

Homily for Corpus Christi, June 14, 2009. Fr. Joseph T. Nolan
“THE BODY OF CHRIST”

If you think of the Catholic church as a building (it is of course much more) there is one thing always present—a red light. Not for traffic! It is the sanctuary lamp, the large candle in a red glass container. It tells the visitor that this is the place of the Blessed Sacrament, the consecrated bread that became Christ’s body during Mass. The bread, now called hosts, are kept in the tabernacle, usually standing upon a side altar. With us it is kept now in the beautiful space formerly for baptism – over there. It is this body of Christ that is honored and publicly enthroned. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament really means adoration of Christ as God’s son, hidden, so to speak, under this form of bread.

A short but solemn service called Benediction was developed to pay homage to this Presence. And this feastday, Corpus Christi, was also instituted to honor the Blessed Sacrament. Benediction is less observed now because new emphasis has been placed on the Mass. Participation in the Mass, our principle liturgical act, does not rule out devotions but previously the Mass was usually not a form of prayer in which people took part. Now it has become, as it should be, the great prayer, the great offering of the people with the priest. And Christ. Everything we are talking about began, as we heard in the gospel, at the Last Supper when Jesus said of the bread, “This is my body, take and eat.” In the Mass we now call that the consecration. The priest is not a magician changing bread into Jesus, as children sometimes think. The church understands the action of Jesus with his disciples as prompted or energized by the Holy Spirit. Jesus said of himself in his lifetime, “the spirit of the Lord is upon me.” And the eucharistic prayer invokes the Holy Spirit to make the bread and wine the sign or sacrament of Christ’s presence. The church absolutely defends the fact that this is a real presence of Christ under these forms of bread and wine. The theology was worked out by St. Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century, and you can take a short course in this theology by reading the long poem called the Sequence, assigned to the Corpus Christi mass. It is not high poetry but a good summary of St. Thomas’ thought.

We give many names to this many-sided gift of God. *Eucharist* is the name we usually give to the consecrating and offering of the bread and wine at the Mass. When received by believers we call it *holy communion*. The Mass is more than a communion service, it is an offering of Christ, and the faithful with him, to the Father. What we offer is our lives in God’s service, our labors in bringing about God’s reign.

Blessed Sacrament. Eucharist. Holy communion. These are different aspects or different takes of the self-gift God makes to us. Bread is life-giving, and so is wine, but more often we associate wine with festivity, and gladness of life. It reminds us of Jesus’ promise that “my joy may be yours, and your joy may be complete.” This bread and wine, and the prayer of the church, mysteriously bring Christ into an

inner communion with each of us. There are so many ways to think about this great action which began with the bread and wine in Jesus' hands at the Last Supper. And there is one more truth, the most important of all. The consecrated bread is Christ's body. *So is any baptized person, for he or she is a member of that body.*

We have all heard that from St. Paul but we don't dare to believe it or act upon it much of the time. Pope Pius XII first used the term "mystical body" to emphasize this truth. Later the adjective was dropped. It's really true that one can say of bread, this is the body of Christ, and one can say of the baptized Christian, you are the body of Christ. And even more: the whole church is the body of Christ. Some would like to say this is true of everyone because we are all the children of God. True enough, and it's also true that salvation does not depend on baptism; holiness and salvation are open to anyone who loves, who seeks good and turns from evil. Baptism does not make us better; it makes us more privileged. We can, for instance, receive the other sacraments, especially holy communion. And it is a reminder that we are Jesus' disciples, called to teach and work in the vineyard.

There is one time, and it happens all the time, when the two aspects of the body of Christ meet. It is holy communion. We are so familiar with this sacred action that we perhaps miss the significance of what is being said and done. The priest, holding the host, says, "the body of Christ." Do you know what he was required to say, before each communicant, in the days of Latin? "Corpus Domini nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternam." Most did not understand, and few in those days went to communion anyway. Now he says simply, "The body of Christ." But that applies to both the bread and the person. In this precious moment of faith, the two meet. And the answer we make to the priest—"Amen"—is more important than often appears. It really means "I accept and welcome my role as a member of Christ's body. I am a Christian, a disciple. What St. Paul once wrote is true of me and all my brothers and sisters: 'I live now—no, not I, but Christ in me.'"

One could say that the Blessed Sacrament is the great reminder of the Incarnation, that God in Jesus came among us, and abides. The eucharist is the great reminder of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. The communion is the great reminder that the life of Jesus continues in us. All this began at that supper table when Jesus took the bread and the cup in his hands. He said of this action—this self-giving, this communion—"Do this to remember me." And we have. Ever since.