

**Homily for the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ**  
*Corpus Christi*  
**June 7, 2015**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception**  
**Springfield**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki**  
**Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The monks of St. Catherine's Monastery in Egypt had in their possession for hundreds of years one of the earliest copies of the Bible, written in the fourth century, on vellum. They knew it was a venerable document but they never dreamed of its huge importance. Then in 1859 a German scriptural scholar, on a visit, caught sight of the document and realized, as he said, that this was "the most precious biblical treasure in existence." The pages of this "codex" (the technical term for it) are now distributed between Russia, Germany, England and Egypt. There is a portion in the British Library in London. Sometimes we can have something priceless in our possession, but not fully appreciate its unique value.

Well, the Church's proudest possession has always been the Eucharist, God's greatest gift to His people, but perhaps we too do not

always appreciate its unique value. Today's Gospel is a foundation document for us. From the beginning, Christians assembled in private homes and relived the Last Supper; and communion was taken to the sick people who could not come. St. Justin the Martyr describes this for us, and he died in 165 A.D. So the Mass and Holy Communion are as old as the Church herself. As was logical, the custom developed of keeping hosts for Holy Communion somewhere safe, so that they would be available to the priest or deacon in an emergency.

Jesus is present in the Eucharist, even when reserved in the tabernacle. This is the body and blood of the risen and living Lord. He deserves our attention, indeed our adoration, not only at the moment of communion but whenever we come into the church. The greatest saint and scholar of the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas, wrote superb hymns in praise of the real presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, some of which we still sing today.

Over the centuries the custom developed of carrying the Blessed Sacrament in procession, for the veneration of believers. This is part of what we do on Holy Thursday evening - we take the Eucharist to the altar of repose, so there is a short procession around the church; but the occasion

is a sad one, because Jesus is beginning His passion. So the Church, waking up to the full dimension of this glorious gift she has always had in her possession, launched the summer feast of *Corpus Christi*, or, as the Church calls it today, "The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ." In many countries there are processions through the streets, with the Blessed Sacrament exposed in a precious casing called a monstrance: children scatter rose petals, citizens hang colored banners out of their windows, the town band plays.

What about us? In the tabernacle, here, Our Lord is alive and welcoming. The sanctuary lamp, always burning, is a sign of that. Christ invites us to come and spend time with him. The tabernacle is a place for face-to-face encounter, and the face of the Lord is a challenging face, but also a smiling face, an understanding face, an encouraging face, a forgiving face. If we have an hour of exposition, with the Eucharist displayed on the altar, it's a time of opportunity. If we'd lived in Galilee or Jerusalem in the time of Jesus, we would have had the greatest difficulty in getting anywhere near Him, what with the curious crowds and the scores of sick people. If we did get the chance to speak to Him, after thirty seconds someone else would have elbowed us out of the way. Here, in the

Eucharist, we can have that quiet, prolonged, personal conversation that is the heart of all prayer.

Today is a day on which we can focus on the full beauty of this great gift that we are given. Last year to mark this occasion of *Corpus Christi* I published my first Pastoral Letter, *Ars Celebrandi et Adorandi*, On the Art of Celebrating the Eucharistic Liturgy Properly and Adoring the Lord in the Eucharist Devoutly. The Eucharist is essentially God's efficacious action, but we can either cooperate with God's grace by celebrating the Eucharistic Liturgy properly or hinder its effects by failing to do so.

Adoring our Lord in the Eucharist can also be done either devoutly, carelessly or not at all. Those who never adore our Lord in the Eucharist risk becoming indolent and tepid in their relationship with Jesus. Those who adore our Lord but do so in a careless manner at least may start out with the right intention, but miss a golden opportunity to grow closer to Christ. Adoring our Lord devoutly is an expression of our love for God and our gratitude for His love and for all the gifts of His creation.

Growth in the Church is fostered through beauty in the liturgy. The command of Our Lord to increase the number of His followers everywhere is clear when He said, "Go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew

28:19). The beauty of our church edifices, magnificent works of religious art and the graceful celebration of the liturgy, accompanied by harmonious music, inspiring homilies and the active participation of the faithful, are the foundational elements that attract people to the liturgy. The great Pope Saint John Paul II also called our attention to the *ars celebrandi* in his Encyclical letter on the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, in which he said: “No one is permitted to undervalue the mystery entrusted to our hands: it is too great for anyone to feel free to treat it lightly and with disregard for its sacredness and its universality.”<sup>1</sup>

Pope Benedict XVI spoke eloquently about the meaning of the *Corpus Christi* procession for contemporary Catholics in his homilies for the feast. The sacrament of the Lord’s Body and Blood always “goes above and beyond the walls of our churches.” The procession blurs the separation between what we do inside the church, and what we do outside: we immerse Christ, so to speak, “in the daily routine of our lives, so that he may walk where we walk and live where we live.” Pope Benedict declared, “The procession represents an immense and public blessing for our city.”<sup>2</sup>

In his homily for *Corpus Christi* celebrated this past Thursday in Vatican City, Pope Francis focused on the Eucharist as spiritual

nourishment, and on the Eucharistic feast as a moment to celebrate the freedom to worship God fittingly. The Holy Father said that on the “feast of *Corpus Domini*, we have the joy not only of celebrating this mystery [of the Eucharist], but also of praising Him and singing in the streets of our city. May the procession we will make at the end of the Mass, express our gratitude for all the journey that God has allowed us to make through the desert of our poverty, to take us out of slavery, by nourishing us with His love through the Sacrament of his Body and the Blood.”

The Holy Father concluded with a call for solidarity with all those who do not have such freedom. “In a little while,” he said, “we shall walk along the way, let us perceive ourselves in communion with our many brothers and sisters who do not have the freedom to express their faith in the Lord Jesus. Let us feel ourselves united with them, let us sing with them, praise with them, adore with them. And we venerate in our hearts those brothers and sisters from whom the sacrifice of their lives has been required for fidelity to Christ: let their blood, united to that of the Lord, be a pledge of peace and reconciliation for the whole world.”<sup>3</sup>

As you receive Holy Communion today and participate in our *Corpus Christi* procession, remember the elegant and simple words of Saint

Augustine regarding our reception of the Body and Blood of Jesus: “If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive.”<sup>4</sup> What we receive is Christ who himself is God, and as St. John tells us: “God is love” (1 John 4:8). What we therefore become in receiving the Eucharist well is love, a love which is meant to be shared with others in imitation of Him whom we receive. By letting the love of God, received in the Eucharist, flow through us in our care for others, we provide a light for others to see.

As we seek to pay fitting homage to our Eucharistic King through the devoted and careful celebration of the Holy Mass, may we always feel the gentle presence of Jesus, drawing us like a magnet to his company. In this way, may we come to an ever greater realization that the law of the heart is love.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Pope Saint John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 52.

<sup>2</sup> See Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Thursday, 7 June 2007, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20070607\\_corpus-christi\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070607_corpus-christi_en.html), and Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Thursday, May 26, 2005, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/homilies/2005/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_hom\\_20050526\\_corpus-domini\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050526_corpus-domini_en.html).

<sup>3</sup> Homily of His Holiness, Pope Francis, Thursday, 4 June 2015, [http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/05/pope\\_on\\_corpus\\_domini\\_in\\_solidarity\\_with\\_persecuted/1149201](http://en.radiovaticana.va/news/2015/06/05/pope_on_corpus_domini_in_solidarity_with_persecuted/1149201).

<sup>4</sup> St. Augustine, *Easter Sermon 227*.