

“Corpus Christi”
Homily of May 29, 2005
by Father Brian Joyce

Today is the feast of Corpus Christi. One parishoner asked me last night why on earth are we celebrating the feast of a town in Texas? “Corpus Christi” is Latin for the “Body of Christ.” The title of the feast officially is “The Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ.” We celebrate the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, which has a long and interesting history.

On the night before Jesus died, we know that he gathered his closest friends and that they had a meal. We know that they shared scripture readings and that they sang hymns, or at least one hymn for sure, and at two different points during the meal, Jesus shared himself with them under the form of blessed bread and, sometime later, as blessed wine. And, then he said, “Now, you do this in memory of me.” And then we know that the earliest Christians followed that order. They did it in memory of him.

Now, the earliest Christians were Jewish. So, what they would do each weekend, on the Sabbath, they would go to the synagogue where there was a service that included scripture and a homily and general intercession, what we would call “prayers of the faithful.” And then, after the sun went down and the Sabbath was over, on what they would call Sunday and we would call Saturday night, they went to their homes for a sacred meal in memory of Jesus. That didn’t last too long. Before long, they took the two services and put them into one, and we ended up with the form and format of the Mass as we have it today, the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. And it has basically been the same for two thousand years since Christ’s Last Supper. But the styles and approaches have been radically different.

So, let me just give you two snapshots, in the history of the Church, of the celebration of the Body and Blood of Christ, or the celebration of the Eucharist. One snapshot I would describe, or label, as “Stand back.... Stand way back!” And the other one, which would be like the Last Supper itself, I would label as “Come together and join in.”

“Stand back. Stand way back....” That snapshot would cover really from the early Middle Ages up to when my own parents were growing up. First of all, in those days, unlike the Last Supper, people did not go to Communion. Period. The focus was not on their participation and sharing or doing anything but rather, it became, on watching, watching from the distance, looking at, rather than joining in the celebration. We have records of some very odd practices that developed, for example, priests would vie to see who could hold the host up the highest and the longest. We even had records in England, of people paying the priest to hold the host and chalice up longer. And people yelling from the congregation, “Hold it up higher, Father Brian, hold it up higher.” And, in popular devotions, ways

of celebrating were focusing on how to view the host. And popular devotions such as Forty Hours Devotion and Benediction actually became far more popular than the Mass it self, or certainly, than going to Communion. Stand back. Stand way back! I remember this growing up. The Mass was in complete silence. The priest had his back to us. It was in Latin where we could not understand the words, but we could watch, where very few ever went to Communion. My memory, growing up, as an altar boy, was that if you were at the ten o'clock or eleven o'clock or twelve o'clock Mass, nobody went to Communion. Nobody! And remember the bells! (I mentioned this last evening and, just as I got to the bells, a cell phone went off. So, the bells have been replaced by modern technology!) But, I don't know if some of you recall this, the bells were rung thirteen times, not just once or three times, thirteen times. And the priest had his back to us so we couldn't see it, but during what we call "The Eucharistic Prayer" he made sixteen signs of the cross over the bread and wine. And when people did decide to go to communion, earlier in the twentieth century, they saw communion as a magic moment separate from the Mass entirely. I remember during Lent. And part of this was people had to get to work or couldn't get there early enough, Communion was given out before Mass started and given out again after Mass. So people could drop in and receive a host and get on their way.

I was in Dublin, Ireland, in 1960. I went to weekday Mass in the middle of Dublin. The church was packed. The priest was saying Mass. They gave out Communion before Mass. They gave out Communion again during the Offertory of the Mass. They gave out Communion at Communion time, lo and behold, during the Mass, and they gave out Communion again at the end of Mass. While the priest was saying Mass, this was going on at the side and there was a steady line of most people just going to Communion, getting a host, and getting out! Stand back.... Stand way back!

Another snapshot, which I would date from the middle of the twentieth century, or, if you want, from early Christianity, "Come together and join in," where going to Communion has become the norm. After all, it is a sacred meal. Receiving both the forms of bread and wine has become the norm, and the Church teaches it is not a separate magic moment, but the presence of Christ as he was at the Last Supper, that Jesus is with us in the gathering. Where two or three gather in his name, when we first get together, if we do it in faith, the Risen Christ is present to us. And Jesus is truly present to us in the Word of Scripture, especially the words of the gospel and then in the most unique, marvelous way we have, in the consecrated bread and wine of Communion. "Come together and join in."

I'm going to use three phrases to describe Corpus Christi or the understanding of the Eucharist. One is very Jewish. One is very Italian and one is very American. The first one is very Jewish: "Body and Blood." Jesus says, "This is my body. This is my blood." And he is speaking Aramaic. It's a Jewish understanding of "body and blood," which does not mean one's flesh or one's bodily fluids. What it means when Jesus says, "This is my body. This is my flesh," he is saying "This is myself, given to you." And when he says, "This is my blood," he is saying, "This is my life, poured out for you." The Real Presence of Jesus is beyond chemistry and beyond biology and beyond anatomy, and even beyond the physical. The presence of Jesus transcends all of that. We believe that Jesus is truly present, really present, risen and alive. That's the Jewish phrase.

The second phrase is very Italian: “Cucina lenta.” It means “slow cooking,” a whole movement that started in Italy a number of years ago, in reaction to the fast food craze, to recapture the pleasure of sharing carefully prepared food in the company of family and friends as a social and relational moment that is essential for good human life. Cucina lenta, slow cooking. I think it should apply to the Eucharist too. Rather than coming to Mass just to get it out of the way, (arrive as late as I possibly can and leave as early as I possibly can) but rather to come and enjoy one another and spend time enjoying the presence of the Lord. I’m not suggesting that we have to have longer sermons. And I recognize there are times when we do end up being late or having to leave early. But the whole point of it should not be to get in and out of the parking lot and in and out of church as fast as I possibly can. Cucina lenta..... slow cooking.

And the last phrase is very American: “There is no such thing as a free lunch.” ...There is no such thing as a free lunch. When we come to Eucharist it is not to be entertained, even by the presence of the Risen Lord, but to give praise and thanks to God and to be changed by that and challenged by that. We give praise and thanks to God in Eucharist and hopefully we become different, and we become more a people and more a community, and we become more faithful witnesses to Christ in our world. I love the outline of Mass that the poet priest, John Shea, gave. Four things: gather the folks, tell the story, break the bread, and change the world. We gather the folks when we come together in the name of Jesus. We tell the story. We listen to our stories in Scripture. We break the bread and receive Communion and then we go out to change the world, or at least, little by little, to change ourselves.

So, Happy Corpus Christi, and I’m not talking about a town in Texas.