

Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ

“Corpus Christi is the most solemn feast of the Church year.”

– St. Peter Eymard (1811-68)

While most Catholics are familiar with the annual feast reverently called the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi), we sometimes need reminding as to the purpose of the celebration.

Origins

The feast of Corpus Christi was inspired by God through the heart of a 16-year-old Augustinian nun, St. Juliana (1192-1258), in the diocese of Liege, Belgium. Beginning in 1208, Juliana experienced frequent visions that included a full moon with a stripe across it. Jesus appeared to Juliana and told her that the moon symbolized the Church and the stripe represented the lack of a special feast day to honor the Eucharist. According to Father Michael Muller’s book, “The Blessed Eucharist,” our Lord had four reasons for asking Juliana to pursue adding such a feast day onto the Church calendar: 1. “In order that the Catholic doctrine might receive aid from the institution of this festival at a time when the faith of the world was growing cold and heresies were rife.” 2. “That the faithful who love and seek truth and piety may be enabled to draw from this source of life new strength and vigor to walk continually in the way of virtue.” 3. “That irreverence and sacrilegious behavior towards the Divine Majesty in this adorable Sacrament may, by sincere and profound adoration be extirpated and repaired.” 4) “He bade her announce to the Christian world His will that this feast be observed.”

When, after 20 years, Juliana told others about her visions,

many scoffed at and rejected her. A notable exception was the local bishop, Bishop Robert de Thorete (d. 1246), who recognized that the world would benefit from such a celebration and, in 1246, authorized the feast of Corpus Christi within his diocese. Before the first feast day could occur, Bishop de Thorete died, and the potential widespread enthusiasm quickly waned. But nevertheless such a feast would become part of the universal liturgical calendar.

Pope Urban IV

At the time Juliana made her vision public, there was an archdeacon in the Liege diocese named Jacques Panatleon. Jacques, who favored the feast day, would become Pope Urban IV (r. 1261-64) and as pope in 1264 promoted the celebration. Some at the time argued against a special feast day, while others thought such a celebration should be combined with Holy (Maundy) Thursday. Pope Urban would address both these concerns and lay out the merits for a separate feast day (see sidebar).

In his papal bull *Transiturus*, the pope decreed that the feast of Corpus Christi would be celebrated annually on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday. He wrote: "Therefore, upon this holy day, let the faithful with heart and voice sing hymns of joy; upon this memorable day let faith triumph, hope increase, charity burn: let the pious rejoice ... and pure souls leap with joy." Many parts of the world indeed celebrate Corpus Christi as a holy day of obligation on Thursday after Trinity Sunday. In the United States, the bishops moved the annual feast to the next Sunday.

Processions begin

The 12th and 13th centuries were times of increased adoration of the Eucharist. The laity wanted to extend their adoration of the Blessed Sacrament outside the Mass. This was a period centuries before the Church introduced Eucharistic Adoration,

the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament that we have today. A procession of the Eucharist, outside the Church, outside the Mass, was a way for Catholics to publicly adore the Eucharist and demonstrate their love to the world. The feast of Corpus Christi was considered an ideal day for such a procession.

Papal Bull: 'Transiturus'



As part of the August 11, 1264, papal bull, Pope Urban IV explained his rationale for establishing a special feast day to celebrate the Eucharist even though the Blessed Sacrament was honored in every Mass:

“But, although we daily commemorate this mystery in the Sacrifice of the Mass, we nevertheless believe that it is very meet and right, in order to confound the foolishness of heretics, that we should, at least once a year, celebrate a more special and more solemn Feast in honour of this Sacrament. Maundy Thursday, the day on which Jesus Christ instituted this Sacrament, being taken up with the reconciliation of sinners, the washing of feet, and other mysteries, we cannot give ourselves up entirely to the celebration of this august Sacrament; this is the reason it is proper to assign another day for this.”

The pope goes on to discuss that other feast days have been assigned to honor various saints and explains:

“But if such is the custom of the Church, how much more reason have we to practice it in regard to the vivifying Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, Who is the glory and the crown of all saints. We shall thus have the advantage of supplying by a pious diligence, for all the faults we may have committed at the Masses we have offered up or assisted at during the course of the year. Moreover, the faithful at the approach of this Feast, calling to mind their past faults, will come in all humility and purity of heart to expiate them, and to ask of God pardon for the irreverences committed during the time of Mass, or for their negligence in assisting at it. ... We, therefore, in order to fortify and exalt the Orthodox Faith, have thought proper to ordain, that besides the daily commemoration which the Church makes of this Divine Sacrament, there shall be celebrated every year a solemn Feast in its honour; we name a day expressly for this purpose, to wit, the Thursday after the Octave of Pentecost. Upon which day the devout multitude shall visit our churches, where the clergy, as well as the laity, filled with holy joy, shall sing canticles of praise. ...” (“The Life of St. Juliana of Cornillon,” George Ambrose Bradbury, O.C., Thomas Richardson and Son, London, 1873)

Processions became widespread in the 14th century and were orchestrated with great pageantry. The whole town participated, groups representing political parties, trade unions, police, the military, bands, school children and more, vied to be in these beautiful parades. Since this ceremony was meant to be on par with the pomp and circumstance afforded a king or queen, the processions tended to be very elaborate and often lasted for hours. Shops were closed, little or no commerce conducted. Church bells rang, and artillery was fired. It was a special, holy event, and everyone participated.

Corpus Christi today

Although not mandated, some parishes today continue to demonstrate their adoration for the Eucharist by carrying the Blessed Sacrament down city streets and into neighborhoods. Cardinal Francis Arinze, writing about Eucharistic processions, noted:

“They [Christians] should not allow angry demonstrators, supporters of political factions, and sports fans to have the monopoly of processions. They should not hesitate to get up and be counted for Christ.” The Corpus Christi procession is a unique opportunity to demonstrate our core belief and expose our most cherished possession to people who have no idea about Christ in the Eucharist.

We live in a world of sense and reality; the Eucharist is both reality and a divine mystery. We might not be able to explain the mystery, but we know in our heart and in our soul that here is Jesus. He is reality. He is with us. Through the Eucharist he assures us of eternity, a heavenly place beyond our world of sense. On Corpus Christi we are called to renew our belief in this mystery, to praise, adore and even publicly acclaim our Eucharistic Jesus in a special way.

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