

*"I am the living bread that came down from heaven
...whoever eats this bread will live forever."
(John 6.51-52)*

Dear Friends,

The Feast of Corpus Christi is celebrated to give thanks to God for his love and generosity; to remind us of Christ's mission; Christ's sacrifice; of how this mystery is contained in the sacrament of Christ's body and blood and expressed in the amazing statement that Jesus is the living bread – the food, the nourishment and the sustenance necessary for his followers to be fully alive and in all circumstances. Jesus says many things about himself in the formation process of his friends and followers, in order that they may develop a personal understanding and relationship with him, by appreciating who he is through the different ways Jesus presents himself. I am the good shepherd; I am the door; I am the way, the truth and the life; I am the living bread come down from heaven. Each of these expressions brings out different aspects of the person of Jesus and of his mission.

Reflecting on today's scripture, I found myself wondering what those who were with him in his last days heard when Jesus said, "I am the living bread come down from heaven" or at the last supper as today's gospel recalls – "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many"? Perhaps the disciples understood that Jesus was expanding upon and changing some of the significance of the Jewish Passover; perhaps they realized that Jesus was sharing some of his spiritual struggle and reflecting on what was to occur to him, thus giving his coming passion and death a significance that would become the mystery of faith to sustain his followers. Whatever the first disciples heard that night came to be understood and received, as well as celebrated as the sacrifice of Christ which still sustains us in our covenant with the Lord; it still feeds us in our relationship as disciples of Christ and still strengthens us in our daily commitment of service to others.

Historically, the purpose of today's feast was to rekindle the faith of many who in medieval times had lost sight and contact with the wonderful sacrament of the Eucharist. Perhaps too many had come to take mass and the Eucharist for granted because faith, Church and the sacraments was the ordinary context of daily living and while the sacrament of Christ's real presence may have been in plain sight, it had become invisible. So the feast of Corpus Christi was intended to bring out the sacrament's meaning, its mystery and its mission. The desire to rekindle in the hearts of many an appreciation of the truth that Christ lived and died for us and that Christ is with us, really and truly, in the Blessed Sacrament, led to the popular renewal of faith expressed in the devotions of Corpus Christi processions and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, and in some of the traditional hymns, that some of us grew up with.

However, celebrating this feast in our present context requires a rediscovery of faith and calls for a whole new presentation of the gospel, as well as a firm missionary purpose,

with which to face contemporary disaffection with anything Christian; to face the disappointment of many with some of the Church's life and practices, as well as her teachings. This effort becomes a major challenge to discover for our times, the best way to make Christ real and present, which, I believe is the central mission and goal of the new evangelization.

There are serious efforts to revive Eucharistic devotions in the Church in recent times. But what today's feast requires is more than devotions; it requires the faith that underpins the devotion. This raises, for many, questions such as: Are we able to celebrate and uphold the truth that Christ is our Lord and Saviour? Do we really believe that Christ is present with us, in the Sacrament of His Body and Blood? Such questions highlight the point that today, in matter of faith and morals, we cannot take anything for granted. Our theology tells us that Sacraments are effective signs that give grace, but the other side of that teaching is that they are not effective if there is no faith in those who receive them.

As I reflect on the circumstances in which we live, it's not the truth of Catholic doctrine or the quality of our devotion which primarily captures my interest, but the place and meaning of the "mystery of our faith" and its impact in daily life. Does it make any difference to me and to you, that Christ is alive and that we believe he is present, in our world? And if it does, how do we show it?

The gift of Corpus Christi is not a precious treasure to be kept in a golden box, nor is it an object to be paraded in the streets. As important as it may be to have Christ present in our tabernacles or to give public veneration to the sacrament, neither of these practices make any sense if the body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ is not present in the Body of Christ, constituted by Christ's baptized followers! The challenge of this feast for us today is to overcome our invisibility, inactivity and indifference in everyday life.

What needs to be rekindled in the lives and hearts of so many of us, who claim to be Christians, is the awareness, the conviction and the mission that we are the "real presence" and effective sacraments of Christ in the world.

In the middle ages when the feast of Corpus Christi was publicly and widely celebrated, the individuals of the day, might have forgotten the truth and reality signified by the Blessed Sacrament, but the cultural context was essentially Christian and Catholic. Its assumptions and core values were commonly upheld and so, that social foundation made it possible to stoke the fire of piety in a cultural Catholicism, or made it possible to rebuild on some of the apparently self-evident truths that formed the paradigm of the day.

This is no longer the situation in which we find ourselves. In our country and in our time, Christendom is dead, the Christian values that shaped and formed much of our country and society are eroding away and if they haven't already eroded, at best what remains are shadows of what was assumed to be "truth". Now, not much can be taken for granted in the realm of what constitutes truth, except perhaps for what the media promotes as relativism and political correctness.

To rekindle the Christian faith in such a context calls for a major transformation of today's disciples of Christ. For our Church, this is the challenge of the New Evangelization; for our pastors and leaders, this is what Pope Francis has called a pastoral conversion which he described as a dream for a Church with a missionary option.

If we take Francis' words to heart, the demands to make Christ really present in our midst are far reaching. Are we ready to do what the gospel imperative is calling us to do, to offer Christ as the living bread for those who are hungry for meaning; to present Christ's teaching as the basis for significant living in today's world; to unabashedly propose Jesus Christ as the way to eternal life?

Can we see ourselves, as Pope Francis suggests, capable of transforming everything, so that the Church's customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channelled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for [our church's] self-preservation? To bring Christ to the streets is now a dangerous thing! For a time indifference was the primary response to Christian presence, now it's getting more hostile with concerted efforts to push faith into the realm of not only the personal, but the private with the intention of removing it from the public sphere.

Given this present secular context, what does bringing Christ into your work place mean for you who are Catholic and Christian health care professionals? Right now, in our country, some of you are being questioned, laughed at and perhaps even persecuted for your faith and for your desire to bring what you believe to bear, upon your service of people. Some of you are being asked to put your convictions aside; some of you are being threatened with the possibility of having to let go of your medical practices! These are not easy matters to deal with and I hope your gathering has provided an opportunity to find courage and support as you weigh the cost of discipleship.

Along with you, those of us who believe in Christ, who are trying to live under Christ's standard and by his expectation, we are also struggling to find our voice and our place, in order to stand for what we hold to be true and holy, sacred and beautiful, not because the Church teaches it, but because it is rooted in God, and revealed to us by Jesus Christ. On this day when we honour Christ in our midst, may he be our living bread and the source of our life. May today's Eucharistic assembly nurture our faith and an occasion to find in each other's hope, the passion and strength to carry on the mission of Christ entrusted to us. When Jesus left us his Body & Blood as sign and sustenance for the journey, he did not leave us alone. He found the way to be totally and really present to us. With this grace, let us now make Christ truly present to others as we strive to be the Salt of the Earth and the Light of the Nations.

Thank you one and all for being here and may Christ be with all of you.

Amen.

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