



SOME HISTORY - Fr Andrew Hamilton sj

Corpus Christi focuses on Christ's presence under the form of bread and wine. This focus was shaped by disputes within the Church in the Medieval period when the Feast began.

In Europe at the time the religious beliefs of some groups called for deliverance from material things into the world of spirit. They dismissed Catholic sacraments in which God was seen to work through material things such as water, bread, wine and oil. These groups were focused in local areas and were seen as a threat both to the rulers of Europe and to the Church. Crusades were launched against them with great savagery.

For Catholics the presence of Christ in the transformation of bread and wine became a central emblem of true faith and a rallying call. They found

support in miracles where the Eucharist was seen to be turned into Christ's human flesh and human blood.

The Feast [Body and Blood of Christ] itself was first celebrated in the 13th century, inspired originally by the mission of Julien of Liege, a Religious Sister. The great theologian Thomas Aquinas, whose hymns on the Eucharist are still sung, lent support to the campaign. The feast began locally, and the Pope of the time made it available for the whole Church. It encouraged reverence in church where the consecrated host was preserved in a prominent place for worship and for ceremonies like Benediction where it was the focus of attention. It also became a proud statement of Catholic identity. Processions of the Blessed Sacraments took place in towns where Catholics were a majority, and more recently huge public celebrations during the Eucharistic Festivals have showcased the universality of the Church.

For many Catholics such devotions deeply nourish their faith and they continue to have an important place in the Church. As in other aspects of Catholic life, however, different periods call for different emphases.

Over the past century, and particularly in the Second Vatican Council, the Church has emphasised more strongly the presence of Christ within the community, which Paul called the Body of Christ. In this vision all Catholics are active as well as receptive in the celebration of the Eucharist. It has also given strong weight to Christ's action in the Eucharist. Christ is present, not simply in the consecrated bread and wine, but as the one who forgives, speaks, feeds, gathers together and makes present his offering on the Cross.

In this fuller understanding of the Eucharist Christ is present in the bread and wine because he is active in the Church. In the Eucharist he calls us to prayer and reverence. He also calls us to follow his way in feeding the poor and giving spirit to the excluded and in taking up our own cross.

The Feast of Corpus Christi is a feast of its time. It is also a Feast for every time that encourages us to pray, to wonder at Christ's continuing gift to us through his presence and his continuing activity, and to follow him in giving ourselves to those in need.

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THE HOSPITALITY OF GOD

Eucharist is the celebration of the hospitality of God, shared by guests who commit themselves to become fellow hosts with God.

A blessing is always expected to make the one who receives it the source of a blessing for others; it is not expected to come to rest on its recipient and to end there ... one is not blessed at the expense of others.

Monika Hellwig The Eucharist & the Hunger of the World

Before a Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia, Pedro Arrupe SJ, who was the Superior General of the Jesuits (1965-1983) reflected on the Eucharist and hunger:

In the Eucharist, Jesus becomes the voice of those who have no voice. He speaks for the powerless, the oppressed, the poor, the hungry. In fact, he takes their place. And if we close our ears to their cries, we are shutting out his voice too. If we refuse to help them, then our faith is indeed dead as St James (2:14-17) tells us so clearly:

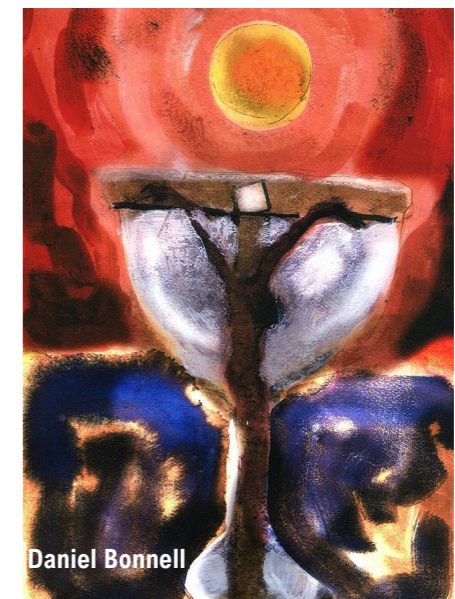
If one of the brothers or one of the sisters is in need of clothes and has not enough food to live on and one of you says to them, 'I wish you well; keep

yourself warm and eat plenty,' without giving them these bare necessities of life, then what good is that?

If there is hunger anywhere in the world, then our celebration of the Eucharist is somehow incomplete everywhere in the world ... In the Eucharist we receive Christ hungering in the world. He comes to us, not alone, but with the poor, the oppressed, the starving of the earth. Through him they are looking to us for help, for justice, for love expressed in action. Therefore, we cannot properly receive the Bread of Life unless at the same time we give the bread of life to those in need wherever and whoever they may be.

FROM LAUDATO SI'

It is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation. Grace, which tends to manifest itself tangibly, found unsurpassable expression when God himself became man and gave himself as food for his creatures.



The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours.

In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living centre of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life. Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God.

Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love: "Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world".

The Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation. The world which came forth from God's hands returns to him in blessed and undivided adoration: in the bread of the Eucharist, "creation is projected towards divinisation, towards the holy wedding feast, towards unification with the Creator himself". Thus, the Eucharist is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation. (LS 236)