

## Homily for the Feast of Corpus Christi

Divine Redeemer Church

near Charleston, South Carolina

It is a privilege to serve as invited preacher for the Feast of Corpus Christi. I suspect, however, that Father Newman was prompted by historical precedent. From its beginning in the Church, Dominicans have been closely linked to this special feast of the Eucharist.

It all goes back to 1264. In that year, Pope Urban IV decided to institute a feast of the Eucharist to be celebrated on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday. It would have been the first Thursday in what today we call "Ordinary Time." [In places where this day is not a civil holiday, later liturgical changes allow for the feast to be celebrated on the following Sunday so that more faithful can participate.] To compose the liturgical texts for the Mass and divine Office, the Pope turned to a famous Dominican, St Thomas Aquinas. We still hear one of Aquinas's compositions sung at Mass today – the "Lauda, Sion," "Laud, O Zion, your salvation . . . Christ, your king and shepherd true." Corpus Christi celebrates the person of Jesus Christ, and especially observes the gift to us that God has made of his Son in the Eucharist. But why a special feast?

Earlier this Spring, during the Easter holy days, the Church recalled the institution of the Eucharist, along with the priesthood that perpetuates it in the world. The figure of Melchizedek, "priest of God," reminds us that it is the divine plan to designate some men for the service of benediction and sanctification. Christ ordained priests to ensure that his Eucharist and the divine forgiveness of sins continue in the world. Holy Thursday provides

the obvious moment to mark these great mysteries of our faith and the charity that they unleash among the people of God.

We should never forget that Christ instituted the Eucharist shortly before his death: "I received [it is St Paul who speaks] from the Lord what I handed on to you, namely, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread, and after he had given thanks . . ." (1Cor 11:23). From that moment on, the Eucharist announces Christ's passion. The reason for the bond between the Eucharist and the Passion is simple to understand: if Christ had not died for our sins, no human person could hope to achieve the virtues that the Eucharist causes to flourish in our lives. In this sacrament, God bestows a kind of unity and charity that only He can create; it surpasses anything that the whole human race, not to mention any individual, could ever achieve alone.

However, God never works in us against our own will, and so the Church requires that we properly dispose ourselves to receive the Eucharist. We must confess our sins, if necessary, and always renew our sorrow for past sins, so that the virtues of Christ's passion can take new and deep root in our heart. Without this renewal of the whole person, none of us could discover in ourselves that for which we must always give Eucharistic thanks.

Today's special observance of the Eucharist allows us to focus on Christ's love outside of the immediate context of his Passion and Death. Impetus for a special post-Paschal season feast originated with a thirteenth-century Belgian woman, Blessed Julienne of Mont-Cornillon, whose personal devotion to the Eucharist spread rapidly around the area of her native Liege. Julienne was captivated by the real presence of her friend Jesus in the sacrament, and wanted to make others keenly aware of this dimension of the Eucharistic

sacrament. It is not surprising that a woman encouraged the Church to think directly about the personal presence of a friend. And that's just what we behold in the blessed Eucharist. For this sacrament stands at the heart of everyday Christian life, and so remains the real and efficacious instrument of Christ's abiding presence to his friends.

Corpus Christi, the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, turns our attention squarely to what this blessed sacrament really contains: Christ, true God and perfect man. On this day, the Church asks us especially to meditate on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. With the whole communion of saints, we confess that Christ is really, truly, and substantially present under the appearances of bread and wine, and that the communicant receives the complete Christ, body, blood, soul, and divinity. Consider the wonder of God's providence: Jesus becomes really present in the Eucharist so that he can abide among us as a friend, so that we can through the sacramental eating and drinking of his Body and Blood commune with him.

Put otherwise, today's feast celebrates the friendship that Christ desires to build with each one of us. The Eucharist to be sure remains a meal, but this sacrament speaks less about eating and drinking than about what the meal contains: "By the truth of his body and blood Christ joins us to him in this sacrament" (ST IIIa q. 75 a. 1). Thus, St Thomas Aquinas. It is proper to friendship, so the saint continues, to live with one's friends (*convivere amicis*). We can never take for granted the fact that God chooses to be friends with us, even to the point of devising a special sacrament in order that he might abide continually as First Friend with us. This sacrament escapes, to be sure, all manner of human explanation.

Whereas it is a majestic mystery that Jesus is here present, greater still is the truth that God wants to draw us so close to himself.

In the Eucharist Christ does not so much come down from heaven, as He renders us present to Himself. God doesn't move about locally. Christ wants this friendship with all men. Bear in mind the great superfluity of fragments recorded in today's account of the multiplication of the loaves: Jesus not only fed the people, he also provided for them in perpetuity—the number of baskets, twelve, pointing to the number of apostles, who continue to supply the Church with the bread from heaven.

When we think about real presence as God's chosen means to extend the offer of friendship to us, we understand better why it is that Christ commanded us to celebrate the Eucharist "until he comes" (1Cor 11:26). He doesn't want us to be alone. Because of the highly intimate union with Christ that it provides, this sacrament serves as the sign of the greatest love and provides the comfort of hope for our final resurrection.

Let's close with the saint to whom the Pope turned to celebrate the great mystery of the Eucharist: "O sacred banquet, in which Christ becomes our food, the memory of his Passion is celebrated, the soul is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us."