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PASTORAL LETTER – FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI 2019

THE EUCHARIST: THE GIFT OF LIFE

To all the faithful, religious, deacons and priests:
*Grace and peace be yours in abundance
through knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*

(2 Pt 1:2)

[1] At seven o'clock in the evening on August 18, 1996, Fr. Alejandro Pezet was celebrating Mass in the commercial center of Buenos Aires. After he finished distributing Holy Communion, a woman came up to tell him that she had found a discarded Host on a candleholder at the back of the church. Fr. Alejandro took the defiled Host and placed it in a container of water in the tabernacle.

[2] On Monday, August 26, he opened the tabernacle and saw to his amazement that the Host had turned into a bloody substance. He immediately informed Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio (the future Pope Francis) that the Host had become a fragment of bloodied flesh and had grown significantly in size. It was decided to keep it in the tabernacle. After three years passed and the Host had suffered no visible decomposition, Cardinal Bergoglio decided to have it scientifically analyzed.

[3] In 1999, at the direction of Cardinal Bergoglio, Dr. Ricardo Castanon, an atheist at the time, sent the fragment to New York for analysis. Not to prejudice the issue, no information about the origin of the fragment was given to the team of scientists. One scientist, Dr. Frederick Zugibe, a cardiologist and forensic pathologist, determined that the substance was real flesh, containing human DNA. He further concluded that it was a piece of a heart that had been tortured. The blood was type AB. And, this perfectly matched the scientific studies done on the Eucharist miracle of Lanciano. During the analysis, to everyone's shock, the samples of the heart muscle were pulsating while they were being studied.

[4] Over the centuries, there have been several miracles of the Eucharist. Lanciano in the 8th century. Bolsano in the 13th century. Santarém in the 14th century. Siena in the 18th century. And even in our lifetime: Finca Betania in Cúa in 1991; Tixtla Mexico in 2006; and, St. Anthony of Sokółka, Poland in 2008. In each and every case, the Church has submitted these miracles to the careful scrutiny of science. And the results have been the same. Real flesh. Real blood.

[5] Yet, even before the first Eucharistic miracle happened, the Church was teaching that the

PASTORAL LETTER – FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI 2019

Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Jesus. In his *Letter to the Romans* (106 A.D.), St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote, “I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the bread of life, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became afterwards of the seed of David and Abraham; and I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.”

[6] In 350 A.D., St. Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem, summed up what other Church Fathers had been saying. In preparing people for the sacraments, he taught, “The bread and the wine of the Eucharist before the holy invocation of the adorable Trinity were simple bread and wine, but the invocation having been made, the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine the blood of Christ” (*Catechetical Lectures* 19:7). For the first 1,000 years the Church, both in the East and the West, tenaciously held to this belief that the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Jesus.

[7] However, in the 11th century, Berengar, a priest of Tours and a leading scholar at the Cathedral school of Chartres, began to teach that Christ was only spiritually present in the Eucharist and that the elements of bread and wine remained. For thirty years, theologians argued and debated his teaching, trying to clarify the Church’s faith. At four different councils, Berengar’s teaching was condemned: at Brionne, at Chartres, in Rome and at Vercelli.

[8] Hildebert de Lavardin, Archbishop of Tours, who had been a pupil of Berengar, answered the arguments of his famous teacher. He introduced the term “*transubstantiation*” to describe the change of bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ at the consecration of Mass. Almost immediately thereafter, the Fourth Lateran Council used this term for the first time in a statement of the magisterium. On November 11, 1215, the Council affirmed that “[Christ’s] body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine, the bread and wine having been transubstantiated, by God’s power, into his body and blood.”

[9] Except for a very few theologians, the doctrine of the Real Presence of Jesus went undisputed for more than 500 years. Then came Luther and the Protestant reformers. Luther taught that the bread remains bread and the wine remains wine, but that Jesus becomes present in those elements at the moment of the reception of Holy Communion. Thus, he taught something of a real presence but not as the Church teaches.

[10] Other reformers went further than Luther and completely denied the Real Presence. Their followers today do not believe what we believe as Catholics about the Eucharist. This is why we do not share the Eucharist with our Protestant brothers and sisters. Calvinists believe that they receive Christ only in a spiritual and heavenly manner. They teach that, even after the consecration, the bread and wine remain the bread and wine. Methodists, Baptists, Disciples and Mennonites consider the Lord’s Supper a simple memorial service. Anglicans are divided among themselves on what the Eucharist truly is. And, the Quakers and the Salvation Army have no Eucharist at all.

[11] It is precisely our belief in the mystery of the Eucharist that draws us to Mass. “Regarding the Holy Mass, one sometimes hears this objection: ‘Of what use is Mass? I go to Church when I feel like it, and I pray better in solitude.’ But the Eucharist is not a private prayer or a beautiful spiritual exercise, it is not a simple commemoration of what Jesus did at the Last Supper. ... The Eucharist is ‘a remembrance,’ that is, a gesture which renders real and present the event of Jesus’ death and

PASTORAL LETTER – FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI 2019

resurrection: the bread really is his Body given up for us, the wine really is his Blood poured out for us” (Pope Francis, *Angelus*, August 16, 2015).

[12] From the moment the apostles gathered with Jesus in the Upper Room to every Mass being celebrated at this very moment, the Church has steadfastly held to the literal meaning of Jesus’ words. After the priest repeats Jesus’ words “This is my Body...This is my Blood,” only the appearance of bread and wine remain. The reality, the substance, is changed.

[13] How important it is to handing on the true faith that we always refer to the Eucharist properly! How sad to hear anyone say at Mass, for example, that, in this line, the bread will be distributed or in that line, the wine! Our words should express our faith. It is *the Body of Christ*. It is *the Blood of Christ*.

[14] Even before the gospels were written, Paul wrote about the Eucharist. He was very clear in how he described the elements. In 1 Cor 11:27, Paul says, “Whoever eats this bread and drinks this cup of the Lord unworthily will be guilty of the *body* and *blood* of the Lord, and eats and drinks judgment to himself.” Obviously, Paul believed in the Real Presence.

[15] In response to the Protestant reformers who were denying the Real Presence, the Council of Trent clearly and unequivocally enunciated the Church’s faith. The Council taught that, in 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.” Recognizing that it is the Lord himself, Jesus, our Savior and Judge whom we receive, before receiving Holy Communion, we repeat the words of the centurion in the gospel, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should come under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” We stand humbled before the Lord who loves us so much that he gives us Himself.

[16] So important was the Council of Trent’s teaching on the Eucharist that architects designed Rome’s Church of the *Gesu* to emphasize the Church’s faith in the Real Presence. They eliminated all side aisles and the narthex. In this way, on entering the church, the faithful immediately see the altar and the tabernacle. What is at the heart of the Church’s faith is right before their eyes. This design of the *Gesu* influenced church architecture for the next four centuries. A testament to the Church’s Eucharistic faith!

[17] “In her loving and pastoral solicitude the Church has made sure that the faithful receive Holy Communion having the right interior dispositions, among which dispositions stands out the need for the faithful to comprehend and consider interiorly the Real Presence of him whom they are to receive” (*The Catechism of Pope Pius X*, n. 628. 636). Thus, at every Mass, we show proper respect for the Lord when we approach Holy Communion with full attention on the Lord whom we are about to welcome into our soul. Not talking to others. Not greeting others while on line to receive the Eucharist. Not chewing gum! Even before getting into the line to receive, we should examine our conscience. It should never be an automatic reflex to simply get in line and take the Holy Communion.

[18] Receiving the Lord worthily and with spiritual benefit requires preparation and reverence. It is

PASTORAL LETTER – FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI 2019

the very Son of God whom we welcome into our souls. We should approach Holy Communion with a spirit of adoration. As St. Augustine teaches, “No one eats that flesh without first adoring it; we should sin were we not to adore it” (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 98, 9).

[19] If we are conscious of serious or mortal sin, we should first go to confession before receiving Holy Communion. What a loss of faith when receiving Communion merely becomes a routine act! What a practical denial of the Eucharist to receive without awareness of the meaning of what we are doing!

[20] To receive Holy Communion, someone must be baptized, living in the state of sanctifying grace, and holding fast to the teachings of the Church (cf. Acts 2:42). Already in the second century, Justin Martyr wrote, “no one else is permitted to partake of it, except one who believes our teaching to be true and who has been washed in the washing which is for the remission of sins and for regeneration [baptism] and is thereby living as Christ enjoined” (*First Apology* 66:1-20).

[21] Each time we receive Holy Communion worthily, we encounter Christ. “He comes towards us to assimilate us in him... To nourish oneself of the Eucharist means to allow oneself to be changed by what we receive. As the bread and the wine are converted into the Body and Blood of the Lord, so too those who receive it with faith are transformed into a living Eucharist... Because when [we] receive the Eucharist, [we] become the Body of Christ.” (Pope Francis, *General Audience*, March 21, 2018). In every Eucharist, Jesus draws us into the mystery of his own divine life. He makes us His Body, the Church. Receiving Holy Communion makes us alive to God and to others! The Eucharist is the gift of life.

*Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Paterson,
|on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, twenty-third day of June
in the year of Our Lord, two thousand and nineteen.*

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