

The Feast of Corpus Christi

June 7, 2015

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi)

By Rev. James V. Schall, S.J.

Readings: Exodus 24.3-8;
Hebrews 9.11-15;
Mark 14.12-16, 22-26

What we call the Gulf of Mexico the early Franciscan missionaries named the Bay of Corpus Christi. The Texas city on its western shores still bears that name. The city of Sacramento in California is also named after the Blessed Sacrament. The Feast of Corpus Christi (technically, the Body and Blood of Christ) has ancient and medieval origins. It is traditionally celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, to reemphasize the Last Supper which was also on a Thursday.

The Feast, once held in Lent, later was placed after Lent to emphasize the Eucharist itself, the Body and Blood as really present. This desire to manifest the full meaning of the Last Supper is why the Feast of Corpus Christi is associated in many places with public processions that bear the Eucharist through the streets of a city or town. The most splendid of these processions is probably that found in the city of Orvieto in Italy.

Understanding What Is Believed

Catholics, in our faith, seek an understanding of what it is that is believed in each particular teaching. Our worship of God includes our proper understanding of what is, from the apostles, handed down for us to believe. At first sight, to maintain that the bread and wine consecrated at the altar are in truth the Body and Blood of Christ will seem impossible to explain. Moreover, not every explanation is satisfactory. Many theories make the Eucharist merely “symbolic” or poetic, not real. Most Protestant churches historically deny the Catholic understanding of the Real Presence of Christ in the Sacrament.

But the fact of the real Body and Blood of Christ under the “species” of bread and wine is not “unreasonable.” Its truth is a central teaching about Christ’s life and death. In the history of theology, almost every effort possible has been made to show this understanding is incoherent. On examination, however, every dissent and denial has led the Church to a deeper understanding of its truth and, as a consequence, of reality itself.

The gospel (A series) in the Mass for Corpus Christi recounts a passage from John 6. It is worth spending some time on this passage. “Jesus said to the Jews: ‘I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will *live forever*, and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for *the life of the world*.’” These words sounded like nonsense to the Jews who heard them. They argued with Christ about them. They wanted to know how this could happen. It seemed impossible. Yet the words have something to do with “living forever” and the very “life of the world.”

Here, Christ had a good opportunity to give the Jews a more technical explanation of what he was talking about. As such, there was nothing wrong with the Jews’ questions. Yet, Christ does not explain anything to them, as if to say: once you believe, you will understand.

Christ then takes a good look at the Jews present. He replies by restating the exact same fact: “If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man, and drink his blood, you will not have life in you.” He does not give them an argument. He states a fact. Take it or leave it. Christ adds that, if anyone does eat his flesh and drink his blood, that person shall be “raised up” on the last day. The disciples later recalled that he told them that he had to suffer but would be risen up again.

To the Inner Life of the Father

What does this passage tell us? First, there will be a “last day” which is related to eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ. At this point in John’s gospel, we still do not know of the Last Supper and its teaching about how this eating and drinking are to be understood and carried out. Christ does say, however, that “he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him.” Jesus affirms that he was sent from the “living Father” from whom he “draws life.”

Notice what is said here. A relation exists between our own lives and the life of Christ. The Eucharist brings us to the inner life of the Father. The Son, also true God, is sent to provide a way to the Father. Christ refers here to the manna given to the Chosen People in the desert, which is but a symbol of what is happening here. The manna did not prevent death, but he who eats “this bread will live forever.” Now it is obviously true that we are all to die and hence the judgment. What, then, is the relation between our death, judgment, and the living forever that we are promised?

This connection is what is supplied to our understanding at the Last Supper. Paul says in Romans 5 that “what proves that God loves us is that Christ died for us while we were still sinners.” Paul states that Christ’s dying for us while we were still “sinners” is what “proves”—note the word—that “God loves us.” This connection between God and us surely means that we are still loved by God even if we are sinners, which, if we look honestly at ourselves, we see that we are.

But if we are sinners and God still loves us, how do we return to God’s good graces? The point is that we cannot return by ourselves. Someone must first do it for us so that we are able to be reconciled with God and, hence, achieve the purpose for which we were created in the first place, namely, to have eternal life within the communion of the Trinity.

This brings us to the Last Supper. At this supper, the death of Christ the following day is prefigured and explained. Jesus tells the disciples that they are no longer his servants but his friends. He tells them that he loves them to the end. They are still not quite sure what he is talking about. He takes the bread, blesses it, gives it to each of them. He tells them that it is his Body. He takes the chalice, blesses it, tells them it is his Blood. Then he tells them that they are to do “these things” that he has just done, “in memory of me.”

The A Mass of *Corpus Christi* does not read from the gospel account of the Last Supper. Rather, it goes back to the conversation that Christ had with Nicodemus in John 3. He had told Nicodemus that he needed to be born again. Naturally, the good pharisee wanted to know how this was to be done, as he could not reenter his mother’s womb. This objection does not faze Christ. He tells an astonished Nicodemus: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son so that everyone who believes in him may not be lost, but may have eternal life.” Christ warns Nicodemus that the stakes are very high – the divide between losing and gaining eternal life is uncrossable by ourselves, or even by God as the parable of Dives and Lazarus tells us.

Christ then explains something to Nicodemus: “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but that through him the world might be saved.” Thus it follows that “no one who believes in him will be condemned, but whoever refuses to believe is condemned already because he has refused to believe in the name of God’s only Son.” These are remarkable lines. The world needed saving. It could not save itself even though it suspected that something was wrong. The world is not condemned by Christ’s purpose in it. It has a possibility of being saved, but that possibility, given in Christ’s death, must be freely accepted by each person. The consequences of not accepting are not pleasant. A person can still condemn himself; such is the freedom that not even God can or wishes to take from us.

Christ’s Sacrifice Present in the World

Put in these terms, what the Body and Blood of Christ are about is not just a small matter of understanding a teaching. It has to do with our very purpose for existing and God’s purpose in creating us. So at the consecration of the chalice at Mass, the priest says, in words we often hear but too seldom think about, this Blood “was shed for you and for many, for the forgiveness of sins.” Then the words follow: “Do this in memory of me.”

It is precisely this doing “in memory,” the Mass itself, that keeps ever present in the world Christ’s sacrifice. There is only one Mass, the sacrifice of Christ. Every time this rite is celebrated, it is the same sacrifice that Christ underwent from the supper to his death and resurrection. It is not something past or an imitation, but a making present of the single sacrifice of the cross. In the history of the world, only one Mass is celebrated.

This is how the admonition to Nicodemus is fulfilled. Unless you eat my body and drink my blood you will not have everlasting life in you. Now we see how Christ knew what he was teaching us. He left us words, yes, but also the very reality in which the bread and wine became his Body and Blood. His purpose in being sent by the Father could be accomplished in us through his sacrifice. We had but to believe and accept, yes understand, that our sins are forgiven not through us but by Christ’s sacrifice which he explained to us at the Last Supper.

The Feast of Corpus Christi draws our attention to the fact that Christ remains with us in the *Sacramento*, in the *Corpus Christi*. In doing so, it also reminds us that, when God does something in this world, it is serious business. We may take it lightly, but God seems to be quite serious. He gives Nicodemus and the rest of us no alternative between accepting and not accepting.

When Pope Benedict finished his great book *Jesus of Nazareth*, he had examined all the evidence and arguments that maintained that Christ was not who he said he was, the Son of God. Benedict concluded that the evidence is otherwise. Christ was who he said he was, the Son of God made flesh to dwell among us in this world. And his purpose? That our sins maybe remitted and that we may attain eternal life. It is not surprising, then, that the priest, about to receive communion, quietly says: “May the Body of Christ bring me to eternal life.” That is where this world and our own individual lives meet the origin of both in the Body and Blood of Christ.

About the Author

Rev. James V. Schall, S.J. taught political science at Georgetown University for thirty-five years. He is the author of numerous books, including *Reason, Revelation, and the Foundations of Political Philosophy* (LSU Press, 1987), *Another Sort of Learning* (Ignatius Press, 1988), *Idylls and Rambles* (Ignatius Press, 1994), *At the Limits of Political Philosophy* (The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), and *The Mind That Is Catholic* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

FOR FURTHER READING

Benedict XVI, *Homily for the Feast of Corpus Christi (June 7, 2012)*, available at:
<http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en>

Catechism of the Catholic Church ##1322-1419, available at:
http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s2c1a3.htm

Francis, *General Audience (February 5, 2014)*, available at:
<https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/>

John Paul II, *Apostolic Letter for the Year of the Eucharist, Mane Nobiscum Domine*, available at:
<http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en>

Rev. William Saunders, “*Is the Mass Really a Sacrifice?*” available at:
<https://www.ewtn.com/library/ANSWERS/REALLYSC.HTM>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***The world needed saving but could not save itself.***
- ***Christ’s dying for us while we were still sinners proves that God loves us.***
- ***The possibility of being saved, given in Christ’s death, must be freely accepted by each person.***
- ***There is only one Mass, the sacrifice Christ underwent from the supper to his death and resurrection.***
- ***The Feast of Corpus Christi draws our attention to the fact that Christ remains with us.***