

## Corpus Christi

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Why bread? Because if we are what we eat, in Jesus day, that is what people were—bread. Bread made up over three quarters of their diet. And it is estimated that women spent three hours a day, every day, making their family's daily bread. In fact the word "bread" was also their word for "food." Even for us it can still be a synonym for the money we earn. Its also the root of our word for those we work with. Companion, literally means one with whom we break bread. So when Jesus proclaims that he is the bread of life, he is saying that he is the substance of our lives, he is what sustains and animates us, body and soul. And again, if we are what we eat, then that is what we are, Christ.

Now I am not telling you something you have never heard before. We all know that we need God in our lives. Or at least we say that we know it, we think that we know it. But nothing brings this lesson home than when our lives fall apart and we have nothing left to rely on. Nothing brings home the importance of God in our lives than when our health fails us, or our job is eliminated, a loved one dies, or our marriage disintegrates. When the very ground on which we stand drops away, it is then that we come to appreciate how much we need a God to cling to. And as our grasp on God himself starts to slip through our fingers, as our grip tires and loosens from the dead weight of our lives pulling us down into hopelessness, it is then that we learn how God clings to *us*, holds us, sustains us day by day, hour by hour, from this moment to the next. For ultimately it is not our faith in God, or our hope in God, even our love for God that counts the most, but God's faith in us, God's hopes for us, God's love for us that descends upon us like manna from heaven.

On Jesus own day of reckoning, at the last time he was to break bread with his disciples, he picks up the common loaf, blesses it, breaks it and as he begins to pass it around says to them "This is my body." In this simple gesture, now become our most sacred ritual, Jesus proclaims what is about to happen to him, that his own body is about to be broken, that he might become the blessed bread of our lives. Paul also identifies the body of Christ with the Christian community gathered together to solemnly share a common loaf of bread. We find the bread of life in our common life together, sharing our lives with one another, caring for one another, holding one another each in our own days of reckoning. At the dawn of the second century Ignatius of Antioch taught that just as a multitude of grains of wheat are gathered and ground together to be baked into a common loaf so we too are called to join together, to support one another as we are ground down by life's burdens, to be there for one another through the

heat of suffering, the fiery trials and tribulations of our lives to be kneaded and baked into the very body of Christ.

Three hundred years later, Augustine will also speak of the church as the body of Christ. We draw our sustenance from our common life of prayer in which simple bread and wine becomes transformed into the very body and blood of Christ for our nourishment. So too Augustine understands communion not as a reward for good behavior, or a testimony to our holiness, but as medicine to heal our broken, and wounded souls.

800 years later still, Aquinas will extend the identification of the body of Christ even further. The Eucharist is not only a memorial meal of Jesus' own last supper, or a ritual sacrifice of Christ own body broken and shared, the Eucharist is also a foreshadowing of that final, eschatological banquet in Heaven, in which the entire Church, past, present and future, the full communion of saints, comes together, as companions. Every time we eat his body and drink his blood, we renew our hope, and look forward to the coming of that day when God will once more be all in all.

Aquinas has an even more personal link to today's feast. The feast of Corpus Christi was created in his time, and Aquinas actually composed hymns for it. *Pangea Lingua* was written by Aquinas. And when he suffered what was likely a stroke he had a vision of the host, which spoke to him saying "you have written well about me". Adoration and Benediction was another ritual surrounding the sacred host that arose at this time, and Aquinas wrote a hymn for that ritual too, *Te Deum*.

Why this fascination with the host at this time. It actually related to our situation these past months. The laity virtually never went to communion. In fact they had to be order by law to go at least once a year, typically at Easter. Hence the term "Easter duty." Why the reticence? Because no one felt worthy. Preaching in the middle ages was not about converting people to Christ, everyone was already Christian. Rather preaching was about returning people to Christ by waking them up, pointing out their sin and reminding them of the threat of hell. To partake of the sacred host while in a state of sin was not taking medicine, it was a sacrilege. You were defiling the Body of Christ. It did not save you, it condemned you. So better to play it safe. Beholding the eucharist from a distance, spiritual communion. And so the priest would hold up the host and linger that people might behold it. A bell would be wrung as he did so, to let people know now was the time to pay attention. and that elevation of the host would be freeze-framed, put in an ornate monstrance, so that the laity might pray before it at their leisure.

Its been hard for us to not be able to take communion these past months. We miss partaking of the sacred body and blood. Because we have become used to it. Weekly communion may be a relatively recent revival, not part of the church's practice for centuries. But it is our practice, it is our ritual and it

has come to ground our lives in ways that we miss when its gone. Adoration and Benediction is actually closer to our Zoom service. The monstrance demonstrates the host, it displays it visually. Just as on this monitor. But Adoration today is no longer enough. Like a virtual service, it can supplement but it is no substitute for what we now feel is the “real thing.”

Finally also at the beginning of the twentieth century, the symbol of the body of Christ was extended once more, by the Jesuit scientist Teilhard de Chardin, to embrace the whole universe. He spoke of the universe as the cosmic Body of Christ embracing not only Christians, not only humanity, not only all living beings but everything whatsoever, the whole cosmos. For matter too is sacred. Even our bodies, in these days of social distancing perhaps especially our bodies, are just as sacred as our most spiritual thoughts. For God created it all and Christ came to redeem it all, lock, stock and barrel.

Today in this Zoom mass we behold the Body of Christ over a screen, from a distance. But as gathered even telepresently we constitute the Body of Christ too. And we are taken up into the mystical, cosmic Body of Christ. Let us pray that at the end of time we might be companions again, with the entire communion of saints in that final last supper, the eschatological banquet prepared for us by Christ himself and hosted by the Father of us all.