

The cleanup at ground zero in New York City ended this week. The rescuers there deserve our thanks. It must have been repulsive work at times. They cleaned up the wreckage of a building – that was hard enough, but they also removed the remains of the dead: bodies and body parts. Even with their meticulous work, many of the dead have not been identified or have not been found. At ground zero of a country seething with anger and wishing to make the world more secure, rescuers accepted a gruesome task and worked it with dignity.

One of the main teachings of the Catholic Church is the sacredness of human life. We believe the human body deserves respect from the womb through the bedroom to the tomb. We recognize the body of Christ in one another, and we treat that body with respect.

It is no accident, then, that our eucharist is the body and blood of Christ. It is the holiest presence of Jesus and it deserves our respect. The work of Christians is sometimes repulsive to others. We care for the unborn, the hungry, the sick and the abused. Our work puts us in touch with the deepest spiritual needs of humanity. We do it out of love for Christ. We find our strength for that work in the eucharist.

The eucharist itself sounded repulsive at first. When Jesus asked his listeners to eat his flesh, some quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” But Jesus insisted, “My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.” Drinking blood is not normal. It is behavior on the edge. It’s where Jesus wanted his followers to be.

Jesus promises good things to those who share the eucharist. He will raise them on the last day. They will remain in him and he in them. He will give life to those who eat and drink. To share in the eucharist is to take a risk; it subjects us to the ridicule of unbelievers. But it will unite us with the Father.

Sharing the body and blood of Christ is central to the Christian life. But it is not the whole of it. We don’t just receive communion; we live a life that promotes communion. We seek forgiveness from one another. We fast an hour before receiving communion. We share peace at mass, and we bring peace to others. We receive communion under both forms to partake of the body of Christ and of the blood of Christ, as Jesus asked. We support the food pantry. We invite those who do not yet share our faith to worship with us. And in many private ways we love the body of Christ in our neighbor and in the stranger.

Our work may not be as visible as the rescuers of ground zero, but it is as loving. We find those whom society has rejected and we love them because they are human beings, because they are the body and blood of Christ.