

Christ Among Us

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

Eucharistic Theology

Saint Paul wrote his First Letter to the Corinthians about twenty years after Jesus died. The gospels came later, so Paul's account of the Last Supper is the earliest we have. He wrote, "I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (11:23-24).

That passage has led to three important beliefs that Catholics hold dear. First, the body and blood of Christ is made present under the forms of bread and wine. Second, this consecration takes place during the celebration of the eucharist when we do in remembrance of Jesus what he asked us to do. Third, the mystery of his real presence endures in these elements after the conclusion of the Mass. Some other denominations accept the first two of these beliefs—that Christ is truly present in the eucharist, and that the eucharist fulfills what Christ asked us to do. However, Catholics are fairly unique in our belief that the sacramental presence of Christ endures. We therefore secure consecrated hosts inside tabernacles in our churches, and we practice devotions pertaining to eucharistic reservation. We dedicate one day each year to this belief, the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ. Many people still use its former title in Latin, *Corpus Christi*.

The bible provides other foundations for this belief. Matthew, Mark and Luke all record similar words of Jesus at the Last Supper. In John's gospel, Jesus gives a discourse, in which he states, "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (John 6:54). Acts of the Apostles records Christians breaking bread on the Lord's Day.

Both biblically and traditionally, the primary activity expressing this belief is communion in Christ, eating and drinking his body and blood at Mass. Devotions associated with the eucharist derive from and lead back to communion.

Reservation Practices

Adoring Christ in the eucharist first took place within Mass. In the fourth century, for example, Cyril of Jerusalem encouraged those receiving communion to make a throne with their hands to receive the consecrated bread, and to bow to the chalice before drinking from it. In the fifth century, Augustine said no one should eat the body of Christ without first worshipping it. By the eighth century, at the end of the eucharistic prayer, the pope and the deacon were raising the vessels of the consecrated bread and wine.

In the Middle Ages, some doubted the real presence of Christ in the eucharist. The Catholic Church defended its position, and additional practices of adoration arose during Mass.

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For example, in the twelfth century, during the eucharistic prayer, as he recited the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, the priest lifted the host for the adoration of the people. Lifting the chalice began about a century later. Practices such as these produced an unexpected corollary: The faithful felt unworthy before the greatness of Christ, so they began receiving communion less and adoring the sacrament more. In 1215 the Church legislated the reception of communion at least once a year because many were not even doing that.

The origins of the feast of Corpus Christi go back to the visions of an Augustinian nun, St. Juliana of Liège, a city now in Belgium, in the early thirteenth century. The bishop there promoted the inclusion of Corpus Christi in the universal calendar, and Pope Urban IV obliged in 1264. He was living in Orvieto, Italy, due to civil unrest in Rome. Many believe that during a Mass in nearby Bolsena the previous year, a priest who had doubted the real presence of Christ lifted the consecrated host only to see blood dripping from it onto the corporal, the square cloth resting atop the altar. That cloth is on view today at the cathedral in Orvieto.

St. Thomas Aquinas is considered the author of hymns and the arranger of the office to be prayed on Corpus Christi. Eucharistic processions connected to this day developed first in Cologne shortly after Thomas's death in 1274. By 1316, Pope John XXII promoted processions to conclude the celebration of Corpus Christi. All of these developments connected eucharistic adoration to the celebration of the Mass.

Eventually, celebrations apart from Mass took shape. Christians began to adore Christ present in the consecrated bread whether it was housed in the tabernacle or exposed for more direct viewing. To demonstrate their belief, Catholics make a genuflection toward a tabernacle—lowering the right knee to the ground—when entering or leaving a church, passing by the tabernacle, or approaching it directly. For many centuries, whenever a host was exposed for adoration, believers entering and leaving the church made a double genuflection, kneeling briefly on both knees. That practice was removed from the liturgy in 1973; Christ is not any more present when the Blessed Sacrament is exposed. Nonetheless, many believers experience more intense moments of prayer when they can directly gaze upon a consecrated host.

Forty Hours Devotion was spreading in parishes around Europe. In the nineteenth century, St. John Neumann promoted it in the United States. In the early twentieth century, the universal Roman Ritual finally added an order of service to catch up with the practice in parishes.

After an opening Mass, the Blessed Sacrament was exposed for adoration and prayer, but also for preaching. Forty Hours Devotion often became a parish retreat with a guest speaker. The length of time adopts the number of hours that St. Augustine said extended from the death of Christ on the afternoon of Good Friday to the resurrection of Christ before dawn on Easter Sunday.

Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament concluded with Benediction. That ceremony ultimately became an independent celebration when the priest would

bless the people with the consecrated host. Especially during the centuries when the faithful received communion infrequently, this blessing became a highlight of their spiritual practices. Although many Christian groups in America today use “benediction” to mean the prayer a minister may offer at the end of a formal meal, for example, the word has meant something different to Catholics: the ceremony of eucharistic adoration and the blessing that concludes it.

Before the liturgical reforms, an outside observer comparing the celebration of Benediction and the celebration of Mass in a typical parish may have noted that Benediction inappropriately outshone the Mass in the number of ministers, the splendor of their vestments, the decoration of the church, the number of lighted candles, the use of incense, and the participation of the people in communal song. The Second Vatican Council authorized an antidote to these external practices, reminding people to keep their beliefs in order. Participation in communion at Mass was the first reason Jesus Christ left his body and blood under the signs of bread and wine.

The Reforms of the Second Vatican Council

Those reforms became enshrined in the 1967 Instruction on Sacred Worship, *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, issued by the Sacred Congregation of Rites. It opens with the words, “The eucharistic mystery is truly the center of the liturgy and indeed of the whole Christian life.” It urges the faithful to participate in the sacrifice of Christ and the sacred banquet of his body and blood.

The final section of this instruction deals with worship of the eucharist as an enduring sacrament. It stresses that the primary reason to reserve consecrated hosts remaining after Mass is communion for the dying. The secondary reason a source for adoration of Christ. The instruction also treats processions through the streets and eucharistic congresses.

Eucharisticum Mysterium appeared two years before the reforms of the Mass as it is now celebrated in Catholic churches. It provided the framework for the ritual book, *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery Outside Mass*. That book collected for the first time all the rituals pertaining to the usage of a tabernacle: communion services, communion to the sick, exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, eucharistic processions, and eucharistic congresses.

Ritual books such as this still appear first in Latin, the source for translation into vernacular languages. A revised English translation will be available in just a couple of months. It should remind Catholics about the best practices associated with their belief in the real presence of Christ.

For example, it outlines the ceremony many know as “Benediction”, now more properly called Exposition of the Most Holy Eucharist. The basic structure imitates that of the past. Although it may be celebrated entirely on its own, it is still conceived as something that follows the Mass, as we witnessed here today.

At that Mass, a sacristan has prepared two large hosts. The priest holds one in his hands, shows to the people, breaks into pieces, and consumes it at the altar. The other host he leaves unbroken throughout the distribution of

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communion to the faithful. The priest or a deacon then places that host inside a small glass container, called a luna or lunette because it resembles the moon. He places that container inside a larger highly ornate vessel, called a monstrance from the Latin word for “show” because it shows its contents to the people. The size and design of a monstrance make the vessel visually attractive, but its purpose is to draw attention to what it holds: the host consecrated at the Mass. The minister sets the monstrance on the altar in full view of the people.

After a period of adoration, music, and common prayer, the priest blesses the people with the host: He approaches the altar wearing a humeral veil, a lengthy, ornate cloth that stretches across his shoulders. He genuflects. Slipping his hands into pockets at the ends of the veil, or using the ends themselves, he grasps the monstrance, keeping the cloth between his own humble flesh and the sacred vessel. He raises and lowers host, then moves it from left to right, making a sign of the cross over the gathered assembly. That is the “benediction.”

The ceremony traditionally concludes with the recitation of the divine praises and the singing of the hymn, “Holy God, We Praise thy Name.” It will surprise many Catholics to learn that both those components have been missing from the official revised ceremony since 1973. Also missing has been a dialogue that most assumed was required: “You have given them bread from heaven, having all sweetness within it.” That comes from the Book of Wisdom, chapter 16, verse 20, and many have sung it as a prophecy for the eucharist.

The hymn, “Holy God,” is a setting of the *Te Deum*. That great hymn of praise is still sung as part of the Office of Readings in the Liturgy of the Hours on Sundays, solemnities and feasts, as well as on other solemn occasions—and it supplied the name of the excellent choir we are hearing today.

The divine praises were probably composed in Italian by the Jesuit Father Luigi Felici in 1797, in reparation for what he perceived to be blasphemies against the divine name. It begins, then, with “Blessed be God. Blessed by his Holy Name.” It praises the incarnate Son of God, Jesus, and his name. The original list immediately moved on to the praise of Jesus in the most holy Sacrament of the altar. Then it praised the great Mother of God, Mary Most Holy and her name, along with the titles of Virgin and Mother of God. It concluded as it does today, “Blessed be God in his Angels and in his Saints.” However, various popes added acclamations. Pope Pius IX added Mary’s Immaculate Conception in 1851. In 1897, Pope Leo XIII added praise of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus. In 1921, Pope Benedict XV added St. Joseph. Pope Pius XII added Mary’s Assumption in 1952. In the 1960s Pope John XXIII added praise of Jesus’ Most Precious Blood, and his successor, Pope Paul VI, added praise for the Holy Spirit the Paraclete to complete the list in use today.

The ceremony permits various ways for people to spend their time before the Blessed Sacrament. They may hear scripture readings, sing hymns, observe silence, and offer prayers. The revised English translation will include the divine praises as an option in its traditional place following the blessing and before the reposition of the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle. It will not include the

dialogue from the Book of Wisdom, though I suspect many places will still use it. “Holy God” may certainly be sung, but other hymns of praise may replace it.

Devotional Practices in Parishes

Some Catholic parishes have developed an admirable practice of establishing extended hours of adoration before the exposed Blessed Sacrament. At certain times throughout the day or night, people may drop in, spend a few minutes or an hour in prayer and then move on their way. In relay fashion, some adorers arrive as others depart. A continual stream of worshipers thus shares the space and prays not just for their own needs, but for those of the world.

Some churches offer perpetual adoration, that is the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament 24/7. This requires an extraordinary commitment from believers to present themselves for prayer even throughout the night. Some communities of vowed religious men and women dedicated themselves to the same purpose. We used to have Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration in Kansas City at Meyer Boulevard and the Paseo. When I was a child, my parents sometimes brought us to their Corpus Christi gathering with the bishop.

However, some Catholic parishes have begun practices that lack suitable attention. Exposition is supposed to include proper ministers, a congregation, incense, candles and music. But one can now find a surprisingly do-it-yourself approach to exposition, where people may enter a church, open the tabernacle or uncover a monstrance, pray for a while, and then put things back the way they were, as if they were switching on a light when entering a room and shutting it off before exiting. Because of our strong belief in the enduring presence of Christ in the eucharist, periods of adoration require certain liturgical protocols, and this self-service approach is not among them. People who wish to pray before the Blessed Sacrament individually more properly do so before a tabernacle.

The Roman Missal, speaking about the wondrous mystery of the Lord’s presence in the eucharist, says, “Christian people are led to worship this wondrous Sacrament through adoration in a special way on Thursday of the Lord’s Supper in Holy Week and on the solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ” (GIRM 3). The Evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday each year concludes with a transfer of the Blessed Sacrament from the sanctuary to its temporary place of reposition. On the solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, another procession is recommended. In the missal, this notice appears at the end of the pages treating every celebration of the Mass on Corpus Christi: “It is desirable that a procession take place after the Mass in which the Host to be carried in the procession is consecrated.” The local bishop is to approve street processions in order to ensure proper decorum.

Corpus Christi Today

Although we commonly speak about this day as “Corpus Christi,” its formal name is more prolix: The solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ.” That full title appears in the Missal, which then places in brackets two Latin words, “Corpus Christi.” “Corpus” means “body.” We use the same Latin

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word in some legal expressions like “*corpus delicti*” and “*habeas corpus*.” “*Christi*” is the genitive form of the word for “Christ”. It’s easier to pronounce the Latin word *Christi* than the English word “Christ’s,” so we use a genitive phrase. Finally, since Latin has no definite article, the English translation of those two Latin words requires four: “The body of Christ.”

When the calendar was revised in 1969, the traditional title of this day did not change. However, the revision removed a number of other observances.

For example, the former calendar had two feasts of the Precious Blood. The older one was among a group of seven celebrations pertaining to The Passion of the Lord. These were observed on Fridays each week from Septuagesima—three Sundays before Ash Wednesday—all the way into Lent. This particular office was composed at Sarzana, Italy, about the year 1750, in honor of what that local church believed to be a relic of the Most Precious Blood—not the sacramental blood of Christ as at Bolsena, but a few drops that Nicodemus himself collected from the gaping wounds of the dead Jesus and thoughtfully secured in a vial before placing the corpse in the tomb. For two centuries, this feast was observed on Friday of the fourth week of Lent, but it was removed from the calendar in 1961, just before the Second Vatican Council.

The second day honoring the Precious Blood, was July 1st. Pope Pius VII had instituted this in 1822 for a religious order known as the Congregation of the Most Precious Blood, on the request of their founder, Gaspar del Bufalo. We have members of that community here in our diocese. In 1849, Pope Pius IX extended this celebration to the entire Church, on the advice of his confessor, the superior general of the same Congregation of the Most Precious Blood. July 1st was the date that year when French troops put down the Roman revolution, restoring Pius IX to power after his exile in Gaeta.

The revisers of the calendar saw that devotion to the blood of Christ lacked historical weight. Every day honors the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord. And Corpus Christi already included references to the blood of Christ. The collect (or opening prayer) acknowledges “the sacred mysteries of [Christ’s] Body and Blood.” The new communion antiphon would cite John 6:57, where Jesus says, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me.” The prayer after communion speaks about the community’s reception of Christ’s “precious Body and Blood.” So, even though “Corpus Christi” technically means “the Body of Christ,” it also implies “the Blood of Christ.” For these reasons, the revised calendar suppressed the July 1st observance of the Precious Blood of Christ.

That decision provoked outrage. After the new calendar was announced in 1969, the elimination of the feast of the Most Precious Blood faced the strongest objection. The Congregation for Divine Worship received 367 petitions from eleven countries asking it to be restored. In 1970 the Holy See announced not so much a change, but additional words to re-title the former Corpus Christi as “The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ.” A commentary on the change appeared shortly afterward, stating, “In the revised Roman Calendar the solemnity of

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‘Corpus Christi’ is called the solemnity ‘of the Body and Blood’ of the Lord.” The article revealed that Pope Paul VI had announced this change on February 4, 1970, to a visiting group of Sisters of the Most Precious Blood.

Devotion to the Blood of Christ forced a change in the title of this day, which in English now takes eight words: the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ. That is the fuller expression of its meaning. But people still find it easier to say two Latin words: Corpus Christi.

Historically this feast was observed on the second Thursday after Pentecost. Surely the choice of Thursday was meant to recall the weekday associated with the Last Supper. Holy Thursday has so many themes to honor that it probably seemed appropriate to assign another Thursday to this central theme of the real presence of Christ.

However, at the time when the calendar was being revised, people thought this feast was so important, it should either be made a holyday of obligation for Catholics, like Christmas, or it should move to a Sunday, when a larger number of people would observe it. Some countries already had that permission. Today any conference of bishops may request the move. If they don’t, Corpus Christi automatically becomes a holyday for Catholics, when they are obliged to participate at Mass.

That still wasn’t enough. Some conferences wanted broader permission to choose a different time of year altogether. In the southern hemisphere, the second Thursday after Pentecost falls in winter, and some of the faithful there would have enjoyed a eucharistic procession in the time of year when flowers grow. They wanted permission to move the observance not three days, but six months forward. They never got it.

The Catholic Church has responded in various ways to Jesus’ declaration, “This is my body,” and his command, “Do this in memory of me.” Catholics have come to believe that Christ is among us in the eucharist. Of course, we are joyfully aware that Christ is among us in a variety of other ways—in the priests who celebrate the eucharist, in the gospel, which is Jesus’ word; and in the people, who are also properly called the Body of Christ, Corpus Christi.

These beliefs encourage us to spread the gospel, but they also give us confidence that we are not alone. When the world becomes a difficult place to live, we are comforted and emboldened by the message of the eucharist. Christ is not dead; he is risen. Especially in the eucharist Christ is among us.