

GOD'S LOVE SACRAMENT—REAL PRESENCE IN THE EUCHARIST!

Solemnity of Corpus Christi

THE MOST HOLY BODY & BLOOD OF CHRIST

Year C

Gen 14:18-20; Ps 110:1-4; 1Cor 11:23-26; Lk 9:11-17

She was only 16 years old...when a moon with a black band around it would appear to her throughout the day. She wondered what it meant...then the Lord Jesus appeared in a dream to her...to Blessed Juliana of Mont Cornillon, a 13th century contemplative nun from Belgium...and Jesus told her that the moon referred to the liturgical year and the black band, to the fact that the liturgical year lacked one thing: a day in honor of His Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

Blessed Juliana went to her ordinary, Bishop Robert of Liège, and asked him to institute a feast in their diocese in Belgium, which he did beginning in 1246...but not until conferring with his Archdeacon, Jacques Pantaleon, whom we will soon encounter again in our story. That was the first intervention of the Lord to bring about the Solemn Feast of Corpus Christi which we celebrate this weekend, along with our First Communicants at the 11:30 and 1:30 Sunday masses.

Scene II, the second intervention (also during the 13th century): Father Peter of Prague had lost his faith in the reality of Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist...after all, couldn't a priest question whether, what starts out as mere bread and wine in his hands, could change...after a few sacred words...into the real body and blood of the God-man, Jesus, even though all the appearances of bread and wine remain? Father Peter felt like a hypocrite every time he celebrated mass and spoke the words of consecration over the bread and wine.

So he decided to do something quite drastic. In 1263, he decided to make a 900-mile walking pilgrimage to Rome, to pray at the tomb of his patron, St. Peter, for the gift of a renewed faith in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

Now why do you think he made the pilgrimage to St. Peter in Rome when there were tombs of other saints much closer to Prague? Well, he went to the tomb of his patron saint because Simon Peter (Cepha, as Jesus had named him) has always been the rock of faith in the Eucharist to the whole Church...from the time the Lord talked about the reality of the Eucharist the first time, in a synagogue in Capernaum, one year before his death.

You remember the scene in John 6, the Bread of Life discourse. Jesus told his listeners that unless they "eat" (GK: *esthio*) His flesh and drink His blood, they would have no divine life in them; and, conversely, the one who literally "gnaws" (GK: *trogo* vice *esthio*) on His flesh and drinks His blood will have eternal life (cf. John 6:53-54). St. John goes on to use the verb "*trogo*", to "gnaw", three more times in that chapter to underscore the real body of Christ...and then he tells us that many of His disciples walked away complaining, "*This teaching is too hard! Who can accept it?*" (v.60) Remember that a Jew couldn't even touch blood or a dead body without becoming ritually impure, yet Jesus was asking them to drink His blood and gnaw on His flesh...why that sounds like cannibalism!..and in fact the early Church was so accused. Many of those disciples, accordingly, turned their back on Jesus because of their unbelief. Jesus knew that they had heard Him correctly but were just not willing to accept the Truth about the Eucharist. Now if Jesus had only been speaking metaphorically or symbolically, wouldn't He have told them so to keep them in the fold? But He did not...and the unbelievers separated from the flock.

He then turned to his closest followers, the twelve, and asked them, "*Do you also wish to go away?*" (v.67) They fell ominously silent. Nevertheless, it was St. Peter who stood and said, "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.*" (vv.68-69) Even though he didn't fully understand what Jesus was saying, nor why He was saying it, St. Peter believed in the Eucharist because he believed in Christ, which meant believing in what Christ said.

It would take a year before what Jesus was saying would make any sense...when Jesus, during the Last Supper, took bread and wine into his sacred hands and mysteriously changed them into His body and blood saying, "*This is my body. This is the cup of my blood.*" (Lk 22:19-20) It took many, many more years for the Church at the Council of Trent in the 16th century to scholastically define what was taking place as "*transubstantiation*": a singular and wondrous conversion of the total substance of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, the external appearances only remaining unchanged...and that in the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist is contained the whole of Christ (body, blood, soul, and

divinity), truly and substantially present...just as Jesus said in Capernaum in John's Gospel and just as He did in the upper room in Jerusalem on the eve of His death.

But sadly, even today, there are those modern disciples who still don't fully believe that they are in the awesome presence of God almighty Himself, Jesus, wholly and substantially present in the consecrated host and wine, when they approach the altar to consume Him in the Eucharist.... St. Thomas Aquinas, who wrote so many beautiful hymns for the first celebration of the Corpus Christi Feast, wrote in the Adoro te Devote..."I believe whatever the Son of God has said; Nothing is truer than the Word of Truth." Jesus, the Word of God, Truth incarnate, said that we had to eat His flesh and drink His blood, and therefore, St. Peter believed...so shouldn't we?

But back to scene II and a dejected Father Peter of Prague who, after weeks of disappointment in his prayers in Rome before his patron saint and with ever-waning faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, began heading back home with a group of pilgrims. When it came to be Sunday, members of the group asked Father Peter if he might celebrate Mass for them. Out of courtesy, he assented. They stopped at a small Church dedicated to St. Christina in Bolsena, Italy, and celebrated Mass on a side altar. Right before the "*Agnus Dei*" ("*Lamb of God*"), when Father Peter broke the host, as a priest always does, to put a particle into the chalice, the host in his hands began to bleed profusely. It bled on the corporal, on the altar cloths, on the altar, and it bled on Father Peter. The people, beholding the miracle in front of their eyes, started to shriek. The pastor of St. Christina came to see what all the commotion was about and beheld the miracle with his own eyes. They had to decide what to do with the miracle. The local priest knew that Pope Urban IV was at that time in Orvieto, a walled city only about 10 miles away, so they decided to take the miracle to Orvieto to see how the Pope would instruct them.

When they arrived, Father Peter told his story, about how he had lost his faith in the Eucharist, made a pilgrimage to Rome, thought that the Lord hadn't heard his prayer, but then made His real presence incontrovertibly present during the celebration of the Mass in Bolsena. Father Peter punctuated the truth of the Lord's presence in the Eucharist by saying, "Holy Father, bread can't bleed." That particular Holy Father, Urban IV, was in fact the former archdeacon of Liège, Jacques Pantaléon...and he took that miracle as a sign that Christ wanted the feast to His Body and Blood celebrated not just in a diocese in Belgium, but throughout the whole Church. The first universal celebration, therefore, occurred in 1264 and it has been celebrated annually ever since. So now you know the rest of the story....

There have been many Eucharistic miracles throughout the centuries in which the Lord has manifested His presence to the faithful. When you approach the altar today and every day to consume the consecrated bread and wine, now the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ, do so in the absolute awe and reverence of the real and substantial presence of Jesus Himself. I leave you with a quote from a letter to the Franciscan Order by St. Francis of Assisi:

"Let everyone be struck with fear, let the whole world tremble and let the heavens exult when Christ, the Son of the living God, is present on the altar in the hands of a priest! O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity! O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread! Brothers, look at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before Him! Hold back nothing of yourselves or for yourselves that He who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally!"

What powerfully appropriate words St. Francis offers our first communicants this weekend at the 11:30 and 1:30 masses...and how boldly appropriate that our Basilica designated this Feast of Corpus Christie for their first communion. Brothers and sisters, every time we celebrate Mass, what occurred in Bolsena could occur here...Have a joyous and blessed Feast of Corpus Christi!

May Jesus Christ be praised...now and forever!