

FOR MY FLESH IS REAL FOOD AND MY BLOOD IS REAL DRINK. (JOHN 6:55)



In the year 1263, a German priest, Peter of Prague, stopped at the town of Bolsena, north of Rome, while he was on a pilgrimage to Rome. Records indicate that Peter was a good, pious priest who strived for holiness. He was troubled by the apathy of many of the faithful; clerical immorality and laxity; and a lack of reverence at Mass. Worse, he was afflicted with doubt about the holy Eucharist. Like those in the Gospel, he asked himself, "How could this be? How can Jesus share with us His Body and Blood?"

He agonized over whether at the words of consecration the bread and wine became the Body and Blood of Our Saviour and whether Christ actually was present in the consecrated host. He knew well that the church believed and taught that the bread and wine were transformed into the Body and Blood of Our Lord at the consecration during the holy sacrifice of the Mass. Moreover, the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 had solemnly used the word "transubstantiation." Yet, he had trouble believing and prayed that the Lord would increase his faith.

The next day, he celebrated Mass at the tomb of St. Christina, an early martyr of the church. As soon as he said the words of consecration, the host began to bleed. Blood fell onto his hands and onto the corporal on the altar. He was awestruck and began to cry. At first, he was not sure what to do and tried to hide the blood, but then interrupted the Mass and announced what had happened. The congregation, too, was awestruck. He asked to be taken to see Pope Urban IV who was residing at the neighbouring town of Orvieto about 10 miles away.

Father Peter placed the host in the corporal and then wrapped both in another linen. Arriving at Orvieto, Peter told the Holy Father what had happened. Urban IV then ordered

an investigation. After all of the facts had been ascertained, the Holy Father declared a miracle had occurred. He ordered the relics to be brought to the Cathedral of Orvieto, which they were with a procession of great pomp and ceremony. The pope met the procession, and the relics were placed in the cathedral, where they are still be venerated today.

One year later, in 1264, Pope Urban IV instituted the feast of Corpus Christi, a special feast day to recognize and to promote the great gift of the Blessed Sacrament. He commissioned St. Thomas Aquinas to compose a Mass and an office for the Liturgy of the Hours honouring the holy Eucharist. St. Thomas Aquinas also composed the beautiful Eucharistic hymns "Panis Angelicus," "Pange Lingua," "O Salutaris Hostia" and "Tantum Ergo."

Today, at the Church of St. Christina in Bolsena, one finds the altar where the miracle took place, and the blood-stained stones of the miracle are preserved. The Cathedral of Orvieto possesses the blood-stained corporal as well as fragments of the miraculous host.

In 1964, to commemorate the 700th anniversary of the institution of the feast of Corpus Christi, Pope Paul VI celebrated the holy sacrifice of the Mass at the altar where the holy corporal is kept in the Cathedral of Orvieto. Then in 1976, Pope Paul VI visited Bolsena and spoke from there via television to the 41st International Eucharistic Congress meeting in Philadelphia, whose theme was "Jesus the Bread of Life." In his address, the Holy Father said the holy Eucharist is "a mystery, great and inexhaustible." How true, indeed.

After 3 months of not being able to receive the Eucharist, we look forward to the reopening of the churches, and eventually the celebration of public masses.

Eucharistic miracles such as that at Orvieto, at Lanciano, are given by God to help us deepen our faith in the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. This is necessary because what we draw from the sacraments if according to our faith in them.

When you can fly again courtesy of Easyjet and Ryanair, why not visit one of these shrines to the precious body and blood of Christ and ask as the apostles ask, 'Lord increase our faith'.

Mary, Mother of the church, pray for us!

Fr David Palmer

