Christ on Our Lips

The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Jesus Christ

Yesterday the Catholic Church in the United States celebrated one of its most sublime teachings, the real presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the eucharist. Both yesterday and today we hear concerts of sacred music that further illumine that teaching, inspire devotion, and sustain beauty.

The music associated with Corpus Christi comes from two sources of prayer— the Mass and the divine office, or the Liturgy of the Hours. The great thirteenth-century philosopher theologian St. Thomas Aquinas is most frequently cited as the author for this collection of words and music.

The Catholic Church revised its liturgical books and calendar in 1969, and this caused some changes to Corpus Christi. But it kept the core of what Thomas contributed 700 years earlier.

The Mass

Regarding the traditional Mass of Corpus Christi, we heard Te Deum sing several elements yesterday: The introit, gradual, alleluia, and sequence. These are changeable parts, also called the Proper, distinct from the Ordinary, which contains parts you hear at any Mass: the Kyrie, Gloria, Sanctus and Agnus Dei, for example.

The introit opens the celebration. Today it may be replaced with something else, such as a hymn. Usually the words come from the Book of Psalms, and they shed light on the day's celebration—or not. Some are quite generic. They all appear in the Roman Missal, the primary book for celebrating Mass. The Roman Gradual presents musical notation for these propers.

For Corpus Christi, the traditional introit remains in place. Inspired by Psalm 81, verse 17, opening with the Latin words *Cibavit illos*, it reads, "He fed them with the finest wheat and satisfied them with honey from the rock." The introit is "inspired" by that verse because the bible reports the voice of God promising rewards for those who heed his word: "Israel I would feed with finest wheat and satisfy with honey from the rock." Christians took this as a prophetic foreshadowing of the eucharist. Not only has God treated his faithful people with physical nourishment, but he has also provided the greatest spiritual food, bread that has become the Body of Christ.

The Gradual provides an additional versicle from the opening of Psalm 81, "Sing joyfully to God our strength, shout in triumph to the God of Jacob," and adds other verses, including God's invitation, "Open wide your mouth, and I will fill it." All this food imagery sets the context for the celebration.

The alleluias from the original introit still appear in the Gradual. However, the Missal removed them, as it more commonly attaches alleluias to antiphons in Easter Time, which ends with Pentecost.

We also heard Te Deum sing a choral setting of the gradual, *Oculi omnium*. The gradual followed the first reading. Today a responsorial psalm usually fills that slot, though the gradual may still be sung. *Oculi omnium* still serves on Corpus Christi. It also repeats on the twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, which preserves many of the chants formerly assigned to the Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost before the revision of the calendar in 1969.

The words come from Psalm 145, verses 15 and 16: "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand and satisfy the desire of every living thing." These verses share themes with the introit: God is the provider of food. However, they add a twist that surely pleases the ecological movement: God satisfies not only the needs of his faithful people, but "the desire of every living thing." All humans, all animals, all plants receive nourishment from the benevolent hand of God. Again, Christians have taken those verses as a prophetic utterance for the body and blood of Christ.

A sequence is a hymn for a particular occasion, added amid the readings at Mass. Today it precedes the alleluia that introduces the gospel. In the past, the sequence followed the alleluia. Hundreds of these exist, but only four remain in use, and two of those are optional. All were composed in a brief span in the Middle Ages, and three of them within 80 years. *Lauda Sion* is the longest of the four, and the revised liturgy offers a shorter version, which we used at Mass yesterday—but this entire sequence may be omitted.

The singers address the city of Jerusalem, Sion, inviting it to praise Christ for "the Bread today before you set," the same bread that Christ shared in Jerusalem at the Last Supper. The sequence continues, "What he did at supper seated, Christ ordained to be repeated, His memorial ne'er to cease…. This the truth each Christian learns, Bread into his flesh he turns, To his precious blood the wine." The breaking of the bread does not divide Christ, but all who share even part of the bread consume the whole of Christ.

The final section opens with a surprising reference to animals: "See the children's bread from heaven, Which on dogs may not be spent." Here Thomas alludes to the passage in two gospels where Jesus attempts to dismiss a Canaanite woman's request for the healing of her daughter with the reproof, "it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs" (Mark 7:27 ll Matthew 15:26). (Spoiler alert: Jesus does come to the rescue.) In the sequence, the food of angels is given to faithful children. It concludes with a prayer to Christ: "You who… on earth such food bestow, Grant us with your saints… Fellow heirs and guests to be." This sequence may be sung during any exposition of the Blessed Sacrament.

The traditional alleluia versicle is John 6, verses 55-56: "For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." This is a highlight from Jesus' discourse on the bread of life. It undergirds belief in the real presence of Christ in the eucharist and the practice of holy communion.

That versicle changed in 1969 when the scripture readings for Corpus Christi expanded to rotate across a three-year cycle. The new versicle does not change from year to year. It offers John 6, verse 51, and it identifies the speaker, as do many antiphons in the missal: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven, says the Lord; whoever eats this bread will live forever." The change spotlights one of the "I am" statements Jesus makes in John's gospel, connecting him with the revelation of God's name to Moses at the burning bush.

Two other Mass chants are the offertory and communion. Although we are not hearing those for Corpus Christi at these concerts, they complete the vision of the day's key scripture verses. The revised liturgy changed them both.

The original offertory was Leviticus chapter 21, verse 6: "The priests shall offer incense and bread to God, and therefore they shall be holy to God and not profane his name, alleluia." That verse implies that priests need to avoid their default behavior of profaning God's name. The revisers clearly wanted something more expressive, and they offered a choice from two already serving other days.

The first is Psalm 78, verses 23 through 25: "He commanded the clouds above, and opened the gates of heaven. He rained down manna to eat, and gave them bread from heaven. [Mortals] ate the bread of angels." This repeats the offertory for the Wednesday after Easter, where it is still found.

The second option is based on events in Exodus chapter 24, verses 4-5, which present Moses as a responsible priest: "Moses consecrated the altar to the Lord, offering holocausts upon it, and slaughtering victims: he made the evening sacrifice into an aroma of sweetness to the Lord God in the sight of the children of Israel." This chant had been sung on the Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost. Most of the chants for that day are now on the Twenty-fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time, including this offertory—except in Year C of the lectionary cycle. On that day the Gradual exchanges this chant with another one from the Eighteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time, or the former calendar's Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost. That chant also comes from Exodus—but chapter 32 with verses 11, 15, 13 and 14 in that order. It features Moses appealing for God's mercy on the people. Moving this chant into Year C puts it on the Sunday featuring the parable of the prodigal son. Since the Eighteenth Sunday gave up its offertory in Year C for the benefit of the one from the Twenty-fourth Sunday, the Twenty-fourth Sunday gives its antiphon to the Eighteenth Sunday that year. The repetition of the Corpus Christi chant still happens on a summer Sunday in Year C not because of tradition, but only to plug an open spot.

The communion antiphon has also changed. The traditional chant quotes 1 Corinthians, chapter 11, verses 26-27: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord." The antiphon in the revised missal comes from John chapter 6, verse 56: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." The antiphon adds, "says the Lord," to identify the speaker. Verse 27, which cautions against receiving communion unworthily, is

entirely missing from the revised lectionary. It used to be among the readings both on Holy Thursday and on Corpus Christi, and the drafts of the revised lectionary kept it that way, but the verse was removed at the very end. Perhaps it was an attempt to foster reception of holy communion, rather than to dwell on reasons to abstain. Considering that devotion to the eucharist increased during the Middle Ages when reception of the eucharist was dwindling, the omission of verse 27 both from the lectionary and from this communion antiphon may have tried to chart a corrective path forward. People now hear the words of Christ himself promising to remain with those who eat his body and drink his blood.

The Divine Office

The divine office is the source for the rest of the Corpus Christi music you are hearing in these concerts. For major celebrations such as this one, the office begins the previous evening with first vespers, continues the next day with matins and lauds, offers middle hours of prayer, continues with second vespers, and concludes with compline or night prayer. This single day of prayer offered an amazingly beautiful array of words and music.

The traditional hymn for both first and second vespers is *Pange lingua*, which still appears there in the revised Liturgy of the Hours. The words invite the tongue of the singer to praise the hidden mystery of Christ's glorified body and precious blood, which he gave his followers as food and drink at the Last Supper. When human senses cannot perceive the change, faith brings assurance.

The final two verses are even more popular, beginning with the words *Tantum ergo*. These are almost always sung just before the benediction that concludes eucharistic adoration. The chant melody is well known, as is a strophic hymn. In the past, *Tantum ergo* frequently accompanied the procession at Forty Hours Devotion, and the missal still concludes the Holy Thursday liturgy with it. As a thurifer swinging incense leads the way, the first four verses may be repeated until the procession reaches the tabernacle. Then the final two verses are sung during the incensation of the Sacrament and its reposition. That surely influenced the choice of the same hymn for incensation of the Sacrament near the close of other periods of adoration. In the Catholic Church, you can gain a plenary indulgence for the remission of all your sins under the usual conditions when you sing *Tantum ergo* on Holy Thursday or on Corpus Christi. Singing opens the gate to heaven.

At matins, which was sung in the wee hours of the morning, the traditional hymn is *Sacris sollemniis*, and the Office of Readings still recommends it. The hymn recounts the events of the Last Supper and recalls the charge Jesus gave priests to offer the sacrifice. In its final two verses, it marvels at the bread of angels shared among the lowly. Those verses begin with the words *Panis angelicus*. We heard Palestrina's setting yesterday; César Franck's version is a standard among popular solo and choral music. The entire hymn is still recommended for eucharistic processions.

At lauds one finds the hymn *Verbum supernum*. In the revised liturgy, it still is the recommended hymn for morning prayer. The first four verses profess the

coming of the Word made flesh, who gave himself as food to his disciples, died to ransom sinners, and reigns as their reward. The final two verses address Christ, the Victim who brings saving grace, asking him for strength against foes. In close, the singers give praise to the entire Trinity.

Those two last verses, beginning with *O salutaris hostia*, traditionally open a period of adoration during exposition of the Blessed Sacrament. Yesterday Te Deum sang a setting by Vytautas Miškinis. Traditionally, the presider swings incense toward the Sacrament during the last verse. The entire hymn was also part of eucharistic processions on days such as Corpus Christi or within Forty Hours devotion, and it still may be used that way.

The magnificat is Mary's hymn of praise, recounted in Luke's gospel in the moments after the angel announces she will become the mother of the Savior. It is sung every evening of the year within vespers. A changeable antiphon frames the canticle. For Corpus Christi, the traditional antiphon remains in place. The words are some of the most sublime in the divine office, *O sacrum convivium*. Yesterday Te Deum sang them in Visitation Catholic Church, where some of the words adorn the ceiling over the sanctuary where the singers stood. The words use the literary form of an apostrophe, where the speaker may address an object, even without a complete sentence, as when Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote, "Thou glorious sun!" or Sir Walter Raleigh declared, "O eloquent, just and mighty death!" or when Juliet seizes the weapon from the newly deceased Romeo and addresses it: "O happy dagger!"

Here is the new official English translation: "O sacred banquet, in which Christ is received: the memory of his Passion is renewed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us." This used to reappear in the service of holy communion outside Mass, whether for the healthy at church or the sick at home. It still may be used at the beginning of the distribution of communion to the sick.

Other music not featured on these two days of concerts is also associated with the procession of Corpus Christi. *Salutis hominæ sator*, was used as the hymn for lauds and second vespers on the feast of the Ascension of the Lord. This hymn exists in variations, and the revised liturgy chose a version it considers authentic, *Iesu nostra redemptio*. It is now recommended for both first and second vespers of the Ascension. The hymn is addressed to Jesus, who suffered for sinners, ransomed them, and sits at God's right hand. It asks him for the same pardon over sinners today. This hymn may still be used in eucharistic processions. As people adore the enthroned host, they pray to the enthroned, ascended Christ.

***Æterne rex altissime* is the hymn for the office of readings on the Ascension, and traditionally the last hymn for eucharistic processions. The revised liturgy uses a more recently curated version. The words address Christ, the Redeemer King, sitting on the Father's right, ruling over all, whose sacred flesh overcame the sins of human flesh. It prays for pardon and redemption.**

Adoro devote **is a hymn Pope Pius V inserted into the Missal in 1570 as a prayer of thanksgiving for a priest after Mass. It also has been attributed to Thomas Aquinas and has been used in celebrations of Benediction. Among the variants, the accepted one comes from the critical edition of André Wilmart, an early 20th-century French Benedictine medievalist and liturgist. The words express the believer's experience beholding Christ in the Eucharist.**

Ubi caritas **comes from the Missal's Holy Thursday Mass during the washing of the feet. It summons the members of the community, gathered in the love of Christ, to love God and to love one another. The recent critical edition of the hymn is the work of the 20th-century philologist and medieval Latinist Karl Strecker. The opening line, familiar to many as "*Ubi caritas et amor*," has been edited as "*Ubi caritas est vera*," that is, from "Where there is charity and love" to "Where true charity is." The same hymn is recommended for the Blessing of a Religious House in the United States' edition of the Book of Blessings (720).**

This rich collection of music has inspired believers over the centuries. Its poetry, artistry, and reliance on scripture and doctrines have made it a treasured part of chant repertoire. The words have inspired other choral and instrumental compositions that draw out other meanings from these timeless words for people in different cultures and ages. Yet, as we are experiencing in these two days, the original chants of Corpus Christi retain their impact.

Although music as an art form is satisfactory in itself, for believers, music serves an additional purpose in prayer. Music evokes transcendental experiences that can augment individual and common piety. The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy famously summarized this in 1963: "The musical tradition of the universal Church is a treasure of inestimable value, greater even than that of any other art. The main reason for this pre-eminence is that, as sacred song united to the words, it forms a necessary or integral part of the solemn liturgy…. Therefore sacred music is to be considered the more holy in proportion as it is more closely connected with the liturgical action, whether it adds delight to prayer, fosters unity of minds, or confers greater solemnity upon the sacred rites. But the Church approves of all forms of true art having the needed qualities, and admits them into divine worship."

Music, therefore, puts Christ on the lips of believers—words spoken of him and words he spoke. Music prepares for and celebrates holy communion, the oral reception of the Body and Blood of Christ. This belief is commemorated in a special way each year on Corpus Christi, when we adore Christ among us, and receive Christ on our lips.