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Our Lady of Good Counsel-St. Thomas More, NYC
June 14, 2020, Streaming Mass
Solemnity of Corpus Christi 2020 John 6:51-58

Today we celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi, the Real Presence of the risen Christ in the Eucharist under the appearances of bread and wine. Yet what we have been experiencing is quite the opposite, the “real absence,” in that we have not had the opportunity to celebrate the Eucharist and receive Holy Communion for the past three months. Some of you may be aware that last October Pope Francis had a meeting with the bishops of the Amazon to discuss the problem in that part of the world where, because of the shortage of priests, Catholics have the opportunity to take part in the Eucharist only two or three times a year. It is the kind of thing we probably would have thought could never happen here.

For a moment let us reflect on the origin of this feast. If we happened to be in the city of Orvieto in the province of Umbria in central Italy last Thursday, we would see a spectacle reenacted there that dates back to the Middle Ages. The piazza in front of the façade of its magnificent cathedral would be packed with tourists and townspeople, many wearing medieval attire and carrying flags and musical instruments of that era. They would all be waiting for that moment when the doors of the church would swing open, and after a long procession of clergy and choirs, they would behold the cathedral’s prize possession, a large, square-shaped golden reliquary containing a piece of aged linen cloth with a rust-colored stain down the center. It commemorates a “miracle” that supposedly took place in the thirteenth century when a priest celebrating mass doubted that Christ was truly present in the Eucharist, and suddenly before his eyes the host began to bleed, leaving the stained altar cloth as proof for his lack of faith. “Bleeding hosts” may be part of popular piety, but they are not part of the authentic faith and tradition of the Catholic Church. When we profess Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, we are affirming a “sacramental” presence, not a physical presence. As in any of the seven sacraments, what happens is that through visible, tangible words, actions, materials, invisible, spiritual realities are made available to us. In the Eucharist, under the forms of bread and wine, the risen Christ is present to us. When we receive Holy Communion we are welcoming that real and active presence into our lives, not chewing on the body of Jesus.

Admittedly today’s Gospel may give the impression that Jesus is speaking of a “physical” presence, so let us take a closer look. Jesus says, “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you...For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.” The key to unlocking the passage is in the

opening line, wherein Jesus says, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven, whoever eats this bread will live forever." Jesus is comparing Himself to manna, the bread-like substance that God provided for the Hebrews in their journey from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land. It sustained them along the way, but it was perishable: if they kept it more than a day, it would begin to rot and decay. Jesus presents Himself as the imperishable "bread of life" that will sustain His disciples along the journey into "eternal life." The emphasis is on the superiority of the nourishment He will provide to that food which the Hebrews of old obtained in the desert.

But why all this talk about the "body" and "blood?" Because it is through the body, that we human beings are present to each other. We are not disembodied spirits communicating telepathically. We are creatures of flesh and blood, and that is how we reveal ourselves. In the context of the internet, we may be "virtually" present, but not really present to each other. As one parishioner recently wrote to me, he said he appreciated having the mass online, but it is "like shadows on the wall." It is simply not the same as being all together at mass. Just as Jesus was misunderstood when He spoke of the need "to be born again," so He is again misunderstood if "eating His flesh" and "drinking His blood" is taken literally and not seen as expressing His desire to be really present to His disciples over space and time.

As indispensable as our bodies may be to the communication of who we are, the body, by its mere physicality, does not guarantee this will happen. Witness the case of a loveless marriage, where a couple may be lying in bed next to each other, but are hardly "present" to each other. I remember a recently divorced woman who quoted to me a line from the movie "Bus Stop," wherein one of the characters says, "If I'm going to be alone, I'd rather be alone by myself." In the context of the Eucharist, an emphasis on the "physical" presence of Christ can obscure the fact that it is a real spiritual, sacramental presence that is the essence of our faith.

In the Eucharist Jesus becomes available to us in the totality of Who He is, under the aspect of nourishment. He is given to us as food for the journey, our journey through life. Our receiving of the Eucharist is a sharing in His life. As in any profound relationship a person is changed by the other, so are we changed in our relationship with the risen Christ. As we are open to His real, living presence, we come to resemble Him more and more. We come to possess some of the qualities He possessed. St. Augustine of Hippo would say when distributing Communion, "Receive what you are and be what you receive." We are to become what we eat. That is both our challenge and our hope.