

THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI

Today we celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi, the most holy Body and Blood of Christ. It is a feast which was instituted in the Catholic Church in the 13th century in Belgium, but its roots reach far back to Moses and the time of the Exodus, the journey of the people of God from slavery in Egypt. To understand the symbolism is important

God established a special Covenant or Agreement with His chosen people as a condition of their freedom from slavery. These ritual Covenants or Treaties were sealed by a bloody sacrifice, hence Moses, in the book of Exodus Ch 24, throws the blood of the sacrificial bulls over the altar and over the people as well. We remember this in the hymn,

'We holy people stand washed in your blood, spirit filled, yet hungry, we await your food'.

Because they were not faithful to the rules of the Covenant, God made them wait for 40 years in the desert but, as part of His continuing love and care, He fed them from a special food from Heaven – Manna.

When they finally passed over and settled into the Promised Land, they remembered and gave thanks in what was called the Passover Meal. This was the meal that Christ and His disciples were celebrating in the Upper Room on Maundy Thursday. Taking the elements of bread and wine, He transformed them into His own Body and Blood and then gave them back to be a continual source of nourishment for our souls. Our assent to this mystery requires an enormous act of faith. We trust the words of Christ, "This is my Body and this is my Blood" – and not a 'one off' event – "Do this in memory of me".

In the Passover meal the Jewish people remember to give thanks for God's saving presence with them. In the Eucharist, established by Christ, we not only remember to give thanks for God's saving presence but we make it real and alive once more when the elements of Bread and Wine are transformed into spiritual food for our souls.

St Paul, writing to the Hebrews, (Chapter 9) reminds us that now Christ himself is the new High Priest entering the sanctuary to offer sacrifice - **not** with the blood of bulls and goats, but with His own blood, shed in sacrifice for us upon the Cross.

He superceded the old Covenant sacrifice by a new and more effective Sacrifice in which he is both High Priest and Victim. God gave them Manna in the desert, God gives us Himself, Body and Blood, "I am the living bread which has come down from heaven, anyone who eats this Bread will live forever"

So, by a huge act of faith we believe that, following Christ's own instructions, when the priest utters the words of consecration, the bread and wine are changed into the real Body and Blood of Christ. Down through the centuries, that awesome moment has been embedded in diverse forms of prayers and liturgies that expressed,

protected and enhanced the sacredness, the specialness such a moment evokes. It is called the Mass or the Eucharist.

The problem was how to strike the right balance between having something which was loveable, amenable and user friendly whilst at the same time expressing the high worship it merits.

We got it wrong.

Initially, the specialness that was accorded to the sacred consecrated host, the Body of Christ, so far removed it from human experience, that fear, magic and superstition surrounded it. The Eucharist could only be celebrated on very rare occasions; you went to Holy Communion if you **dared**, perhaps once a year. Nobody could touch the consecrated host, except the priest and even then, his two fingers had to be kept joined until the end of the Mass. The belief developed that the host was so special that, instead of receiving it, it was sufficient just to look at it from a distance to receive the same graces and blessings, hence the priest would hold up the host at the Consecration just to show it to the congregation – and that was enough for them.

Wealthy people would pay the priest to hold up the host for a longer period of time - for the longer you gazed at it, the more blessings and graces you received. You had stories and legends of hosts dripping with blood. You knelt to receive the host as you knelt at the Altar rails and the server would place a silver dish under your chin lest any fragments of the host should break off. You had long fasts before going to Holy Communion. It was only from 1914 that children of the 'age of reason' (7 years?) were allowed to go to Communion.

Benediction, Forty Hours, strict processions and sacred music, visits to the Blessed Sacraments in silent prayer all made the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament a highly mystical phenomenon that was a treasured part of what it was to be a Catholic.

Then came the liturgical reformers who, after the Second Vatican Council and with the very best of intentions to make the experience and understanding of the Eucharist more amenable and user friendly to Catholics, slowly introduced a programme of change.

Out went the altar rails and the silver plate; you could chose to kneel or stand when you came to communion; you could touch the host, you could chose to receive in the hand or on the tongue; communion could be under both kinds and the fasting rules changed.

It would be disingenuous to deny that something very important has been lost and perhaps can never be recaptured again. No matter how sincere the intention, the reform has missed the mark and the meaning of the Eucharist has been diminished and impoverished. You can see it in some of the ways people receive Holy Communion. More often than not, young people these days, especially children, talk about the bread and the wine, not the Body and Blood of Christ.

To go to Communion, to receive the Body and Blood of Christ is essentially a spiritual encounter. To partake of a gift which was given in love - to participate in an intimacy that bestows Joy, Strength, Confidence, Healing and Peace. That abiding presence of Christ is a profound religious mystery. All religious mystery has to be approached and undertaken in a spirit of reverence and awe to protect it and make it effective especially in the words and the actions which surround it.

Perhaps, in the past, the effectiveness of the gift of the Body and Blood of Christ was diluted by it being **too remote** from us. In the present, it's effectiveness and meaning is being diluted by it being **too close** to us. We have lowered its impact as a religious mystery. Over familiarity can breed indifference.

So now, what can we do to restore its specialness to our consciousness? May I suggest the following: -

1. When you enter the church to pray or to come to Mass, consciously remind yourself that this is a very special place, the House of God. It is a place of Solemnity, Beauty and Peace where God dwells with us in a very special way in the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle on the altar. It is here that he meets us in the Eucharist.
2. Express this by a deliberate and conscious genuflection - or bow towards the Blessed Sacrament.
3. If you are going to Holy Communion make sure your hands are clean. If not, on that occasion, receive on the tongue. If you are wearing a glove, take it off.
4. Do not be chewing gum or sweets as you approach the altar.
5. When the priest or the Eucharistic Minister offers you the host with the words, 'Body of Christ', look at it, realise what it is and assent to it with the word 'Amen' (Yes, I believe). Always consume the host in front of the priest, not half way down the church. Likewise, with the Chalice and the words 'Blood of Christ'.
6. When you go back to your seat, sit or kneel and open up your heart to Him who is now in your heart.

It is only through a regular and conscious routine of devotion that is personal to **you**, that works for **you** that you can hold on to the deepen this religious mystery of God's presence with you and to you in the Body of Christ.

St Paul writes to his followers in the context of the gift of faith, he says, "You have been entrusted with something very special, guard it with the help of the Holy Spirit"

How much more with the Body of Christ.