

“Corpus Christi”
Homily of June 18, 2006
by Fr. Brian Timoney

The feast of Corpus Christi, which is Latin for “Body of Christ,” brings many, many memories to me, and, strangely enough, they are memories that are also linked with my father. I grew up in the city of Galway in Ireland and there, on the feast of Corpus Christi every year, there was a great, great big long procession of the Blessed Sacrament. It started at St. Mary’s High School and wended its way right through the center of the city to the square and there there was a platform erected and benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. In the procession, the Bishop carried the monstrance with the host under a big canopy and alongside, marched army officers with their swords held up. And one of those was my father. Then, I was about nine, ten years of age and I had one of those, some of you perhaps, if you are old enough, may remember, the little square brownie cameras. And I had one of those and I had been running along the sidewalk, trying to get a picture of my father. Then, at the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament in the square, as the Bishop gave the Blessed Sacrament to all, the guard of honor of officers saluted with their swords while the bugles played a special, an Irish Army special salute to the Blessed Sacrament. They were the days of what we call now the “Triumphalist Church.” They are days that are long, long gone. They’re nostalgic, but we say goodbye to them.

Last week, Father Aidan said, in a certain sense, that having a feast of the most Holy Trinity was really unnecessary since the very concept of a Triune God is so very much part of our Catholic Christian experience. Well, I think the same could be said of this feast today. It is just in a way a duplication of Holy Thursday and, indeed, it is a feast that we have every single day, as we celebrate Eucharist. We cannot conceive of a Catholic Church without regular celebration of Eucharist, without regular reception of the Body and Blood of Christ under the form of bread and wine. It is so central to our Catholic Christian Church that, if we did not have Eucharist on a regular basis, we would not be a Catholic Church as we know it. We would be some form of Christians, no doubt, but not the one that we have traditionally called “Catholic.” As an aside, may I say that this is what I fear most from the shortage of priests in the Church today. Just having a communion service with hosts consecrated at a previous Mass is, in my opinion, no substitute at all for the celebration of Eucharist, although it seems to be what the Bishops are promoting. I think they don’t want to face the realities of the times. Well, having gotten rid of my own little personal agenda, let us talk now a little theology.

Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ.... What does it mean? Back in the mid-1500’s, the Council of Trent outlined the traditional doctrine that, under the appearance of bread and wine, Jesus is really, truly and substantially present. That is what we Catholic Christians believe. But

what does it mean? How does it come about? The understanding of the presence, the Eucharistic presence, is understanding that became standard with the Council of Trent. It was called by a big, big long name, “transubstantiation.” And it owes much to great theologians such as Thomas Aquinas. It’s interesting that he and others of his time drew on the philosophy of Aristotle, a pagan, to explain this deep, deep mystery of our Christian faith. And indeed I think it’s ironic that Aristotle became known to people like Thomas Aquinas through Islam. Muslims had conquered North Africa, had conquered Spain and in Spain, they came in contact with the Intelligentsia, you might say, of Western Europe. The philosophy, the Greek philosophers had been forgotten by western Europe, but Islam had preserved them. And so, God works in very strange ways. Isn’t that right? Very strange ways indeed.

Well, they used the terms of the philosopher Aristotle, and he used terms such as “substance” and “accidents.” They used that to explain the Eucharist. They taught what he called the accidents, accidents of bread and wine: the shape, the color, the taste, the smell. While they remained, the “substance,” (what made bread, bread, and what made wine, wine) was changed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. And we still hold firmly to that truth, but words such as “substance” and “accidents” do not resonate very well in modern times. Who talks about “substance” and “accidents,” you know? So, modern theologians have searched for other ways of trying to explain this deep, deep mystery, to hold onto the essential truth but to try to explain it in different ways. One of the ways that appeals to me is based on our own personal experience of relationships. If you could picture to yourself now, that you are in an elevator, high rise building, rush hour in the morning. Everybody is squeezed in there, very, very physically present to one another. But unless you are there with a friend, nobody talks. Everybody just looks at the numbers over the door. In other words, there can be real physical presence but no real human presence of one person to another. If you are there with someone you love, a friend or someone you love, it is a totally different experience. There, there is a relationship. There there is real presence of one human being to the other. So, you can have physical presence without any real presence. On the other hand, you can have real presence without physical presence. For example, you could be separated from people you love, your family, spouse, children all day long. You are in one office. They are somewhere else, physically not present, but very, very really present to you. Not just your imagination. It’s real, and is made more real if you have a sign of that person or persons, for example, if you have a photo in your wallet of someone you love. That makes it more and more real to you. So there can be a real presence without a physical presence.

Now, we cannot see or touch the physical body of Jesus Christ. You can’t feel him. You can’t touch him. But he can be very really present to us. How? Because he has given us the signs of himself. And remember, Eucharist is a sacrament, and sacraments are all about signs. And Jesus has given us bread and wine to be the signs of his presence among us. So, when we take bread and wine and say, “This is my body. This is my blood,” Jesus becomes really present to us, even though we don’t see him. It’s real. It’s true. And this is the doctrine and teaching of our Church, and it is this truth that matters, not the explanations of it that may be given by different theologians. Let them have their day. Let them argue. Let them talk. What we believe is the real,

true, substantial presence of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, It remains a mystery. Let's face it. We accept it in faith and he becomes really truly present because of the signs he gives us, because of our own faith, and because of his love for us. And the result is, for us as a Catholic Christian community, this binds us together. This is the thing that really makes us a community, a family. And, you know, it is significant, I think, that one of the most powerful bonding agents in a family is gathering around the table together for a meal. And that's the role the Eucharist plays in our Catholic Christian family.

I'm not here for myself alone today. You're not here just for yourself alone today. You're here, we are here, as the Body of Christ. We are here as the family of Catholic Christians. We are here to acknowledge in great awe and wonder what Jesus himself said and preached, "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you cannot have life in you. The one who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I raise up that person on the last day." We accept this humbly in faith. And, as I said, the explanations of theologians are really irrelevant. Christ present under the form of bread and wine is at the very heart of our Catholic Christian life. Without Eucharist, we are a sect, a sect of Judaism or a sect of Christianity or something. But we are not the traditional Catholic Church that has existed down through the ages. In the presence of this great mystery, in the presence of this great gift from God, our minds may be filled with all wonder, but our hearts are filled with thanksgiving and love. Amen.