

Corpus Christi (June 15, 2006)

Corpus Christi, Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. You might well be asking yourselves why this feast. After all we celebrate the Eucharist every day. Indeed we already have a special feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord on Holy Thursday. So why another one?

One reason was to try to correct a false notion about the Eucharist. Some people were saying that Jesus was not really present in the bread and wine, and so the Church instituted a special feast simply to celebrate that particular truth of our faith: the real presence of the Lord in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist.

St. Augustine preached a sermon back in the fifth century about the Eucharist and he emphasized a truth about the Eucharist that I would like to propose for our consideration today. He said:

“What you see is bread and a cup. This is what your eyes report to you. But your faith has need to be taught that the bread is the body of Christ, the cup the blood of Christ. . . . If then you wish to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle as he says to the faithful, ‘You are the body of Christ and his members. . . .’ You reply ‘Amen’ to that which you are, and by replying you give consent. For you hear ‘The body of Christ,’ and you reply ‘Amen.’ Be a member of the body of Christ so that your ‘Amen’ may be true. Be what you see and receive what you are.” (Sermon 272)

A little closer to our time the Church had a beautiful way of celebrating this feast. Some of you may remember the Corpus Christi procession. This originated back in the Middle Ages, first as a harvest celebration. They tell us it was a time of great faith. At least the people’s faith was simpler than ours sometimes tends to be today. When Mass ended on this day, the whole congregation would get up and walk together out into the streets. They would carry with them the tools of their daily lives and their work: the farmer a hoe, the carpenter a hammer, the housewife a broom, the baker a rolling pin, and all together they would lead the Blessed Sacrament to their fields. Along the way they stopped at the crossroads of the village, the crossroads of their lives, to pray, to sing hymns, to bless; to bless one another, to bless the streets, to bless the fields.

Their faith apparently told them that there was an intimate connection between what they did in church and what they did in their daily lives when they came out of the church. And so the tools they carried were in fact sacred tools, not as sacred as the sacrament they carried, but still in some mysterious way, a kind of sacrament anyway. They were signs of God's love in their lives and when they walked before the consecrated host they somehow joined their daily actions to the action of God in their lives. It was a very simple and yet a very profound faith.

As you know, the idea that we are the Body of Christ comes from St. Paul, and another important part of Paul's message is that because we are the Body of Christ, we must act that way. He wrote to the Christian community at Corinth because there were factions, divisions in the community. And he tells them very strongly, very forcefully, that as long as that is the case, they are not the Body, and when they come together for the breaking of the bread, which is what they called the celebration of the Eucharist, it was not really the Eucharist they were celebrating. It was simply a mockery. That was pretty strong language. Apparently what was happening was something like this: the division was between rich and poor – not very surprising. The rich who didn't have to work all day – remember Sunday was not yet a holiday – arrived early and ate up all the food and drank up all the drink and there was nothing left for the poorer members of the community when they arrived later. This angered Paul and he said so in no uncertain terms.

Well, when the people walked in the Corpus Christi procession in the Middle Ages, there were no privileged positions, except of course for the Sacrament the priest carried. They all walked together, a wonderful sign of solidarity and unity, a perfect concrete image of who they were as the Body of Christ.

We no longer have the procession through the streets, but we are still the Body of Christ. We are still Corpus Christi. This is our Feast as well as a Feast of the Lord. Perhaps we should ask ourselves today what we will take with us when we leave this church. Will we have a true notion of the ties that bind us all, of the solidarity that is ours in Christ? Will we truly be community? It seems to me that our lives should be one unending Corpus Christi procession, carrying the Body of Christ to one another and to this

world where we must live and work and learn and play. Can we, too, become sacraments of the presence of God?