



The Holy See

HOLY MASS AND EUCHARISTIC PROCESSION
TO THE BASILICA OF SAINT MARY MAJOR
ON THE SOLEMNITY OF *CORPUS CHRISTI*

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Square in front of the Basilica of Saint John Lateran
Thursday, 7 June 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We have just sung the Sequence: "*Dogma datur christianis, / quod in carnem transit panis, / et vinum in sanguinem*" - this [is] the truth each Christian learns, / bread into his flesh he turns, to his precious blood the wine".

Today we reaffirm with great joy our faith in the Eucharist, the Mystery that constitutes the heart of the Church. In the recent Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* I recalled that the Eucharistic Mystery "is the gift that Jesus Christ makes of himself, thus revealing to us God's infinite love for every man and woman" (n. 1).

Corpus Christi, therefore, is a unique feast and constitutes an important encounter of faith and praise for every Christian community. This feast originated in a specific historical and cultural context: it was born for the very precise purpose of openly reaffirming the faith of the People of God in Jesus Christ, alive and truly present in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist. It is a feast that was established in order to publicly adore, praise and thank the Lord, who continues "to love us "to the end", even to offering us his body and his blood" (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 1).

The Eucharistic celebration this evening takes us back to the spiritual atmosphere of Holy Thursday, the day on which in the Upper Room, on the eve of his Passion, Christ instituted the Most Holy Eucharist.

Corpus Christi is thus a renewal of the mystery of Holy Thursday, as it were, in obedience to Jesus' invitation to proclaim from "the housetops" what he told us in secret (cf. Mt 10: 27). It was the Apostles who received the gift of the Eucharist from the Lord in the intimacy of the Last Supper, but it was destined for all, for the whole world. This is why it should be proclaimed and exposed to view: so that each one may encounter "Jesus who passes" as happened on the roads of Galilee, Samaria and Judea; in order that each one, in receiving it, may be healed and renewed by the power of his love. Dear friends, this is the perpetual and living heritage that Jesus has bequeathed to us in the Sacrament of his Body and his Blood. It is an inheritance that demands to be constantly rethought and relived so that, as venerable Pope Paul VI said, its "inexhaustible effectiveness may be impressed upon all the days of our mortal life" (cf. *Insegnamenti*, 25 May 1967, p. 779).

Also in the Post-Synodal Exhortation, commenting on the exclamation of the priest after the consecration: "*Let us proclaim the mystery of faith!*", I observed: with these words he "proclaims the mystery being celebrated and expresses his wonder before the substantial change of bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord Jesus, a reality which surpasses all human understanding" (n. 6).

Precisely because this is a mysterious reality that surpasses our understanding, we must not be surprised if today too many find it hard to accept the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It cannot be otherwise. This is how it has been since the day when, in the synagogue at Capernaum, Jesus openly declared that he had come to give us his flesh and his blood as food (cf. Jn 6: 26-58).

This seemed "a hard saying" and many of his disciples withdrew when they heard it. Then, as now, the Eucharist remains a "*sign of contradiction*" and can only be so because a God who makes himself flesh and sacrifices himself for the life of the world throws human wisdom into crisis.

However, with humble trust, the Church makes the faith of Peter and the other Apostles her own and proclaims with them, and we proclaim: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (Jn 6: 68). Let us too renew this evening our profession of faith in Christ, alive and present in the Eucharist. Yes, "*this [is] the truth each Christian learns, / bread into his flesh he turns, / to his precious blood the wine*".

At its culminating point, in the Sequence we sing: "*Ecce panis angelorum, / factus cibus viatorum: / vere panis filiorum*" - "Lo! The angel's food is given / to the pilgrim who has striven; / see the children's bread from heaven". And by God's grace we are the children.

The Eucharist is the food reserved for those who in Baptism were delivered from slavery and have become sons; it is the food that sustained them on the long journey of the exodus through the desert of human existence.

Like the manna for the people of Israel, for every Christian generation the Eucharist is the indispensable nourishment that sustains them as they cross the desert of this world, parched by the ideological and economic systems that do not promote life but rather humiliate it. It is a world where the logic of power and possessions prevails rather than that of service and love; a world where the culture of violence and death is frequently triumphant.

Yet Jesus comes to meet us and imbues us with certainty: he himself is "the Bread of life" (Jn 6: 35, 48). He repeated this to us in the words of the Gospel Acclamation: "I am the living bread from Heaven, if any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever" (cf. Jn 6: 51).

In the Gospel passage just proclaimed, St Luke, narrating the miracle of the multiplication of the five loaves and two fish with which Jesus fed the multitude "in a lonely place", concludes with the words: "And all ate and were satisfied" (cf. Lk 9: 11-17).

I would like in the first place to emphasize this "all". Indeed, the Lord desired every human being to be nourished by the Eucharist, because the Eucharist is for everyone.

If the close relationship between the Last Supper and the mystery of Jesus' death on the Cross is emphasized on Holy Thursday, today, the Feast of *Corpus Christi*, with the procession and unanimous adoration of the Eucharist, attention is called to the fact that Christ sacrificed himself for all humanity. His passing among the houses and along the streets of our city will be for those who live there an offering of joy, eternal life, peace and love.

In the Gospel passage, a second element catches one's eye: the miracle worked by the Lord contains an explicit invitation to each person to make his own contribution. The two fish and five loaves signify our contribution, poor but necessary, which he transforms into a gift of love for all. "Christ continues today" I wrote in the above-mentioned Post Synodal Exhortation, "to exhort his disciples to become personally engaged" (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, n. 88).

Thus, the Eucharist is a call to holiness and to the gift of oneself to one's brethren: "Each of us is truly called, together with Jesus, to be bread broken for the life of the world" (*ibid.*).

Our Redeemer addressed this invitation in particular to us, dear brothers and sisters of Rome, gathered round the Eucharist in this historical square.

I greet you all with affection. My greeting is addressed first of all to the Cardinal Vicar and to the Auxiliary Bishops, to my other venerable Brother Cardinals and Bishops, as well as to the numerous priests and deacons, men and women religious and the many lay faithful.

At the end of the Eucharistic celebration we will join in the procession as if to carry the Lord Jesus in spirit through all the streets and neighbourhoods of Rome. We will immerse him, so to speak, in

the daily routine of our lives, so that he may walk where we walk and live where we live.

Indeed we know, as the Apostle Paul reminded us in his Letter to the Corinthians, that in every Eucharist, also in the Eucharist this evening, we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (cf. I Cor 11: 26). We travel on the highways of the world knowing that he is beside us, supported by the hope of being able to see him one day face to face, in the definitive encounter.

In the meantime, let us listen to his voice repeat, as we read in the Book of Revelation, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me" (Rv 3: 20).

The Feast of *Corpus Christi* wants to make the Lord's knocking audible, despite the hardness of our interior hearing. Jesus knocks at the door of our heart and asks to enter not only for the space of a day but for ever. Let us welcome him joyfully, raising to him with one voice the invocation of the Liturgy:

"Very bread, Good Shepherd, tend us, / Jesu, of your love befriend us.... /You who all things can and know, /who on earth such food bestow, / grant us with your saints, though lowest, / where the heav'nly feast you show, / fellow heirs and guests to be".

Amen!

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