A few years ago, I read with fascination about the ancient tradition of a dancing procession that takes place annually in the town of Echternach in eastern Luxembourg. In the Middle Ages, there were many such dancing processions all over Catholic Europe that were like pilgrimages to ask the saints for prayers for healing or other favors, especially to ward off the plague or other horrible illnesses. Today, Echternach is the only town left with such a dancing event.

The procession there is in honor of St. Willibrord (658-739), an English monk who came to the continent of Europe to spread the Gospel in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. He was a very holy man who had the gift of miraculous powers and, when he died, his remains were interred in the monastery that he had founded in Echternach. The processions to ask for his intercession may go back to the very year 739 when Willibrord died.

Today about 15,000 people take part in the procession annually on the Tuesday after Pentecost (two weeks ago this coming Tuesday) – with another 10,000 or so watching in the crowd. It starts on the outskirts of town on a bridge over the River Sauer where a priest preaches a homily beneath a large and very old cross. Then the pilgrims proceed into the town dancing to a tune that sounds like an Irish jig. As they go, they hop back and forth on their feet left to right as they hold on to
the end of white cloths while the person next to them holds onto the other end. Their destination is at the church where St. Willibrord is buried and where they pray for whatever graces they need. The long day ends with Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The procession moves very slowly and, in fact, until after World War II, the dancing pilgrims were required to take three steps forward and then two steps backward – thus advancing only one step in the process.

How like the Christian life this is! Don’t we often feel like we are taking a few steps forward, only to fall back because of our sinfulness or some misfortune or blow that life deals us? How symbolic this traditional procession in Luxembourg is! And how hope-filled it is! The pilgrims keep going, no matter what. Nothing deters them. They trust in the power of prayer to St. Willibrord and they trust in the power of their Baptism symbolized by the white sheets they cling to. It is a phenomenon similar to the Corpus Christi procession that is traditional on this day, the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, a procession [that we will have once more here at St. Paul’s after this Mass] [that we had here at St. Paul after the 10:30 Mass this morning]. And we cannot walk with a more powerful Presence than the Holy Eucharist which is the sacred Body and Blood of Jesus Christ who never leaves us to walk alone.

Of course, the most important thing about the Eucharist is that we should receive it – that we take and eat it and drink it (as our Lord commanded us.) Of great importance too is to live out this sacrament – to break ourselves and pour out ourselves in loving service of others in imitation of Jesus who washed the feet of his disciples on the night before he died. Today’s readings, which are for this year
B of the three-year cycle of Sunday readings, focus on the precious Blood of Christ. The graphic description in the first reading from the Book of Exodus where Moses splashes the blood of bulls on the people reminded them of the serious nature of their relationship with God. The blood of bulls sealed the Old Covenant based on the commandments. The Book of Hebrews (our second reading) and today’s Gospel of Mark recall to us that it is nothing less than the precious Blood of Jesus that seals for us the New Covenant – the covenant based on the cross and the resurrection. As our Savior poured out his life’s blood in love, so are we called to do after his example. This living out of the Eucharist is especially crucial in our time and in our culture where there is such a great temptation to greed and selfishness and where there is terrible divisiveness in our country and the world – and even in the church. But it is also part of our Catholic life to celebrate the very Presence of the Holy One who has desired so much to be with his people until the end of time in the Eucharistic elements.

St. Willibrord was a monk of the early middle ages. A modern monk, Thomas Merton (1915-1968), wrote a prayer that I believe superbly sums up what it means to wrestle with God’s will as we try to be faithful to following Jesus on our Christian journey. You may be familiar with this prayer. It goes like this: “My Lord God I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that my desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope that I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.”

This prayer is so popular because it frankly acknowledges our dependence on God. We stumble and falter since it is hard for us to see the road we know we must travel. It is hard because of our weakness. But Jesus is our strength and if we trust him truly, we will reach the end of the journey back to God. It is the Jesus of the Eucharist who shows us the way. He is the one who brought the saints safely home. The saints, like Willibrord, guide us still in a procession of life eerily like the annual dance at Echternach. [Graduates, please have the courage to continue to dance the dance of faith and love as you move on from high school – and for your whole life! The Christ of Holy Communion will give you the grace along the way.]

In the Middle Ages, they danced for protection against the bubonic plague and other disasters. But in our time, we face a peril even worse – a culture that tries to strip us of our human dignity by seducing us into worshipping the false gods of individualism, local and global indifference to the poor, and sexual excesses like pornography. In the time of St. Willibrord, people erroneously thought God punished them for their sins with pestilence and famine. Today we are always in danger of forgetting what our sins are doing to us because we are in denial that sin is real, especially the sin of injustice. It is only Jesus who can gently but firmly jolt us back to our senses so that we can be saved from the plague of sin, which is worse than any disease. The Jesus of the Blessed Sacrament, the Body of Christ, walks with us, however haltingly and however slowly, throughout our holy
existence. Thomas Merton intuitively knew where he was going, even though the road was tough. We too know where we’re headed. We came from God and we return to him with the best companion imaginable – the precious Body of the Lord who is all we need as we dance in procession to eternity.