



Saint Thomas Church Fifth Avenue
in the City of New York

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Sunday, May 25, 2008
The Feast of Corpus Christi

Festal Eucharist
at 11am

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Victor Lee Austin

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“CORPUS CHRISTI”

Corpus Christi is the feast of the church that celebrates the institution of the sacrament of bread and wine by Jesus at his last supper the night before he died. It provides us an annual opportunity to reflect on the meaning of what we do when we celebrate the Lord's Supper. For the liturgy of the Eucharist, the mass, the Lord's Supper, Holy Communion (it has all these names and more) is the oftenest repeated sacrament of the church. Here at Saint Thomas we may have a dozen marriages in a year, maybe two dozen baptisms; we will have one confirmation service; we normally have zero ordinations; holy unction is offered about 50 times; and although we keep no count or record, between all the clergy we may hear 30 or 40 or 50 confessions. But get this: we will have a thousand celebrations of the Eucharist. We have three every Sunday, and three every weekday except for Saturdays and church-closing holidays (such as tomorrow), on which we nonetheless have one (at 12:10). Every day, year in and year out, the mass is said here at least once.

What is it that we are doing in this most-frequently-offered sacrament? The simplest answer (and sometimes the simplest is best) is that we are obeying the Lord's command. *Do this*, he said, *so that I will be remembered*. So we do this, celebrate the Eucharist, attend the Eucharist, receive the Eucharist, week by week, day by day, simply because here is a way we can be obedient to Christ. He told us to do it, and we do it.

But why? Christ's answer has something to do with remembering. *Do this in remembrance of me. Do this for the remembrance of me. Do this so that I will be remembered*. The point of remembrance is to have a presence in the midst of an absence. Christ has died, has been raised from the dead, has ascended to his Father. His body is not in the tomb, not at table with Mary and Martha and Lazarus, not walking some dirt road in Judea, and not anywhere else: his body is not to be found. But the obedient, faithful “doing this” with the bread and the wine brings about his presence in the midst of his absence. His presence is real, while the absence remains also real. His body is really here when we “do this”: but it is not a body of flesh, but bread and wine.

There is a view expressed from time to time amongst a minority of Christians (it has never been anything but a minority view) that the bread and wine in Holy Communion are merely symbols, that the bread and wine are not really changed. So you wouldn't point to the consecrated Bread and say “That's the Body of Christ”; rather, you'd say something like “That's a symbol of the Body of Christ.” On the symbolic view, the bread has not been changed. Such is not the view of the Episcopal Church, nor is it the view of most Christians throughout history. The broad view is that something happens; the bread and the wine are consecrated in the prayer of the mass and thereby changed. If you point to the bread before the consecration and ask what it is, the correct answer is “It's bread”; point and ask the same question after the consecration and the correct answer is “The Body of Christ.”

Here at Saint Thomas we reserve the sacrament, which means that some of the consecrated Bread is put into a silver container called a ciborium, covered with a white veil, and placed either in the tabernacle at the back of the chantry altar or near the high altar in the aumbry in the side sanctuary wall. The principal purpose of reservation is to have Communion available to take to the sick, but it also provides a focus of prayer and adoration through the week. Apart from a few hours on Good Friday and Holy Saturday, the Body of Christ is always here. Each Sunday right after the 8 o'clock mass we need to move the sacrament from the chantry tabernacle to the high altar aumbry. One of my cherished memories of Max Henderson-Begg is the way he would question me about that move to make sure it had been done. Max would say, "Father Theologian, has Our Lord been moved?" or "Father, where is Our Lord?"

The wording of his question shows Max had a strong appreciation of the realism of Christ's presence in the Eucharist. If he were near as a priest walked by carrying the reserved Sacrament (white veil, silver ciborium, the Body of Christ inside), he would genuflect and cross himself. He trained the acolytes to do likewise. It was something that struck me when I first came here, the respect that the 8th grade acolyte boys showed to Corpus Christi, the consecrated Bread, Jesus present among us.

But I want to take you one step further than the realism of the presence. Consider what happens to the bread when it is consecrated. It becomes the Body of Christ. It would be wrong to speak of it or to treat it as if it were unchanged. *But has it ceased to be bread?* Our Prayer Book speaks of the consecrated Bread with a capital "B." There is a line of thought that when the bread is consecrated and thus becomes the Body of Christ, it is at the very same time becoming (more so than anything else in the world) real bread. The Bread of the altar, that is to say, is the most real bread in the world. There is no bread anywhere which is more bread than this Bread.

And why would we want to say that? Well, think of what you might say to a friend later today. You might say: I received Communion today. And that is a very good way of speaking. The consecrated Bread is Communion. Just as, in a less intense way, all bread rightly used is some sort of communion amongst human beings.

Just last week someone said to me (again, it was in appreciation of a quality he had found in Max): You really get to know someone when you break bread with him. He went on: "I don't mean 'Oh, let's have lunch'; I mean really breaking bread." The communion of human beings with each other, the fulfilment of our life together: it is no accident that we refer to such moments of intimacy as "breaking bread." Herbert McCabe says that the reason we can't celebrate the mass with coke and frankfurters is not because Jesus didn't use them, but because coke and frankfurters aren't real food. It's exaggerated and incomplete, but you see the point. Real human food—real bread—doesn't just preserve biological life. We break bread so that we can have *human* life, which is fellowship, communion, living together as friends.

When the bread and wine were being shared among them, Jesus said to his disciples, "I have called you friends." Here is the ethical substance of the feast of Corpus Christi. Yes, we need to recognize the reality of the consecrated Bread and Wine as the Body and Blood of Christ; recognize, and give thanks to God that Jesus is present to us in the midst of his absence. But we will do great harm to our souls if we bend the knee before the consecrated Host and then jab an elbow, or worse, into the person beside us. Friends, look around you! We are about to share Communion. And he who is really present here has called us friends. We must not receive this Body (at the altar) and then act divisively or harmfully towards this Body (here assembled).

At the end of this mass, the celebrant and the deacon will turn around to face the people, all of you. Suppose, instead the usual blessing and dismissal, one of them were to gesture towards the congregation and ask, "What is it, this people gathered here?" The correct answer would be "The Body of Christ," with just as much realism as we say it of the Bread and the Wine. If you genuflect to the sacrament, remember to genuflect to one another.