

## Solemnity of Corpus Christi 2020

[*Deuteronomy* 8:2-3, 14-16; *Psalms* 147; *1 Corinthians* 10:16-17; *John* 6:51-59]

Two days ago the Province of Alberta entered into Stage 2 of our relaunch strategy. The announcement was accompanied by notification of what can now open, services that can resume and so on. Yet, at the same time we heard from officials urgent cries to remember we are still in the midst of a pandemic, that the virus is a serious one with proven potential to be fatal, and that therefore we must continue to practice good hygiene, physical distancing and the wearing of masks as appropriate. Civic authorities are nervous as they see people letting down their guard, so they are saying with insistence: remember, and act accordingly.

The very same plea, with even greater urgency, comes to us through Sacred Scripture on this Solemnity of Corpus Christi: Remember, and act accordingly. The summons here, though, is not to recall something lethal; it is an urgent call to bring to mind what is life-giving, Jesus present in the Eucharist, and to act in accordance with what is recalled. In order to respond to this entreaty, we need first to consider what remembering means in the context of the Eucharist. This, in turn, will enable us to understand the action to which it calls us.

At the centre of the mystery of the Most Holy Eucharist stands a command to remember: “do this in memory of me.” Normally, when we remember the past, we think of events that went before us as finished, done. The Christian memory of the Last Supper is something very different: the remembered past is rendered present. When, in obedience to the Lord’s command, the Church does what he did in the Upper Room, something wondrous happens: through the words of Christ voiced by the priest and the action of the Holy Spirit, the elements of bread and wine are transformed into the very Body and Blood of the Lord such that they are bread and wine no longer. We proclaim at mass that this is the mystery of faith, beyond the ability of the unaided human mind fully to comprehend. However, if we ponder the sacred texts offered in this mass and allow them to lead us into this mystery of what we are remembering, important insights emerge and we begin to see how we must act accordingly.

In the Gospel passage from St. John, we hear these words of Jesus: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” In the distant background is the experience of the Israelite people who had journeyed with Moses in the wilderness. God had responded to their physical hunger by feeding them with bread from heaven, called manna. Jesus is saying that God is now acting in a way even more wondrous to respond to our spiritual hunger for eternal life, and the Bread He gives is Jesus himself. Jesus in turn instituted the sacrament of the Eucharist so that from this altar we might receive him, the Bread of Life, and live in the hope that arises from the promise of eternal life linked with its reception.

St. Paul takes our reflection further. “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the Blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the Body of Christ?” At the Last Supper, the words of Jesus spoken over the bread and wine - This is my Body, This is my Blood – pointed to the sacrifice he was about to make of himself the next day on the Cross. After pronouncing those words, he offered the bread and wine to the disciples, to indicate thereby he was inviting them to offer themselves to the Father in union with his own self-gift, inviting them, in other words, to lay down their lives with him for the salvation of the world. St. Paul is teaching that the same call comes to us in the Eucharist. Jesus is present on the altar in the very act of Calvary, his self-sacrifice to the Father, so that by receiving him in Holy Communion, we, too, can offer our lives in union with him, and thus participate in his saving mission.

Now that we have reflected on what it means to remember in the context of the Eucharist, we are ready to address the question: How are we to act accordingly?

As we remember that at every mass Jesus is present as the Bread of everlasting Life, we would normally act in response by ensuring that we go to mass to receive him. But for some time now that has not been possible because of the public health imperative limiting our ability to gather, and we have been left hungering for the Eucharist. So, when our ability to receive the Bread of Life is restricted, how can we act in accord with what we remember? Let's listen again to a rather arresting statement that Moses made to the people as he recalled their experience of hunger in the desert. "[God] humbled you by letting you hunger, then by feeding you with manna . . ., in order to make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Moses is saying that God allowed the people to hunger before feeding them in order to teach them what was for their own good, that is, their absolute need for God. From this perspective we awaken to the possibility that God has been allowing our Eucharistic hunger for the same reason. This is not to say that God caused the virus and all that has happened as a result, but it is to say that God will act in all things to teach us and turn them to our good. The action that accords with remembering Jesus the Bread of Life thus becomes a profound examination of conscience. What is God teaching me in this experience? Have I been taking the Eucharist for granted? Have I lost the sense of just how necessary it is for my life? What have I been allowing to take the place of Sunday mass? Have I been seeking to satisfy the desires of my heart with food that simply cannot satisfy? Have I been listening more to the babble of mass media than to every word that comes from the mouth of God?

And as we remember Jesus present on the altar in his act of self-offering, to what action does that call us? Here it is helpful to recall the command at the end of mass as the congregation is dismissed. "Go forth, the mass is ended." This does not mean, "Our business here is done, please watch your step on the way out." What it does mean is this: at this mass, we have pledged to lay down our lives with Christ, having offered them through Christ to the Father for the life of the world. The command to "Go forth" is the summons to put into action what we have pledged by offering our lives daily in service to our brothers and sisters. Our experience of the pandemic has taught us that there is no shortage of need. In its light, we have become unavoidably aware of the terrible conditions in many long term care facilities, the helplessness of the homeless, the vulnerability of migrant workers, the fragility of many domestic situations, and the instability of human solidarity, to cite just a few examples. Remembering the presence at mass of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross has as its inevitable consequence working for charity, acting for justice and labouring for reconciliation and peace.

We are now traversing the stages of re-launch. Officials grow nervous as people forget the pandemic and let down their guard. What should make us far more nervous is the harm that follows inevitably from forgetfulness of Jesus and the wondrous blessing he offers in the Eucharist, the gift that is nothing less than eternal life. So, let's be sure to remember, and act accordingly.

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