

Corpus Christi

14 June 2009

Jn 6.47-58

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In the last decade of the 12th century, a baby girl was born in Belgium whom the Church would come to know as St. Juliana. An Augustinian nun, and already deeply devoted to adoring our Lord present in the Blessed Sacrament, she one night had a vision of the Church represented as a full moon, but a full moon marred by one dark spot. St. Juliana understood this dark spot to represent the absence in the Church's devotion of a special feast day to commemorate the institution of the Lord's Supper – also known as the Holy Eucharist, the Blessed Sacrament, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, the Holy Communion. St. Juliana's importunate witness to – we will not to say *nagging of*, but *importunate witness to* – a string of bishops and popes resulted in the Feast we keep to today:ⁱ *Corpus Christi*, the Body of Christ, and which is of course the Feast of Title for this parish, the Church of the Holy Communion (no dark spot in *our* full moon).

That Corpus Christi is our Feast of Title makes it for us a kind of birthday celebration, an excuse for a party, or at least a no casseroles-barred covered-dish dinner and ham-o-rama. But it also gives an opportunity to consider for a moment or two those things which are at the heart of our identity, who and what God is calling us to be and to do.

For it does seem that many parishes are established with a name chosen more or less by lot – “well, we haven't had a St. Alfred's in a while” – or with some idiosyncratic insight of the founding personality. For instance, I served as rector of the Church of St. Joseph of Arimathea in Hendersonville, Tennessee – a very fine parish with very fine, dear, saintly people. But the bishop at the time of the parish's founding named it for Joseph of Arimathea because the founding members began the church by meeting on Sunday mornings at the local country club, and they were, for the most part, country club sorts of people. And the gospel writers tell us that Joseph of Arimathea “*was a rich man who was looking for the Kingdom of God.*”ⁱⁱ

But this is not the Church of the Holy Communion because of the luck of the draw or as an ironic commentary on its founding members, but because of the theological conviction animating its founding. This parish was founded under the leadership of blessed Anthony Toomer Porter as part of a movement – a movement of recovery of the catholic tradition within Anglicanism. And at the center of the catholic tradition is the Holy Communion, the “source and summit”ⁱⁱⁱ of Christian devotion and living – the conviction that Jesus Christ, who gave himself *for us* and “for the life of the world” on Calvary's Cross, gives himself *to us* in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. “*I am the Bread,*” he says in St. John's Gospel, and “*and the bread which I give for the life of the world is my flesh; ...my flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.*”

The Holy Eucharist as source and summit of Christian life and devotion. It is tempting to want to make an argument for that conviction – to cite some texts, to pile up some premises, to draw some conclusions, to offer some analogies. And there is certainly a place and time for that kind of intellectual scrutiny, even of the Blessed Sacrament.

But there is also a danger which must be carefully avoided in going down that road. Because the faith of the Church is not in a set of propositions, ideas, and symbols. It is in the eternal and triune God, who in Jesus Christ became flesh and dwelt among us. And he was known not by philosophy – “*the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning*”^{iv} as St. Paul and the prophet Isaiah put it – but rather was he known by eyes and ears and outstretched hands. “*That which we have heard,*” St. John begins his first epistle, “*that which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands ... that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you.*”^v

That same God-Man, the Word-Made-Flesh, in the night in which he was betrayed, left us not an argument or analogy or symbol or any other abstraction, but rather a memorial of himself which is himself: “This is my Body... This is my Blood... Do this.”

There is a danger that in trying to understand and explain a thing, we lose the thing itself. And to substitute an abstraction, an idea, for the Blessed Sacrament is to lose Christ Himself. The thing to do, then, first and foremost and always – and even as we seek to explain and understand – the first and foremost and always thing is to worship and adore. And, by the way – but only by the way – it is in worship and adoration that we come to know and understand. As St. Gregory of Nyssa instructed, “Ideas create idols; only wonder leads to knowing.”

Just yesterday I read that in the 1970’s Dorothy Day, co-foundress of the Catholic Worker Movement, invited a young priest to come and celebrate Mass at the Catholic Worker house. Of course it was the 1970’s, an era of liturgical innovation and experimentation (and here I pause to allow the boos and hisses from the reverend clergy to subside), and the young priest, wanting to be with-it and “relevant” asked Ms. Day if he could borrow a coffee cup. She found a mug in the kitchen and gave it to him, and he used it in place of the chalice at Mass. Immediately following Mass, Day took the coffee mug, found a garden trowel, and went in to the back yard. Kneeling down, she dug a whole, kissed the mug, and buried it. Without qualification, and without abstraction, and by way of wonder and adoration, Dorothy Day knew and understood the reality of that Presence under cover of Bread and Wine, and she knew that that ceramic mug could never be an ordinary coffee cup again.^{vi}

Well that was a coffee cup used as a chalice. But what about you and me? Having been fed with Christ’s Body and Blood, having been blessed by Jesus present among us – what is to become of us? Can we be ordinary again? Or will we become what God’s grace in the sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood, the Holy Communion, has made us: the living Temple of his Presence – his loving, healing, transforming, life-giving Presence in the world, for life of the world.

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ⁱ <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04390b.htm>

ⁱⁱ Mt 27.57 & parallels

ⁱⁱⁱ “Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the *fount and apex* of the whole Christian life, [the faithful] offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with It.(6*) Thus both by reason of the offering and through Holy Communion all take part in this liturgical service, not indeed, all in the same way but each in that way which is proper to himself. Strengthened in Holy Communion by the Body of Christ, they then manifest in a concrete way that unity of the people of God which is suitably signified and wondrously brought about by this most august sacrament.” *Lumen genitum* (“Vatican II”, 1964). *Emphasis added.*

^{iv} Is 29.14; 1 Cor 1.19

^v 1 Jn 1.1-3

^{vi} This story via the Rev’d Dn Greg Kandra (deacbench.blogspot.com)