holy gifts of God's word and grace.

If the Epistle reminds us of the transcendent dimensions of what we do here, the Gospel reminds us that they do not take us out of this world and that our assembly is supposed also to realize here and now the indiscriminate generosity of God's gift. When Jesus used banquets or meals for his teaching, the early Church always understood him to be referring also to what their meal-assemblies were supposed to be, especially what the Eucharistic assembly was supposed to reveal about who they were as a Church.

They are supposed first of all to be a community from which is absent the struggle for highest honors, in which is realized the overturning of values by which the first are last and the last are first. But their assembly and community is also supposed to transcend the *do ut des*, "I'll do it so you'll do it," mentality that too often limits human societies. Don't invite people who are likely to invite you in turn, Jesus says; invite without any hope of getting a return invitation. Bring in people whom other societies exclude: beggars, cripples, the lame, the blind. Give, in other words, without expectation of return. This is a call to be as free and gracious towards others as God has been towards us, for he has invited us into his family simply out of love, not seeking anything from us, but simply giving. St. Augustine had a wonderfully concise way of describing this utter gratuity of God's love: *quaerens cum nihil desit tibi*: you have gone in search although you lack nothing. God has sought us for our sake, not for his; and that is supposed to be the

model of our lives, individually and as a community.

In both readings, then, the bounds of this assembly are extended out--first out beyond those whom we can see, to include all the saints and angels, a vast communion of holy ones; and then out beyond those with whom we might wish spontaneously to gather, to include people rejected and marginalized by society. In both respects we are asked to be sure that the full dimensions of our Christianity are part of our consciousness, that in this assembly is realized a community as wide as is God's love of mankind, that in our assembly we keep in mind and live in the hope of the final assembly in heaven in which all who are saved meet as brothers and sisters before our common God and Father.