

"The Real Corpus Christi"

Homily of June 22, 2003

by Fr. Iomar Daniels

Adults are not alone in trying to understand today's feast, the Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi). Children find it very difficult to get their heads around this feast / sacrament, this idea of Holy Communion, of the Body and Blood of Christ.

A boy of three was intrigued by the Communion rite and watched every move of the priest until he finished wiping the chalice. Then the boy turned to his mother and said, "He's doing dishes, Mom.... Now can we go home?"

Kneeling beside his mother at Mass after she returned from taking Communion, a boy asked, "How does that pill taste?" Since she was praying silently to herself, she didn't answer. Then he tried again: "It's the kind of pill that puts you to sleep, Mom?"

And the misunderstandings are ecumenical! Another woman brought her grandson along for Episcopal services. The boy watched as the priest at the altar prepared Communion and said, "Look, Grandma... God is making Kool-Aid."

Today's feast, the Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi), causes many of us to scratch our heads wondering what is it all about. Because it smacks of a medieval thing, it reminds me of the triumphal processions through my hometown with not a thought for our few Protestant brothers and sisters and what they might be feeling. The focus was on the Blessed Sacrament, the Host. It reminds me of the film, "The Mission," when the missionaries enter the missionary land with the Blessed Sacrament held high in the monstrance as if it had some kind of magical powers to win over the natives, to automatically convert them. It was a big fuss, bringing the town to a stand-still. Today, it has become low key. The day of the public procession is gradually disappearing. Thankfully, there is greater sensitivity to other beliefs and other religions.

When this feast was originally presented to us it had a twofold intention. Firstly, it was intended to focus on the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Secondly, it was to focus on the Real Presence of Jesus in the world. Well, as we trace the history of Eucharistic devotion we can see that we became over-focused on devotion to the Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament. It is only in recent history that we have begun to move away from this lopsided devotion, to move away from a purely individualistic eucharistic piety to a more healthy communitarian understanding of Eucharist / Communion, to move away from unquestioned mystery to a fuller understanding of this sacrament.

You see, (And we should never forget this!) the Last Supper was a family meal. It celebrated a momentous event in Jewish history, the Passover, a great liberation event. It celebrated the Exodus which is a prototype of all liberation and redemption.

Before we got distracted by individual preoccupation with the Real Presence in the Blessed Sacrament, the early church understood that the Real Presence was in the People of God, in their brothers and sisters, in the flesh and blood of their neighbor, as well. St. Paul was advocating that they should leave behind their former way of life and enter into an entirely new kind of life. They did this. Their new life was counter-cultural. It meant sharing material goods and the subtle riches of faith, hope and charity. This lasted up until about the fourth century, when we can see a change toward individual and private piety and the magical focus on the actions and words of the Mass.

In a post-Vatican II church we are more aware that the great liberation is still going on. We recognize that it is not just about the "transubstantiation" of the bread and wine, of the gifts. It is also about the transubstantiation of the world about us. We must not forget that the Exodus was a slave revolt by marginalised people who had been driven into servitude under great oppression. We must not forget that the unleavened bread is a powerful sign of the bread of new beginning and that our breaking and sharing it is a call to us to be on the side of the poor. This Eucharistic gathering is a mirror held up to the world, a prototype of the solidarity, compassion and common effort that is intended in God's call to be for others. Just as God was involved in a conscience-raising campaign with the Israelite people, so too must we raise the issues of injustice and prejudice in our own community. Just as God is on the side of the poor and oppressed, so too must we be on their side.

As Gustavo Gutierrez was noted as saying, "This central act of worship is a prophetic gesture, because full communion with God and others is incompatible with any sort of injustice or exploitation. (Oscar Romero)

Can we, then, who share the Body and Blood of Christ today say (like the people in our First Reading) with one voice that "All that the Lord has said, we will heed and do?"

Can we say "Amen" to the Body of Christ that is this community, the people of God?

Can we, having received the Body and Blood of Christ, leave here to bring about the transubstantiation, the transformation, of the world we live in?

There is an inextricable link between what we celebrate here and social justice. Amen.