

# Homily Corpus Christi 2014

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Today we are celebrating [both] the feast of Corpus Christi [the feast of the Divine Body, which is last Thursday's commemoration] [and First Communion for a several small baptized Christians]. The feast of the Divine Body/Corpus Christi began during the late middle ages in the western Latin-Rite Church in order to say as clearly as possible that Jesus' body and blood are really and truly- whatever "really" and "truly" actually mean- present in the Eucharist. It was a visceral and in a sense even playful attempt to say, "ok, guys, however we talk about the Eucharist, the one thing we really mean is that "Jesus is not just in your head. Jesus is not just present in your faith. Jesus is not just present in your memory. Somehow, Jesus is really and truly here outside ourselves, outside our heads, outside our feelings and thoughts. Somehow this Eucharistic bread and wine give us Jesus in whatever way *he meant* to give us himself when he celebrated that first Eucharist at the Last Supper.

We don't know how he does this, but we are convinced that this is what is happening every time we celebrate this "Mystery". Queen Elizabeth I, certainly no great theologian, did, however, express quite nicely both the mysteriousness of the Eucharist and its gift when she wrote, "*Twas God the word that spake it, He took the bread and brake it; And what that word doth make it, That I believe and take it.*" Maybe not enough, but not a bad place to begin in reflecting on the Eucharist.

The feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord was the late western medieval Church's attempt to celebrate and to emphasize the "giftness" of this sacrament- Jesus' gift of Himself to us through materiality of bread and wine. But like all pieces of the tradition, we need to ask how this feast and its teaching might be able to speak into our own world and our own context? How can we allow this feast to "speak" to us, to challenge us and to help us and to support us on the journey of faith in our own day?

I think it can do this because this feast is about "the body", and if there is anything which is contemporary and which we moderns and post-moderns are concerned with, it is *the body*. For good or ill, we are focused on bodies. Over the years I have heard Christians of various stripes whine about this new preoccupation and about how we are losing a sense of the importance of the soul, and isn't this all so terrible. Well, not really! If the accent on the body becomes disconnected from a sense of *who* I really am in our depths, disconnected from *me*, well then, yes, it is a problem. But we mustn't forget that there has always been a rather unfortunate strain within Christianity that has disconnected the body from the soul and acted as if the body were really a rather unfortunate hindrance to authentic spiritual life. We certainly have known "anti-body", "anti-material", and "anti-sexual" expressions of Christian thinking and living. And that, in its own way, is just as problematic as our current preoccupation with the body.

After all, we are Christians, and Christians believe that the eternal Son of God actually took on a body, that Jesus died in the flesh and was resurrected in the flesh, that God wants the salvation of this material world, that on the last day we will experience the redemption of the body, and that the Lord Jesus told us to eat and drink material bread and wine which he identified as his body and blood. We are Christians. We are not

“spiritualists”. And our goal is not to escape from the body, from matter, into some kind of non-material, non-corporeal, spiritualist realm. Our goal is to live God’s life, divine life, real life right here and now, in and with and under and through our bodies. In a real sense, I don’t “have” a body. I “am” a body- but a body with a divine purpose and meaning and goal.

So how surprising is it that the Christian community eventually created a feast of “the body”- the “divine body”- the body and blood of the Lord- as a way of naming and celebrating what is important and what we believe that God is concerned with, because if God is truly the creator of this world and of our bodies, if God willed to become incarnate, to be “enfleshed”, to work out our salvation “in the flesh”, and to promise the redemption of this material universe, why should we be surprised that the “spiritual food” Jesus gives us for the journey of life is bread-which-is-his-body and wine-which-is-his-blood?

The feast of Corpus Christi [the Divine Body] reminds us that we Christians are the real, the genuine materialists. To honor and to venerate the body of Jesus has concrete implications for all kinds of things. It tells us that what we do with our own bodies and the bodies of others is important. We should neither ignore or try to get rid of our bodies as if they don’t matter; nor should we use bodies as if they were only things in themselves without a relationship to *who* a body is. Today’s feast reminds us that God does not want us to engage in some sick, body-denying kind of religious life as if we were not material, sexual beings. It also tells us that God does not want us to use bodies in a promiscuous way as if they are merely objects. To deal with another human

being as *only* a means to an end, rather than as an end in him or herself, is to degrade and to demean that body.

The essential immorality of prostitution, for example, is not that it involves sex outside of marriage; the essential immorality of prostitution is that it involves one person *using* another simply as an object, and that object allowing him or herself to be used. And how often, when we are honest with ourselves, don't we all treat other people simply as objects to be used in one way or another. This can include how workers are treated in industry and business, how spouses can come to treat one another in a marriage, and how government bureaucrats and officials so easily begin to view the poor, the homeless and the sick merely as numbers, statistics, objects on some graph.

The feast of Corpus Christi [the Divine Body] tells us that the bodies of other people and of other creatures must always be treated with respect and honor. We can't honor the body of the Lord in the Eucharist and then treat the bodies of our neighbors or of the poor with contempt. There is an economic dimension inherent in the veneration of the Lord's body. My namesake, John Chrysostom, put it like this, ". . . don't think that it counts for our salvation if after we have stripped widows and orphans of their possessions, we then offer for the Eucharistic Table a gold and jeweled cup" and "you honor the altar because it receives Christ's body, but then you neglect beggars and those who are dying even though they are the body of Christ. When you see a poor person, you are looking at an altar, so don't just refrain from insulting him, but reverence that one, and stop anyone else from harming him."

The feast of Corpus Christi [the Divine Body] also tells us that when we venerate the body of the Lord, we are accepting the sacredness, the holiness of all matter, we are accepting the sacredness of this earth. We are not free to treat the body of this earth as if it were merely a machine or an object that we can exploit whatever way we choose. Today's feast reminds us that if God truly was willing to cloth himself in the materiality of his own creation, then we also need to treat the creation with respect and honor. Perhaps the greatest challenge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be our conversion to the realization that this material earth is not our "possession" and that we have a genuine, God-given responsibility to treat it as something sacred, as something holy.

The feast of Corpus Christi [of the Divine Body] can in our own day remind us that we Christians are the genuine materialists, that for us bodies are sacred places, places where redemption is being worked out, places where God is at work. In this sense, today's feast calls us and challenges us to take seriously what we say about creation, what we say about the incarnation of the Son of God, what we say about the redemption of the world and our own bodies. As we venerate the body of the Lord today, we need to think about what this means for how we pray, for how we celebrate liturgy, for how we engage in politics and economic life, for how we relate to other bodies, for what we do to other bodies, for how we treat this earth. I would challenge you purposefully and consciously to allow today's feast of the body of the Lord to influence, and perhaps to change, at least one way in which you deal with bodies in your own life. If we all do this, then we will truly and really be honoring and venerating the body of the Lord!