

Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, Year A

Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14b-16a

Ps 147

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

John 6:51-58

In a few minutes we will celebrate the greatest prayer we have—the Eucharistic liturgy—and it’s always a consolation to me that the humble words I offer at this time don’t have to take centre-stage, but merely serve to introduce the supernatural graces given to us by God and passed on by the Church in the holy Mass. The Eucharist is the sacramental encapsulation of Christ’s self-offering on the cross, which we offer at every Mass for our various intentions and for those of the whole world. Now of course, there’s really only one Mass, which Christ offered once for all for our salvation, and we are joined to that one sacrifice each time we offer this sacred action that Christ asked us to do in memory of him.

In Gospel we’ve just heard, Jesus spoke of himself as “the living bread which has come down from heaven,” noting that “anyone who eats this bread will live for ever.” He then drives the point home by saying that the bread that he will give is his flesh, offered for the life of the world.

So Jesus declares that his flesh, his body, is the bread of life, and he says that to have eternal life we are to consume his flesh, to take his body into our bodies. Understandably, much of his audience starts grumbling, thinking that Jesus is asking them to become cannibals. Jesus was no doubt aware of this, and could have very easily put them at ease if he wanted to, but instead he doubles down and uses even stronger language: “I tell you *most solemnly*, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in you... for my flesh is real food, and blood is real drink.”

Right after this, many of his followers complained that this was intolerable language, and they stopped following him from then on. I don’t know if Jesus was deliberately trying to thin out his followers a bit, trying to see who really trusted him all the way through despite the confusing things he was saying. But there’s this lovely interaction with the Apostles right after this, as the crowd is leaving him in droves, Jesus asks them if they want to leave him too, and Peter replies on behalf of the others, “Lord, to whom shall we go? *To whom shall we go?* ... We believe; we know that you are the Holy One of God.” Though they clearly didn’t fully understand what he was talking about, the Apostles were fully committed – it was Jesus or nothing by this stage. And it is no coincidence that it was these very Apostles whom Jesus would entrust with the care of the Eucharist – with this very mystery of “eating his flesh” that so confounds his audience in our Gospel passage.

The strength of Jesus' language in this passage is a powerful argument for the truth of what we Catholics call the Real Presence in the Eucharist. After all, if the Eucharist were just a symbol, when the crowds started getting agitated Jesus could have easily calmed them down by clarifying what he meant. But instead, he insists that he's not just using symbolic language – that his followers will indeed need to “eat his flesh”.

And because the Apostles were prepared to see it through to the end, this exchange bore fruit, by helping them grasp the significance of what subsequently took place at the Last Supper. Had this exchange not been burned into their memory, when Jesus took the bread at the Last Supper and said, “This is my body,” they might well have thought it was indeed just a symbol. “Good one Jesus, you almost had us there, making us think we would actually have to eat your flesh!”

But because of Jesus' emphatic insistence that it is indeed his flesh that they would be eating—along with all the connections with the Passover Lamb that would be fleshed out (as it were) the following day at Calvary—the Apostles knew that this was no ordinary bread and wine they were being given on that original Holy Thursday. And though it would take some time for our theology of the Eucharist to be fully hammered out, the Apostles knew enough to know that it *had* to be the centrepiece of the communities they established in Christ's name following the Resurrection.

As the Church spread, the Apostles entrusted the Eucharist to their successors the bishops, who in turn appointed priests to act on their behalf. And thanks to this unbroken Apostolic line—and the sacred power conferred upon me and my fellow priests at our ordination—it is this same Eucharist that we are about to celebrate on this very altar.

As I take the bread and wine in a few minutes, and repeat the words of Christ—acting in his name—the barriers of time and space will collapse, and we will be face-to-face with the mystery that was prefigured in the Upper Room, and brought to completion upon the Cross.

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Now, as with many aspects of our faith, when things start getting a bit too abstract, it can be beneficial to turn to Mary, who helps ground our faith in bodily realities. So think of it like this: when the Virgin Mary carried the child Jesus—the second Person of the Blessed Trinity—within her womb, her body became a temple, the dwelling place of God. Well in a similar way, when we receive the Eucharist in a state of grace, we too carry Jesus within ourselves, and our bodies become a temple, the dwelling place of God.

If you think about it, our “Amen” in the communion line essentially echoes Mary's great “Fiat”—her great “Yes”—to God at the Annunciation. Gabriel the Archangel announced to Mary that God wanted his Son to make his home in her body—in her

womb—and she essentially said, “Let it be so.” And when the priest or deacon or Eucharistic minister says “Body of Christ”, he likewise is essentially announcing that Christ wants to make his home in your body, and when you say “Amen”, you’re essentially saying, “Let it be so.”

Of course, we have already been blessed with the ongoing spiritual presence of God in our souls through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit at our Baptism and Confirmation. But upon receiving the Eucharist, we have God *physically* present within our bodies, for at least a few minutes. The Church teaches that as long as the external signs of bread and wine remain, the consecrated species host the Real Presence of our Lord. So we generally say that for about fifteen minutes after we’ve received communion, we continue to have Jesus physically present within us, to say nothing of his ongoing spiritual presence.

So just as a pregnant woman offers hospitality to her child within her body for a period of time, so too after receiving Holy Communion we offer hospitality to Jesus Christ with our bodies for a period of time. And think about this – if a *pregnant woman* receives Holy Communion, her child and her Lord *share* her hospitality for a time, becoming roommates, as it were, within the temple of her body. Furthermore, the physical nourishment of the Eucharist enters into the mother’s bloodstream, and forms part of the nourishment that her body subsequently provides to her child in her womb. So if your mother was a practicing Catholic, in one sense you could say that your First Holy Communion took place while you were in the womb!

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The wonder and power of this most beautiful mystery that we celebrate at every Mass helps explain why we do much of what we do when we come to church. For instance, we go to our knees during the prayer of consecration, humbly acknowledging that we are now in the real presence of God. We dress with appropriate dignity at Mass, affirming to ourselves and to others that what happens here is something serious and important – indeed, that upon this very altar Heaven and earth shall meet. We spend a time of thanksgiving after receiving Holy Communion, reflecting upon and giving thanks for the amazing mystery that is now present within our very bodies. We genuflect to the tabernacle as we enter and leave the church, giving due reverence to the ongoing presence of God in the consecrated hosts.

And on this Sunday, the Church throughout the world gives particular honour to this divine gift, and declares in faith that Christ came not just for the precious few, but for the unwashed many – indeed, for the whole world. We affirm that the entire universe was made new by Christ’s act of redemption, and so we have this beautiful tradition of spilling out of the pews and carrying our Lord out into the neighbourhoods of our towns and cities, filled as they are with people for whom he too gave his life. And we follow along in joyful procession with the King of Kings, proclaiming in song his

divine wonder, and offering our gratitude for this gift that nourishes our deepest hunger.

It is this wondrous gift of Christ's real presence among us that we honour and celebrate on this feast of Corpus Christi. So I encourage you to cherish this gift, to hunger for it, and to never take it for granted. Receive our Lord with reverence, and let it truly be a glimpse of Heaven on earth.