

# May 25, 2008 – Corpus Christi A

## LESSON: The Real Presence: Introduction

During Pope Benedict's **recent visit** to the United States, he had a meeting in Washington DC with leaders of different religions.

- ✍ During that meeting, he encouraged everyone present not to be afraid to speak about **the real differences between the different religions**.
- ✍ He said, "Dear friends, in our attempt to discover points of **commonality**, perhaps we have shied away from the **responsibility** to discuss our **differences** with calmness and clarity." (Papal Address to Interreligious Leaders, April 17, 2008)

This applies not only to different religions, but also to different **denominations** of Christianity.

Unless we clearly and calmly recognize our **differences**, and then **work through them**, we will not be able to return to **full unity** among all Christians.

One of the **biggest** differences between the Catholic faith and the different **Protestant** Christian denominations (like Baptists, Methodists, and Evangelicals),

- ✍ is connected with the great mystery of the **Eucharist**,
- ✍ which the whole Catholic Church, throughout the world, celebrates in a special way today,
- ✍ the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, "Corpus Christi."

There are **three things** we should always keep in mind about this wonderful sacrament: **what** it is, **how** it happens, and **why** Christ gave it to us.

## ILLUSTRATION: Part I: What It Is

The Catholic Church has always believed and taught that Jesus Christ is **really, truly present** in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

- ✍ This makes the sacrament of the Eucharist the **greatest** of all sacraments.
- ✍ Here's how the Catechism puts it:
- ✍ "In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, **the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained**" (#1374).

That means that the Eucharist is **not** just a **symbol** of Christ's presence.

A symbol **points** to a reality,

- ✍ like the **paschal lamb** in the Old Testament pointed towards the lamb of God in the New Testament, Jesus Christ,
- ✍ or like an **exit sign** on the **freeway** points towards a road or a town.
- ✍ Most **non-Catholic** Christians believe that the Eucharist is like that, just a symbol of Christ's presence, not the real thing.

But as Catholics we know that Christ is **not** just **symbolically** present in the Eucharist, he is **truly, really** present. (Orthodox Christians also believe this.)

- ✍ That's what makes the Eucharist a **sacrament**, instead of just a **symbol**.
- ✍ This is why St Paul, in today's **Second Reading**, calls Holy Communion a "**participation**" in the body and blood of Christ.
- ✍ And this is why **Jesus himself**, in today's Gospel Reading, repeats six times - **SIX times** - in just **seven** verses, that his flesh is **real** food and his blood is **real** drink.

Every time an ordained priest pronounces the **words of consecration** at Mass - when he says "this is my body... this is my blood" - Jesus himself, in a mysterious, sacramental way, becomes **truly present** under the appearances of bread and wine.

This is what Jesus taught, and this is what Catholics have believed since the very dawn of the Church.

## Part II – How it Happens

And so, **every time** Mass is celebrated, whether on a battlefield, in a hospital, in the jungle, or right here in our parish church, a **real miracle** occurs.

- ✍ Just as Jesus turned **water into wine** at the wedding feast in Cana, at **every Mass** he turns bread and wine into his own body and blood.
- ✍ **Only God** can do that kind of thing - only God can perform miracles.

That's why although we know **that** it happens, we don't understand exactly **how** it happens.

- ✍ Theologians can only **describe** what happens.
- ✍ They call it "**transubstantiation**."
- ✍ This means that during the Mass, the **substance** of the bread and wine are **changed** into Christ's body and blood, but the **appearance** of bread and wine remains the **same**.

Many times throughout the history of the Church God has allowed **other miracles** to take place to **remind** us of the reality of the central miracle of the **Eucharist**.

There are **documented cases** of consecrated hosts

- ✍ that have begun to bleed,

- ✍ that have turned into flesh,
- ✍ that have been miraculously preserved in the midst of devastating fires.

Miracles like these, of which **history is full**, are just **reminders** of the **main miracle** that occurs **every day**: Christ turning bread and wine into his body and blood.

## ILLUSTRATION: The Eucharistic Miracle of Krakow

One memorable Eucharistic miracle took place in the year **1345**, near the city of Krakow, in Poland.

- ✍ Thieves **broke into** a little church on the outskirts of the city.
- ✍ They **broke open** the tabernacle (the locked box where the Eucharist is kept outside of Mass) and stole the **monstrance**, which contained **consecrated hosts**.
- ✍ They got away, but when they discovered that the monstrance was **not made of real gold**, they threw it into the **swamp** where they were hiding.
- ✍ Priests from the church began a **search** as soon as they discovered the theft, but they found nothing.
- ✍ When darkness fell, however, a **mysterious light** was seen emanating from the muddy spot in the **middle of the swamp**.
- ✍ **Bright flashes of light** that looked like beams from a huge, intense spotlight were visible for **several miles around**.
- ✍ Villagers became so **frightened** by the mysterious, inexplicable light that they ran to report it to the bishop.
- ✍ After two days of fasting and prayer, the bishop led a **procession** out to the marsh.
- ✍ There, they found the **monstrance**, and within it were the consecrated hosts, still **unbroken**, and those hosts were the **source** of the mysterious light.
- ✍ The crowd was in **awe**, and immediately began to pray and celebrate the miracle.
- ✍ The King built the church of Corpus Christi in Krakow in honor of the **miracle**, and **every year** a special celebration takes place there on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi.

Miracles like these, of which **history is full**, are just **reminders** of the **main miracle** that occurs every day: Christ turning bread and wine into his body and blood in the Eucharist.

## Part III: How We React

This **miraculous presence** of Christ explains why we give so much **reverence** to this greatest of all the sacraments, the Eucharist.

- ✍ We use **precious metals** for the **vessels** used at Mass.
- ✍ We **decorate** our churches with beautiful and valuable **art**, because here in the church building, in the small box called the **tabernacle**, our Lord is present, accompanying us and interceding for us in the Eucharist **24/7**.
- ✍ We celebrate first Holy Communion with **splendor and joy**.

- ✍ We always **genuflect** when we enter Church and genuflect (or bow during Mass) when we cross in front of the tabernacle.
- ✍ Many places hold **processions** every year in which the Eucharist is **carried in honor** through the streets of a city or a community, just as any other king is **honored** by his subjects.
- ✍ We **dress respectfully and elegantly** when we come to Mass, because we are coming to worship and receive our Lord who will **truly become present** once again.
- ✍ We **never** receive Holy Communion without having been to **confession**, if we have committed a **mortal sin**, because every mortal sin is a **rebellion** against the very Person we receive in Holy Communion - Jesus Christ himself.
- ✍ Whenever we are **inside** the Church, we speak in a **quiet tone of voice**, out of **respect** for Christ's presence and out of **courtesy** towards those who wish to pray.
- ✍ We hold **special hours of prayer and adoration** of the Eucharist (as we will this Friday – the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus – our parish feast-day), to honor and thank our Lord, and to bring **all our needs** before him.
- ✍ We celebrate our Masses with **beautiful music, beautiful vestments**, incense, candles, and many other details that allow us to **express our faith and gratitude** to Christ who has **loved us** so much that he has decided to stay with us, really present in the Eucharist, until the end of time.
- ✍ Many people have the pious custom of blessing themselves – making the sign of the cross – as they pass the church – in recognition of Christ, present there in the Holy Eucharist in the tabernacle.

All of this is part of our rich heritage as Catholic Christians, and it all **flows** from **Christ's true presence** in this sacrament.

## **Conclusion: Why?... Because We Need Our Manna**

**Why** did Jesus decide to give us the Eucharist?

He wanted to **extend his incarnation – his presence among us** – into **every corner** of the world, into **every cranny** of history.

That's how much he **loves** us.

- ✍ We are human beings, body and soul, and so we need to feel Christ's presence not just spiritually, but also **here- and-now**, in this sacrament.
- ✍ He knew we would need a **place**, a real **physical place**, where we could go to speak to him, heart-to-heart, in good times and bad. It's why I'm SO glad we can keep our church open all day long – and people COME throughout the day to pray.
- ✍ We also need **Christ's own strength** to help us **fight bravely** against temptations and stay faithful to God's will in our lives.
- ✍ Through the Eucharist, we are **mysteriously present** at the **very sacrifice** that Jesus made on Good Friday, and so at **every Mass** we can **unite** our **own** sufferings and sacrifices to **his**.

In today's First Reading, Moses reminded the Israelites of how God **took care of them** during their **forty-year pilgrimage** through the desert to the Promised Land.

God **fed** them every day with manna from heaven - a **miraculous food** that **kept them going**. Just so, God feeds **us** with this **bread of eternal life**,

✍ so that we will **grow stronger and stronger** in our Christian faith,

✍ until we are **strong enough** to cross over into the eternal Promised Land of **Heaven**.

Today, let's **thank him** for this amazing gift, and when we receive him in Holy Communion, let's **promise** him that we will never **take it for granted**, or **let it go to waste**.