

## CORPUS CHRISTI

### THE SOLEMN FEAST OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

*I am the living bread which has come down from heaven*

On Holy Thursday evening, during Holy Week, we gather to celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper. It is good to try to picture in our minds the scene as it is described in the Gospels, helped by the many ways in which the Last Supper has been depicted in great art, so as to be able to 'feel' our faith, as it were, and what it is that Jesus brought about on the night he was betrayed and which is given to us.

This Last Supper with the disciples was the occasion of the first mass. The holy mass celebrated each Sunday, and in most parishes every day, has been given to us personally by Jesus himself with the words *Do this in memory of me*. The divine worship of the Church is not something believers have designed, such as the beautiful carol service of Nine Lessons and Carols, but *received* from the Lord himself. For this reason, St. Paul, who was not present at the Last Supper since his call to be an Apostle came later, after the Resurrection, wrote in the first letter to the Corinthians,

*This is what I received from the Lord, and in turn passed on to you*

When we participate in the celebration of mass we *receive from the Lord* what has been passed down through the centuries. Hence, we see that the Eucharist is in reality *Jesus giving his very self to us* and a profound mystery of communion with God in Jesus Christ, through whom we come to God the Father in the Holy Spirit.

When we contemplate the scene at the Last Supper, we see a number of instructive aspects which help us to understand the full reality of what Jesus is doing and giving. First, he is in the midst of his followers who are gathered around him. In other words, Jesus is present; he is here. Secondly, he takes the cup of wine and the bread, and using sacrificial language referring to his forthcoming death, blesses them and declares *This is my Body, This is my Blood*. Jesus thereby identifying himself with the consecrated elements of bread and wine, in which he is truly present. Surely, such a gesture is truly extraordinary and amazing! The Church tries to capture something of this wondrous transformation in the use of the term *transubstantiation*. Thirdly, the disciples receive Communion from the Lord but do not treat the Eucharistic meal as a 'one off'. The early Christians were faithful to the command of Jesus to celebrate the Holy Eucharist. And so it is to this day and the end of time.

In the 'shape' of the Last Supper, we recognise three fundamental dimensions. The dimension of the presence of Our Lord; the dimension of the union of the sacrifice of Calvary with the Eucharist and the dimension of his giving himself to us as the bread of eternal life and so drawing us into the mystery of the Holy Trinity. These three dimensions are conveyed in the Gospel Reading for this Sunday, according to St John,

*I am the living bread which has come down from heaven ... and the bread that I shall give is my flesh for the life of the world. For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink... As I draw life from the Father, so whoever eats me will draw life from me. This is the bread come down from heaven not like the bread our ancestors ate: they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live forever.*

Could our Lord have been any more explicit than he was as to his meaning concerning the eucharistic mystery? Indeed, the second recorded celebration of mass is by the Risen Lord in the home of the disciples who encountered him on the road to Emmaus. They recognised Jesus present in the *Breaking of Bread*.

In today's feast of Corpus Christi, that aspect of the Eucharistic mystery we focus upon and celebrate is the real presence of Our Lord in the sacrament and this reality in the life of the Church and of believers. Holy Communion is reserved in the Tabernacle for the those who are sick, housebound and close to death, as viaticum, food for the journey, but also for prayer and adoration.

The sanctuary lamp placed near the Tabernacle draws our attention to *the Lord who is with us* and we make a genuflection in reverence and adoration to this wondrous presence. The mystery of Our Lord's presence amongst us is especially celebrated in the services of Benediction, Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and processions of the Blessed Sacrament. It is in this way that Jesus who ascended into heaven fulfils his promise *to be with us always until the end of time*.

The wondrous mystery of Our Lord *feeding us* and *being with us* shows forth God's love and desire to accompany us through life. Our response must be one of love and faith in God who comes so close to us and who works such wonders. We do so not only in church but also by recognising Christ's presence in those who are in need and need to be fed materially and spiritually.

*O Sacrament most holy, O Sacrament divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment thine*

**Fr Anthony**