

St. Ann's Church – Washington, DC

Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ – June 14, 2020

Homily by Msgr. Watkins, Pastor

My dear Parishioners and Friends of St. Ann's Church here in Washington, DC.

I greet all of you who join us by way of electronic media today as the Church celebrates one of the most important Feasts in her liturgical calendar, the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ – traditionally remembered as the Feast of Corpus Christi.

Last week, as we celebrated the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity, we reflected together on the nature of Mystery. So, let's review those thoughts a bit, because they help us understand more one of the crucial Mysteries of Faith we focus on today, just how bread and wine are transubstantiated into the divine Body and Blood of Jesus Christ on this altar of sacrifice. So, let's talk again about Mystery.

A lot of people think of mystery as something you can't figure out and because you can't figure the mystery out, then it's not worth pursuing, not worth talking about. But that's not necessarily the case. Maybe I can't know everything there is to know about a mystery, but that doesn't mean that the mystery itself is void of some reason, intelligence, purpose, truth which I could possibly understand if I just apply myself. As we said last week, who of us picks up a mystery novel, for example, and says, "Well, it's a mystery, so I might as well close the book because I won't really know for certain "who done it" or "how it all ends."? No, we pick up the book and start eagerly reading, trying to figure the story out and piecing together the puzzle until we can "see" something really going on that makes sense, even if we can see the whole picture. When you pick up a good murder mystery, for example, you just can't put it down. It grips you. Well, there's something like that going on every time we confront a divine Mystery, like Transubstantiation, which tells us that the substance of bread and the substance of wine are really changed, even if the accidents of bread and wine remain the same. Sounds like contradiction? Actually it's not. Sounds like a Mystery? Oh,

for sure! But again, perhaps a most intelligent Mystery of Faith – and I dare say at the heart of the Catholic Faith.

Or, put it another way, we know that mysteries are real and that we desire to really know how it all works out in the end. Therefore, we probe mysteries and try to figure them out. That's what makes them so exciting, so intriguing. On the other hand, we know that MYTHS are just that; myths are made-up stories about things. Mysteries, then, are not Myths. What Jesus reveals, therefore, are not Myths but Mysteries. And Jesus reveals these mysteries not because He doesn't want us to probe into them but because He wants us to do so with the caveat that we will never COMPLETELY know them. But to never COMPLETELY know or understand them doesn't mean that we can know SOMETHING about them. So, it's very immature to say, "Well, it's a mystery, so you can't know it." That's silly and it's demeaning both to God and man. God gave us reason, so let's use it wisely.

So, all of the so-called Mysteries of Catholic Christian Faith were revealed not by man but by God in Jesus Himself. And since Jesus reveals them, they can't be lies. Jesus can't deceive us. We have all sorts of Mysteries of Faith which Jesus revealed to us and which over time by inspiration of the Holy Spirit the Church has come to understand and accept as what we call doctrine or dogma. We have the Mystery of Creation, the Mystery of Redemption, the Mystery of the Incarnation of Jesus, the Mystery of the Trinity, the Mystery of the Resurrection of the Body, the Mystery of Immaculate Conception of Mary, the Mystery of Mary the Mother of God, and today, in a special way, the Mystery of Transubstantiation. So, let's get into that particular Mystery today which takes place every time we come to Mass to worship God the Father, through the Son, by power of the Holy Spirit. We can't say everything we'd like to say about this Mystery, but hang in there as we probe its truth.

Let's begin by asking a basic question. If you really want to know someone as best you can, what's going to be the best way to do that? You could read about that person through a book or magazine article. You could read a letter they might have written, and that would give you insight into their personality and style. You could ask others about them and even their experience of them. You could dream about them. You could exchange emails and Instagram and even Google them, even Zoom them! You could talk on the phone with them. Any

number of ways to get to know someone, but any of these ways wouldn't be at its best. No, the best way to really know someone is to know them as they are, as they truly, naturally, really reveal themselves to you. And the only way which is most authentic, real, and personal would be, of course, to actually, really, truthfully stand face to face, body to body, up close and personal ("the ABC way") and talk to them, listen to them, observe everything about them as close to them as you possibly could. Even then, of course, there's still more to know. I want to know more and more and more. And I truly love that person, I want also to love them more, and more, and more. Now, we know this experience all too well with the people we really want to know. We desire to know more and more and more but there comes a point where it's enough to know. We desire to love them more and more but there comes a time when love is sufficient. My point is that there remains an element of mystery in that relationship. It's personal, it's honest, it's real, it's natural. So, we've succeeded in getting to know them as best we can. And all the other information we gained about them from other sources works to support our real experience of them but in themselves could never substitute for them. We know someone best when it's so close, so personal, so real, even vulnerable. Yet, the mystery of that person remains, because, as we said, we want to know and to love them more and, therefore, there will always be something we won't be able to know or understand about them.

Now, that serves as an intelligent analogy we can make to our relationship with God. See, each of us (if we desire to grow in wisdom and happiness) wants to know God, and to know more. Each of us (if we are spiritually mature) wants to love God, and to love more. AND, what's even more incredible, is that the revelation God gave us of Himself over the last 3500 years through Judaism and completed in Christianity is that God wants to know us and to love us. God proves His desire to know us and to love us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. See, as we said last week, Jesus is Divine and Human at the same time in different respects – truly God AND truly Man (the Mystery of the Incarnation). So, Jesus as God knows and loves us perfectly. And Jesus as Man, desires in His humanity to know and to love us more, and more and more. And in our own personal humanity, each of us desires to know and to love Him more. So, God through Jesus comes to us and we come to Him to get to know each other personally.

Yet, you say that was the case 2000 years ago when Jesus walked with the Apostles and ate and drank with them. That's the best anyone could ever know of Jesus – the Jesus of the past, the Jesus of history, the Jesus who is no longer with us, you say. Well, here's another mystery which is related to what we've been talking about in terms of personal relationships. How many of us have been practicing social distancing from the ones we love. We want to be with them but can't be physically. We want to talk to them up close and personally, but we can't. They may be quarantined, or they may be in a nursing home or hospital, or can't fly or take the train. We can't be with them and they can't be with us, BUT we are united by a bond of love which is also real and powerful. So, we experience their absence. And yet, at the same time, in some paradox, we experience their presence even more. I know they are absent physically but they are really present to me psychologically, emotionally, spiritually. There's a kind of absence AND presence at the same time going on.

Now, in that respect, Jesus, yes, is physically not present. The Mystery of the Resurrection and the Ascension tells us that much. However, the Mystery of God who is HOLY SPIRIT tells us that He is present even now, through His Church, and especially at the moment of that same God telling us something quite distinct, when He says through his priest, "This is My Body ... This is MY Blood." In other words, Jesus says again to us as He did at the Last Supper, "It is I." This bread is now "I" and this wine is now "I." Never before had anyone taken the Passover meal and altered its rubric in the course of ceremony to do something so different and so completely personal. He would say, in so many words, "I am this bread. I am this wine. It is I." In fact, that is the revelation going on in John's Gospel today when Jesus tells the crowds, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven." And then goes on to say something quite strange to the listeners of his day, "...For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him." Wow! Our divine Lord is basically saying, among other truths about Himself, is that He wants us to be so close to him and to eat him, drink him! We can talk another time about what Religion and natural cannibalism is, but not today! What is going on here with Jesus is an intense desire on His part to know and to love us soooo much as to enter our souls. He doesn't desire to know us intellectually. He doesn't desire for us to know him as doctrine or dogma or truths ABOUT Him, but to know HIM, to love HIM as personally and as best we can. We come to Him as best we can, AND

He comes to us the best He can. So, He does that for us when we can't do that for Him. In other words, He gives us Himself, His very self. And what is the self? It's the person. He gives us His very person. And when a person gives his or her very self to you, that is truly an act of vulnerable love for you. They even lay down their lives for you. They would even be willing to die for you. If that is naturally true, then it is altogether even more supernaturally perfected when Jesus lays down His life for us on cross to offer Himself as the perfect victim of sacrifice to atone for universal sin.

So, we are closest and most personally present to Jesus through the reception of His Body and Blood. He's not here physically, so He appears absent. Yet, just as we said about the ones who are socially distant right now from us, perhaps even dead to us, they are in some paradoxical way still present to us. We call that paradox a mystery. And he appears to us in some real form, not just in our heads but personally, body to body, and blood to blood, as we said earlier – the most authentic and real way possible to know and to love someone, to be known and to be loved by someone. So, He appears as bread and wine but He is ACTUALLY present. So, the elements of bread and wine are the appearance, but the REALITY is something, actually Someone else. The accidents of bread and wine remain, looks like bread, tastes like bread, looks like wine, tastes like wine. But what is it?

Some would argue, well, what is it if changes? They would say that the bread and wine are a symbol of Jesus, a sign of our fellowship, a communion psychologically and emotionally with God. No, that's not what Jesus said. See, it's easier to dismiss Transubstantiation as a joke or something made up. Now, if it's made up, made by man, then we're talking about Myth (as we said last week), but not Mystery. If there's an element of the slight-of-hand at work here, then we're talking about Magic, not Mystery. In fact, a lot of people think that what we do at Mass is just that, Magic. [Funny how historically people thought of the Mass as a Magic, because at the moment the priest said the words, "This is my Body," which in the Latin was, "Hoc est enim corpus meum," people thought they were hearing the jarble of "Hoc-us-po-cus"! Hence the confusion.] No, if I'm a witchdoctor up here and all of this is a magic show, then I'm wasting your time, and more importantly, Jesus would be wasting His time. Magic is not personal. Magic is Myth. So, if what Jesus is revealing is true, then what we have is not Magic or Myth but Mystery. And the truth of the mystery of that relationship is grounded in the

substance of a personal encounter as close and as personal as anyone of us could ever desire – bodily, personally. Hence, Corpus Christ, the Body of Christ.

Ok, you say, that's enough for today! But you see, as we did last week with the Holy Trinity, that's what a real, intelligent, exciting mystery does. It causes you to think, to stretch your mind, to imagine the possibilities, and to probe things which are not customary or the day-to-day stuff of life. Time for a break.

Oh, you can begin to see how this incredible Mystery of the Body and Blood of the Lord is so relevant today and everyday in people's lives. Looking for true love? You have it here. Looking to be loved as best another could? You have it here. Looking to know and to be known, to love and to be loved? Doesn't every person have those naturally unfulfilled desires? Yes, He is here. Here under the appearance of bread and wine and truly present in Body and Blood. The substance is changed, the accidents remain.

Sweet Sacrament whom we adore,

Help me to love you more and more.

Help me to love you more and more.