

The Solemnity of Corpus Christi-A

We have come to the great feast of Corpus Christi, the feast of the Body and Blood of Jesus. This feast has its origins in an extraordinary event that took place in 1263. There was a priest called Peter of Prague making his way from his home city to Rome on pilgrimage. He stopped in the Italian town of Bolsena and there he was celebrating Mass. Peter was a pious man, but he harbored doubts about Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. It is said that during that Mass, after he consecrated the host, the host began to bleed; and the blood ran down his hands and arm and stained the corporal on the altar.

Needless to say, Peter was flabbergasted by this and ran to the nearby town of Orvieto where the pope was staying, Pope Urban IV. He knelt down before the Pope and confessed his sin of doubting the Eucharist and then told him his extraordinary story. The pope sent a delegation of cardinals to investigate. They found the corporal with the blood on it and brought it back to Orvieto. The pope was so moved by this report that he went out to meet the entourage and brought this corporal back to Orvieto. If you want to see it, it is in a side chapel of the Cathedral in Orvieto.

As a result, Pope Urban IV decided to establish a feast that would celebrate the real presence of the Lord and the Eucharist; and so the feast of Corpus Christi was founded.

Traveling with Pope Urban IV at this period was the greatest theological writer of the time, possibly of all time, St. Thomas Aquinas. The pope asked Thomas to compose texts for Liturgy of the Hours for the feast. The texts he composed are extraordinarily beautiful. They have been used by the Church ever since up to the present day. They are known for their great poetic beauty and for their theological exactitude. We can learn an awful lot about this feast and about the Eucharist by studying some of these beautiful hymns and poems that Thomas wrote. The best known is called the Pange Lingua. The second to the last verse of this hymn commences with the lines: ***Tantum ergo Sacramentum***. This is a song we sing on First Fridays at Benediction.

From the verses of this sacred hymn we can learn so much about what we are celebrating today. In the third verse of the Pange Lingua, Thomas says: ***cibum turbae duodenae se dat suis manibus***. This means: He gives himself as food with His own hands to the Twelve. Is there any more accurate way to express what the Eucharist is? Jesus feeds his disciples by His own hands with His own flesh. How moved we would be if the host at meal to which we have been invited would serve the meal himself with his own hands; if he came around the table to each person and serve you the meal. Christ did that and so much more; because the food that He served was Himself, His very body and blood—in Thomas' words He gives Himself by His own hands.

How did Christ manage to give such a gift? The next verse tells us—Thomas writes: ***Verbum caro, panem verum verbo carnem efficit***. That means: the Word made

flesh, by His word makes true bread flesh. I cannot imagine a clearer or more succinct statement of the Church's faith in the Eucharist.

Who is Jesus? Not one figure among many; not one prophet among many; **but** rather the very Word of God made flesh. And that Word is the power by which the Universe was created. What the Divine Word says **is**; comes into being. God's word does not merely describe, it makes, it constitutes. That is why Jesus can effect a change at such a fundamental level; making what is true bread into His flesh; making what is true wine into His blood.

Just as God the Father's word spoke the bread and wine into existence, so that same word can transubstantiate them; can change them at the very root of their being. That is why, as you know, the Catholic tradition has consistently maintained that symbolic language is inadequate to this reality. Jesus said Himself in John chapter six: my flesh is true food, my blood true drink. Thomas Aquinas sums up this tradition by saying **verbo carnem efficit**, by His divine word is the bread made flesh.

Yet, as we know, to all appearances we are still dealing with bread and wine. Look up at the altar, you see bread and wine even after the consecration. Thomas resolves this with the words: **praestet fides supplementum sensuum defectui**. That means let faith come forward to supply the defect of the senses. Mind you, the senses in the Eucharist are not deceiving us; for they are taking in what is there to be taken in. We say in our theology that the accidents of bread and wine remain. That means the appearances of bread and wine remain and our senses take in that appearance.

However, the senses do not reach to the deepest reality of what is observed. The only thing that can give us access to that is faith in the words of the one who is speaking. Let faith come forward to supplement what senses fail to perceive. Our senses fool us all the time.

And so, what is the effect of receiving such a gift as the Eucharist? We find that in the second to last verse of Panis Angelicus, Thomas says: **Panis angelicus fit panis hominum; O res mirabilis! Manducat Dominum Pauper, servus et humilis**. The bread of angels, made bread for men; O miraculous thing! The poor and humble servant can feed upon his Lord. The Eucharist allows us even now to participate in Heaven; that's its deepest meaning. It is like manna that has come from a higher world; from the realm of the saints and the angels, that place where God is being praised. And so from it we derive strength for our journey toward Heaven. That is why in his theological writings Thomas Aquinas refers to the Eucharist as **Viaticum**: food for the journey; and as **nutrimentum**, what nourishes us. From this flows that beautiful line: **Ecce panis angelorum factus cebus viatorum**. Behold the Bread of Angels, made the Food of wayfarers. Who are the wayfarers? It is you and I. It is all of us here below making our journey toward Heaven. What sustains us is this Bread of Angels; which gives us even now a participation in the life of Heaven. What a great gift we celebrate today!