

June 19, 2022
The Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ

Genesis 14:18-20
Psalm 110:1, 2, 3, 4
1 Corinthians 11:23-26
Luke 9:11b-17

Today we are celebrating the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi* or the *Feast of The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ*. The purpose of this celebration is to joyously commemorate the institution of the Holy Eucharist by Jesus the night before He suffered and died. Not only do we remember what Jesus did for us long ago, but also on this day we are encouraged to reflect concerning in what way the Eucharist and the eucharistic covenant is intended to change our lives.

J.R.R. Tolkien once wrote,

Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament. There you will find romance, glory, honor, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves on earth.

His statement reminds us that participation in the Eucharist is more than just something that we corporately do out of obedience. It is also a private love affair. The Eucharist truly is indeed about Jesus and me, but it's also about Jesus and me and how I treat others. Hence the following question, how are we to fully enter the mystery of the Eucharist, and then what might the Eucharist expect from me?

To begin our discussion, let's pretend for a moment that we are a parent instructing our son or daughter concerning their forthcoming wedding and marriage. Hence, they may have any number of questions to ask, but what they really want to know is,

what will it be like, what will I experience, and what will be expected of me?

For them the details of the day will quickly fall into place and become secondary to the primary experience of being together with the one whom they love, but nevertheless, the details do matter. The chapel, the dress, the candles, the flowers, the sermon, the vows, the rings, the cake, they are all important and bi-products of culture and tradition. But here we might ask, what is still missing?

Obviously and for sure – God, but what if there were no people to witness the event, no ceremony, no celebration, no laughing or crying, no one to share the memories with, and no one to retell the story. Think about it, how would you celebrate such an event, an/or anniversary if friends and family were removed?

In many churches across the world the celebration of the Lord's eternal covenant with His people has become as benign, complacent, and private as a wedding with no one present where the bride and groom dressed in their everyday work clothes come to listen to a tape-recorded ceremony and then text message their vows to each other.

I know I am being a bit harsh and sarcastic, but unfortunately it is true. We've all experienced those memorable Communion services where we've left the building wondering, "Why did we do this?" Unfortunately for many Holy Communion has become just another thing they do once a week or once a month as a formality performed in regulatory obedience.

Hence, we might ask, why has this attitude invaded such a sacred and holy event? The question is historically complicated, but in simple terms the answer certainly involves institutional apathy, little or no instruction, and the loss of mystery resulting from secular humanism having crept into the church. Hence the reason the historical church endeavors to maintain official feast days to remember and celebrate these special occasions.

So then, why do we continue to set aside a special day to celebrate *The Body and Blood of Christ*?

In the western church, the impetus for an official *Corpus Christi* feast day had its genesis in the heart of one Juliana of Mont Cornillon in Belgium in the year 1193. Juliana was an Augustinian nun who from an early age held a special place in her heart for the Eucharist and therefore pined for a specific day of remembrance to celebrate this wonderful gift from the Lord. Her dream became a reality on September 8, 1264 when the Feast of Corpus Christi became an official feast day in the Roman Church.

In today's first reading from the Book of Genesis we are introduced to what many biblical scholars consider to be the first mentioned reference to the Eucharist in Scripture.

We enter the biblical narrative when Melchizedeck, King of Salem or *Shalom*, Priest of God Most High brought out bread and wine accompanied with a blessing to Abraham immediately after Abraham triumphed in a great victory over his enemies. After receiving the bread and the wine and the blessing, "Abraham gave a tenth of the spoil to him" Gen. 14:20).

Have you ever wondered why during the Mass and after the Prayers of the Faithful the priest always states, "Let us continue our worship with our tithes and offerings and gifts unto the Lord?" Well now you know the biblical reasoning behind that liturgical tradition.

Pre-figured as the Son of God, Melchizedek, the King of Peace initiated a celebration ceremony with Abraham consisting of bread and wine. Abraham in return responded to Melchizedek's gifts and blessing by giving a tithe of all he had gained. These gestures were and are thus considered to be a sacred sacrifice, a first fruits offering, and an act of worship in the context of renewing covenantal relationship with God.

The Bible offers yet another example of the Eucharist in the Gospel reading for today. In Luke 9:11-17 we read of an interesting account where Jesus fed a multitude of at least 5,000 men.

As the day was ending, the Twelve approached Him and said, "Dismiss the crowd so that they can go to the surrounding villages and farms and find lodging and provisions; for we are in a deserted place here." To their request Jesus said in reply, "Give them some food yourselves."

In other words, Jesus was here indicating that He would use His people to feed the bread of life and to nourish those hungry for the presence of God. Note how St. Luke illustrated some very familiar Eucharistic tenants in verse 16: Then *taking* the five loaves and two fishes, and looking up to heaven, He said the *blessing* over them, *broke* them, and *gave* them to the disciples to set before the crowd, and they all ate and were satisfied.

Jesus took, He blessed, He broke, and He gave. It is very interesting to note that this distinguished pattern is the 4-fold Eucharistic paradigm, which is demonstrated repeatedly in Scripture.

Liturgical scholars note that there is no doubt that this parable and the other crowd feeding parables in John's Gospel are none other than Eucharistic in origin. And when the leftover fragments were gathered up, they filled twelve wicker baskets" - one basket for each of the twelve disciples, noteworthy here is the tradition that the number 12 in the Bible is often associated with bread from heaven.

But what about the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, is Jesus truly physically present in the flesh. Here we can encounter an often heated and contentious discussion with theological positions often in direct opposition to each other.

Some say the Holy Supper bread and wine are merely figurative; in other words, they are elements to be used as a reminder or memorial and/or a remembrance celebrated out of obedience to Scripture. Please forgive me but celebrating Holy Communion adhering to this particular persuasion reminds me of the wedding with the tape recorder mentioned earlier.

Others would say that the elements of bread and wine are merely signs and/or symbols. They argue that they point to the real but are not in themselves real and true. (Try telling a new bride or her husband that her white wedding dress is unimportant or that their wedding rings are just symbols or signs and in and of themselves have no real meaning.)

Still others insist that the main focus of the Eucharist is the transubstantiation (a difficult to understand Roman theological term) concerning how and when the bread and wine become the body and blood of Jesus at the words of institution by the Priest.

All the afore mentioned statements may contain certain elements that are true, but I sense that there is something much more intimate here that the Lord would have us know concerning this Sacred Mystery, and it involves the formation of the people into one unified body of Christ.

Taking information from the Eastern Catholic Church, I believe that the heart of the matter in the Eucharistic rite primarily involves the transformation of you and me in and through a very real and personal encounter with the risen Christ in the Liturgy. In the Eucharist not only does the bread and wine sacramentally become the flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, but in addition, during the ritual and the ceremony, you and I are invited to become one with the Body and Blood of Christ as well.

Think about it, have we not been chosen by the Father to become the Bride of Jesus, the body of Christ? Here God will not force us to comply. We must willingly and humbly consent to His Presence, will, and action in our lives.

The Early Church clearly taught that it was in the gathering of the people to celebrate the Eucharist that we officially become the Church - the Body of Christ. Let me repeat that statement: The Early Church clearly taught that it was in the gathering of the people to celebrate the Eucharist that we officially become the Church - the Body of Christ.

Here we not only see the importance of our responsibility to gather together each Sunday, but also the importance of whole heartedly participating in the prayers and the liturgy.

As we grow more to appreciate what 1st Century Ignatius called the medicine or food of immortality, the theology behind a sacramental Eucharist and the necessity to invite others to join in the celebration become clearer and more urgent.

St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians in the 11th chapter reads, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes" (1Cor. 11:23-26).

In this letter to the Corinthians we learn that when we participate in the Eucharist we proclaim or declare, state or announce, affirm and glorify, and exalt the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus until He returns. Not only do we acclaim Christ, but we also acclaim in the most intimate way - that we are united to Him in holy union. In the Eucharistic celebration we offer to God our flesh and blood in a similar manner as He offers Himself to us upon the altar (see Romans 12).

Now there is much more we could say about this subject, but time prohibits, so we will save the discussion for another time. But what about the theological term transubstantiation. We hear the term often mentioned but what does it mean?

Concerning the topic of transubstantiation and being that we are an Old Catholic congregation we will reference the *Longer Catechism of the Orthodox, Catholic, Eastern Church* by St. Philaret (Drozdov) of Moscow (1830), where blessed Philaret states,

Transubstantiation is not a reference to the change itself—since none can possibly understand exactly how/when this takes place—but that it is merely a reference to our Lord being “truly, really, and substantially” present in the Eucharist. In other words, it is not a reference to metaphysical or nominalist philosophy (as with Aristotle, for example), but is speaking to the reality of the change, albeit as beyond our comprehension.¹

In other words, he is implying that from an Eastern Catholic in comparison to a western Catholic perspective transubstantiation is not so much about the how, when, and where, the bread and wine become the body and Blood of Jesus, but that Eastern transubstantiation theology is more fully embraces the mystery of the reality of the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist and what that mystery means for us who participate in it.

In participating in the Eucharist, as Easter Orthodox scholar John Zarzulas has stated, we *become* the Church or the Body of Christ. Subsequently, we might suggest that any definition of transubstantiation ought to include a discussion concerning the transformation of the gathered people along with the transformation of the bread and wine.

Why is that you might ask; because, the goal or purpose (the best words I could come up with) of the Eucharistic celebration is the co-union of the Son of God with His Beloved Bride in a covenantal renewal embrace. Furthermore, for that to fully happen there needs to be holiness and unity in the lives of the people rather

¹ <https://blogs.ancientfaith.com/orthodoxyandheterodoxy/2013/08/14/the-doctrine-of-transubstantiation-in-the-orthodox-church/>

than a constant debate as to what, or how, or if or what Jesus said is true or metaphor.

In closing let us remember four points. 1) When we gather to participate in the sacred Mysteries let us first examine our hearts and judge ourselves lest we be judged. 2) Let us confess our sins to God, and when appropriate confess to another. 3) Let us participate in the Eucharist with all sincerity and piety recognizing that we are indeed truly participating in the flesh and blood of our Lord and Savior. And then 4) Let us go forth from this place in unity - filled with the Holy Spirit to love and serve the world.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit .
Amen.