

## **The Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi)**

On the night before giving His life on the cross, Jesus instituted the Eucharist, the gift of his Body and Blood, in the form of bread and wine, as the perpetual passover sacrifice for his followers. This was done in the context of what is traditionally called the Last Supper. The Solemnity we celebrate this Sunday centers on the gift of the Body and Blood of the Lord, which we partake in at Holy Mass (the Eucharist) until the Lord comes again in glory at the end of the ages.

Instituting the Eucharist at the time when the Jewish Passover lambs were being sacrificed, Jesus inaugurated the Christian Passover. As the ancient rite commemorated the freedom of God's people from slavery in Egypt, so the Christian ritual recalls freedom from sin and death and the gift of new life being offered in and through Christ, who rose from the dead to bring eternal life.

A happy echo of this feast is often seen and heard in the rite of First Communion on Corpus Christi Sunday, when children, and sometimes adults, come to receive for the first time the consecrated bread and wine at the Mass, the Holy Eucharist.

While the celebration of the Lord's Body and Blood has been taking place since the Last Supper and continues to be celebrated at every Holy Mass, the more formal feast of "Corpus Christi" has been observed since 1246, beginning in the diocese of Liege in Belgium. The feast entered the Roman Missal for use in the Latin Church later in the same century, incorporating many of the texts composed by the Dominican Saint Thomas Aquinas, who lived from 1225 to 1274. Aquinas' words became the hymns for the Mass and Divine Office (Liturgy of the Hours) of this great feast.

From its origin in the Middle Ages, the Solemnity of Corpus Christi was intended to affirm Catholic belief in the Real Presence of the Risen Christ in the consecrated bread and wine at Mass. The feast came to be accompanied with processions where the Blessed Sacrament, held in an elaborate monstrance, would be carried to "altars of repose," for adoration by the faithful and Benediction (blessing) with the Blessed Sacrament.

This practice is still carried out in many places, with procession and Benediction afterwards, traditionally held on the Thursday following Trinity Sunday. Why Thursday? The idea then was to recall the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper on Holy Thursday. Today Catholics normally keep the feast on the Sunday following Trinity Sunday.

Firm belief in the Body and Blood of Christ and regular reception of the Blessed Sacrament or Holy Communion is fundamental to Catholic doctrine, spirituality and growth in holiness. This is our inheritance. Let us joyfully embrace the gift of "finest wheat" which God offers us regularly, even every day.

The unbroken teaching of the Catholic Church is that we behold and receive in the Eucharist the Real Presence of the Risen Lord, who promised to be with us until the end of time. It is a great mystery yet at the same time a simple truth: God-is-with-us in a very special and singular way in the Blessed Sacrament, both received at Holy Communion and adored in the tabernacle or exposed on the altar at Exposition and Benediction.

We should not come to Mass out of mere obligation, but because the Eucharistic celebration is an integral part of our life in Christ and our communion with others. The celebration and reception of the Eucharist should be our strength and joy, a commitment in faith and love that gives meaning to all our existence. We aren't Christians because we go to Mass, but we go to Mass because we are Christians, to celebrate God's unbounded love for us and to participate in the action that followers of Christ have engaged in since the Lord walked among his own.

The Mass never ends, we might say, because at the conclusion of every Mass we are "sent forth," to announce the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ, to the ends of the earth, by our words and especially by our deeds.

