

Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ – Cycle A (Corpus Christi)

Note: Where a Scripture text is underlined in the body of this discussion, it is recommended that the reader look up and read that passage.

Introduction

Corpus Christi is a doctrinal feast established in honor of Christ present in the Eucharist. Its purpose is to instruct the people in the mystery, faith, and devotion surrounding the Eucharist. The celebration of the feast evolved during the 13th and 14th centuries. The Berengarian heresy of the mid-11th century (named after Berengar of Tours) taught that the Eucharist was only the figure of Christ. By the 13th century reception of communion was less emphasized and was to some extent superseded by merely seeing the Host. In 1209 Juliana of Liege had a vision which demanded a feast specifically for the Eucharist. After much persuasion the feast was celebrated for the first time in 1247, and Pope Urban IV extended it to the Universal Church in 1264. Although there is trustworthy evidence that Saint Thomas Aquinas composed two offices for the feast, it is by no means clear that the office now used is from his pen.

1st Reading - Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14-16a

On the plains of Moab, God charges Moses, now close to death, once more to proclaim the Law which he received through the revelation on Mount Sinai. This proclamation is contained in the 5th and last book of the Pentateuch called in Hebrew *had-deb harim* (the words) and by the Septuagint *deuteronomion* (second law). Moses is addressing a new generation of Israelites, all those who would have been under the age of 20 when the exodus began. By having the Law read again, Yahweh is saying that His covenant with Israel is made with all generations (Deuteronomy 29:13), past, present, and future: it is an everlasting covenant. We will read all of Deuteronomy chapter 8 in order to appreciate the context of today's reading.

8:1 "Be careful to observe all the commandments I enjoin on you today, that you may live and increase, and may enter in and possess the land which the LORD promised on oath to your fathers. ² Remember how for forty years now the LORD, your God, has directed all your journeying in the desert, so as to test you by affliction and find out whether or not it was your intention to keep his commandments.

Drawing lessons from the past. With themes of divine guidance and providence He uses the wilderness experience as a humbling and testing of Israel.

³ He therefore let you be afflicted with hunger, and then fed you with manna, a food unknown to you and your fathers, in order to show you that not by bread alone does

man live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the LORD.

This is a sort of homiletic on the manna narrative (Exodus 16; Numbers 11:16-23) which shows the importance of living by the word of God.

⁴ The clothing did not fall from you in tatters, nor did your feet swell these forty years. ⁵ So you must realize that the LORD, your God, disciplines you even as a man disciplines his son. ⁶ “Therefore, keep the commandments of the LORD, your God, by walking in his ways and fearing him. ⁷ For the LORD, your God, is bringing you into a good country, a land with streams of water, with springs and fountains welling up in the hills and valleys, ⁸ a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, of olive trees and of honey, ⁹ a land where you can eat bread without stint and where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones contain iron and in whose hills you can mine copper. ¹⁰ But when you have eaten your fill, you must bless the LORD, your God, for the good country he has given you. ¹¹ Be careful not to forget the LORD, your God, by neglecting his commandments and decrees and statutes which I enjoin on you today: ¹² lest, when you have eaten your fill, and have built fine houses and lived in them, ¹³ and have increased your herds and flocks, your silver and gold, and all your property, ¹⁴ you then become haughty of heart and unmindful of the LORD, your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, that place of slavery; ¹⁵ who guided you through the vast and terrible desert with its saraph serpents and scorpions,

The name “seraph” means “fiery”. Seraphim (the choir of angles closest to God’s burning love) are depicted elsewhere in Holy Scripture as winged serpents (Isaiah 6:1-7; 14:29; 30:6). The association with scorpions suggests the effect of its bite.

its parched and waterless ground; who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock ¹⁶ and fed you in the desert with manna, a food unknown to your fathers, that he might afflict you and test you, but also make you prosperous in the end.

Notice how he warns about the danger of amnesia and how, with a good historical memory a proper social ethic will be followed.

¹⁷ Otherwise, you might say to yourselves, ‘It is my own power and the strength of my own hand that has obtained for me this wealth.’ ¹⁸ Remember then, it is the LORD, your God, who gives you the power to acquire wealth, by fulfilling, as he has now done, the covenant which he swore to your fathers. ¹⁹ But if you forget the LORD, your God, and follow other gods, serving and worshiping them, I forewarn you this day that you will perish utterly. ²⁰ Like the nations which the LORD destroys before you, so shall you too perish for not heeding the voice of the LORD, your God.

2nd Reading - 1 Corinthians 10:16-17

Saint Paul established the Christian community at Corinth during his second missionary journey (A.D. 50-52). He preached the gospel there for a year and a half, aided by Silas and Timothy. After he left Corinth, the city had a series of apostolic visitors. Apollos, a brilliant preacher (Acts 18:24-26) arrived about a year after Paul left. It is likely that around this time Peter also paid a short visit to Corinth, although it is not recorded. This letter was written shortly before Easter 57 and offers the Corinthians guidance on some areas that they have found problematic. One of the problems which Paul addresses is the significance of social gestures. The idea of unity and fellowship with God through eating a sacrifice was strong in Judaism and Christianity as well as in paganism. In Old Testament days, when a Jew offered a sacrifice, he ate a part of that sacrifice as a way of restoring his unity with God, against whom he had sinned (Deuteronomy 12:17-18). By participating in temple banquets (there were temples dedicated to the cult of the emperor, to various Greek deities, and to Egyptian gods in Corinth), Christians had no intention of worshiping idols, but Paul believed that such social gestures had an objective significance independent of the intentions of those who made them; they gave the appearance of acceptance and worship, even when it was not intended. He makes his point by using the Eucharist as an example of a banquet of unity. Catholic Christians participate in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice when they eat and drink the Body and Blood of Our Lord in Holy Communion.

16 The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?

Saint Paul begins his argument by establishing a common ground. The Corinthian Christians accept the identification of the bread and wine of the Eucharist with Christ and believe that the sharing of this meal produces a common-union (communion), a shared-union (*koinonia* in Greek) – a union which has two focuses: Christ, and other believers. Note that the “cup of blessing” is the third cup of the Passover meal.

“That bread which you see on the altar, having been consecrated by the word of God, is the Body of Christ. That chalice, or rather, what is in that chalice, consecrated by the word of God, is the Blood of Christ. Through that bread and wine the Lord Christ willed to commend to us His Body and the Blood which He poured out for the remission of sins. If you have received worthily, you are what you have received.” [Saint Augustine of Hippo (ca. A.D. 391), *Easter Sunday Homily*, 227]

17 Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

Sharing the one life-source, the Body of Christ, all believers constitute one body whose diversity is rooted in its unity. All consecrated bread constitutes the one loaf as Christ is present wholly (Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity) in each piece so that it all becomes the one loaf.

“Because the Bread is one, we, the many, are in one body.’ ‘Why do I say “communion?”” He

says; 'for we are that very Body.' What is the Bread? The Body of Christ! Not many bodies, but one Body. For just as the bread, consisting of many grains, is made one, and the grains are no longer evident, but still exist, though their distinction is not apparent in their conjunction; so too we are conjoined to each other and to Christ. For you are not nourished by one Body while someone else is nourished by another Body; rather, all are nourished by the same Body." [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 24,2(4)]

"When you see [the Body of Christ] lying on the altar, say to yourself, 'Because of this Body I am no longer earth and ash, no longer a prisoner, but free. Because of this Body I hope for heaven, and I hope to receive the good things that are in heaven, immortal life, the lot of the angels, familiar conversation with Christ. This Body, scourged and crucified, has not been fetched by death. ... This is that Body which was blood-stained, which was pierced by a lance, and from which gushed forth those saving fountains, one of blood and the other of water, for all the world.' ... This is the Body which He gave us, both to hold in reserve and to eat, which was appropriate to intense love; for those whom we kiss with abandon we often even bite with our teeth." [Saint John Chrysostom (A.D. 392), *Homilies on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* 24,4(7)]

For a companion reading, see [1 Corinthians 11:23-30](#).

Gospel - John 6:51-58

The time is about one year before Jesus' death and resurrection. There are three Passover periods mentioned in Holy Scripture; all of which appear in the Gospel of John:

- | | |
|------------|---|
| Jn 2:13-23 | The cleansing of the temple immediately after the marriage feast at Cana. |
| Jn 6:4 | The feeding of the 5,000 which, along with Jesus' walking on water, immediately precede this bread of life discourse. |
| Jn 11:55 | Jesus' passion and death |

The Gospels of Matthew and Mark also include miraculous healings, the casting out of demons, and the feeding of the 4,000 prior to this event.

⁵¹ I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever;

This is the third time (verses 35 & 48 are the other two) that He identifies Himself as the "Bread of Life." In Hebrew numerology the number three represents completeness. Jesus does not attempt to soften or alter His teaching. It is the literal meaning, not a figurative or metaphorical one, that He is trying to drive home.

and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world."

The Eucharistic theme has been reached; the mystery has been revealed (see also Hebrews 10:5-10).

52 The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us (his) flesh to eat?”

Many of the hearers have understood perfectly well what Jesus is saying and that He means exactly what He says, but they can't believe that what He says could be true. How can He give them His flesh to eat? Is He going to start carving up His arm? Others may have been confused by a Semitic figure of speech where to “eat someone's flesh” was to slander him (Psalm 27:2). If they had understood Him in a metaphorical, figurative or symbolic sense, there would have been no reason for them to quarrel. Just as Nicodemus thought of being born again in the purely physical sense (John 3:4), and the woman at the well thought only of natural water (John 4:11), so now the Jews understand the reference to His flesh literally.

53 Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you,

We normally end our prayers with “amen” but Jesus begins His statement in this manner. Amen means “truly”, “so be it”, “I do believe”. The doubled Amen is a solemn affirmation, an oath. The faithful and true witness is Christ, the Amen (Revelation 3:14). Since two witnesses are required to sentence someone to death (Deuteronomy 17:6), Jesus is bearing the part of both witnesses and alerting them that what he is going to say has life and death consequences. This is the fourth time He has reminded them that this is a life and death situation.

unless you eat the flesh

The Greek verb used for “eat” is *φαγω* (fag-o). The significance of this will be seen in the next verse.

of the Son of Man

Recall that “Son of Man” is a term which Jesus applies to Himself, the New Adam (Daniel 7:13), the one who will affect the resurrection (Ezekiel 37). Jesus' words do not encourage any figurative understanding of His pronouncement, they only underscore the literal meaning.

and drink his blood,

If the idea of eating someone's flesh is repugnant, what about drinking their blood? To the Jewish audience this would be even more repulsive. Blood was a forbidden food under the Law (Leviticus 7:27; 17:10-14), the penalty for which was to be expelled from the tribe; they would be excommunicated. “flesh and blood” is a common Old Testament expression for life. When the two are separated, death results. By taking both, they must be partaking of a living being.

you do not have life within you.

Are dead, have no spirit.

54 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood

The Greek verb used here for “eat” is *τρώγο* (tro'-go) is actually much stronger than just simply “eat” it literally means “chew”, “gnaw”. This shows that it is a real meal that He is talking about. There is now absolutely no room for saying that He is speaking symbolically. Not only has He reiterated the statement, He has strengthened it.

has eternal life,

A guarantee of life eternal. If He had been speaking symbolically, He would have been commanding them to slander Him or suffer the pain of eternal damnation.

and I will raise him on the last day.

A pledge which only God can make.

55 For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

If there had been any questions before, there is now no question at all that He is speaking quite literally.

56 Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood

Again the strong verb is used for eating. This is the fourth time, in four verses, that Jesus has said they must eat His Flesh and drink His Blood. The number four in Hebrew numerology stands for the world in its entirety (four winds, four cardinal points of the compass). The Eucharist is God's gift to the whole world. With this rapid four verse repetition, it's almost like Jesus is saying “what part of ‘eat’ and ‘drink’ don't you understand?”. God is not stupid; when hearers misunderstand Jesus, He corrects their misunderstanding immediately (see John 3:3-6 for example, where Jesus corrects Nicodemus' understanding of “born again” and explains that it is not a physical rebirth but a spiritual rebirth through baptism). Here, no correction is made because no misunderstanding exists.

remains in me and I in him.

This is covenant imagery. When people are bound by a common covenant, they are part of the same family. A person may be cast out of the tribe for drinking blood, but in doing so in this case they are made a member of the Body of Christ; an even bigger and more important family. By eating His body and drinking His blood, they are partaking in the family meal which binds them together. John 15:4 utilizes this same covenant imagery.

57 Just as the living Father sent me

What kind of life does the Father have? A spiritual/immortal one; God is not mortal.

and I have life because of the Father,

The Father and Son are one (John 14:10-11; 5:21-24); they share a life with the Holy Spirit (John 1:32; 15:26). They are a common union (communion).

so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.

Will share His eternal life. The Christian shares a communion with Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16). How is this communion shared with Christ and the Christian community? The same way every family shares communion; by sharing a common meal – the Eucharist.

58 This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.”

This is the third time in this discourse (verses 31, 32 and 49) that Jesus compares the true Bread of Life, His own Body, with the manna God used to feed the Israelites every day during their 40 years of wandering. That bread was only a faint type of the Eucharist, the sacrament of life. It sustained them for 40 years; this will sustain them through all eternity.