

**Catholic Church of the Beatitudes
Santa Barbara, CA**

Homily for **The Solemnity of the Most Holy**

Body and Blood of Christ

Formerly **The Feast of Corpus Christi** (Cycle B)

Thomas F. Heck

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Reflecting on Ex. 24:3-8, Heb 9:11-15, and Mk 14:12-16, 22-26

Before we consider today's readings, let me offer a word about the history, traditions and symbolism surrounding the feast that we are observing today.

Some of us will remember that in pre-Vatican-II days it was called the feast of *Corpus Christi*. It came into the Latin rite calendar under Pope Urban IV in 1264, in response to the urgings of a certain Juliana of Liège, Belgium, as a special day to celebrate the institution of the Holy Eucharist “outside of Lent,” as the *Catholic Encyclopedia* explains. (It competes, of course, with the older and more widely celebrated Holy Thursday liturgy, solemnly instituting the Eucharist—an observance that our community still wrestles with.)

But feast days aside, isn't there something fundamentally distressing about the very idea of isolating or objectifying the *body* of Christ? When I consider representations like Michelangelo's *pietà*, I see the corpse of Christ being supported on the lap of his grieving mother. His body—his “corpus”—had previously been drained of all its blood on the cross. The body was here, the blood was there, soaking into the earth.

When we “make Eucharist” as a Catholic Christian community today, we can't help but see what's on our altar: the bread here, the wine there; the body here, the blood there. At the memorial acclamation, we tell it like it is: “When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim *your death*, Lord Jesus, until you come again.”

This is serious stuff, even though it loses its edge through the frequent repetitions of weekly, even daily, Mass.

In our Eucharistic liturgy we don't for a moment pretend that Jesus did *not* know what was coming when he blessed the bread and wine of his final Passover meal, self-identifying with them as representing his own body, his own blood—indeed, his own slow death by being drained of blood.

I believe that Jesus also wanted to leave us a way to remember him. He wanted to give us the means to affirm, again and again, the *new* covenant that he announced, established, and sealed with his own blood (as the Letter to the Hebrews points out).

Truly, this is serious stuff . . .

Fast forward to our own generation. It seems that most every Catholic born before 1960 knew that in Latin, *Corpus Christi* meant “the body of Christ.” (let me ask for a show of hands – Who knew?) Why bring this up? Because it appears that some Texans in Congress or the Military never quite *got* that meaning. Forgive me for questioning whether the “gift of tongues” was ever liberally bestowed upon our lawmakers and politicians! Their ignorance of Latin roots, at any rate, was appalling.

In the 1970s, the US Navy got funding to build a whole fleet of nuclear “fast attack” submarines—38 of them, each at a cost of over \$900M dollars. The plan was to name them after American cities. One of them was to be called the *Corpus Christi* as a tribute to the port city in Texas.

A funny thing happened on the way to its 1983 commissioning, however. Some Catholic politicians were alerted to the fact that naming a nuclear warship the “body of Christ” was wholly inappropriate—even sacrilegious.

Ooops! How could this touchy naming issue be defused? The Navy quickly disarmed its critics by lengthening the submarine's name to "*The City of Corpus Christi*."

Now I wonder: How many of us Catholics are pleased with that solution?

Back to the good old feast day. Once upon a time (pre-Vatican II) we did not even *think* about the Eucharistic blood of Christ—that was Father's domain. We faithful had perfectly-formed white communion wafers placed on our tongues, as we kneeled on *our* side of the communion rail.

Some of us might even have heard the words *corpus* and *Christi* in what the priest mumbled as he passed by: "Corpus domini nostri Jesu Christi custodiat animam tuam in vitam aeternum, amen!"—"May the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ (literally) take custody or possession of your soul unto life everlasting. Amen."

Today's first two readings are quite a contrast to the traditional, antiseptic, ritualized Catholic sacramental tradition! In Exodus we hear of the blood of newly slain heifers drenching the altar that Moses erected at the foot of Mt. Sinai; bowls of the same blood were then sprinkled on the people, while Moses reminded them that "This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you..."

In the second reading, from the Letter to the Hebrews, we are reminded that, in contrast to what was done in Moses's time, Jesus was taking the *covenant in blood* a quantum leap forward:

For if the blood of goats and bulls and the sprinkling of a heifer's ashes can sanctify those who are defiled so that their flesh is cleansed, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from dead works to worship the living God!

Today's Gospel, from Mark, takes us back to that fateful Passover—the last meal that Jesus would share with his followers—when he redefined ritual bread and wine in a whole new light. You might say that Jesus transformed the simplest elements of the Passover meal into the most profound.

Wasn't this always Jesus' way, however? Didn't he always turn conventional wisdom and practice on its head? Think of teachings like "the last shall be first and the first last" (Matt 20:16), and "whoever would be great among you must be your servant." One of my favorite precursors of the way Jesus "catches us by surprise" (to quote from our recent worship aid) actually occurs in the beginning of Luke's Gospel, where Mary, in her Cantic of Praise, rejoices over the way "he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree . . ."

In a few minutes, when we prepare to receive the sacramental body and blood of Jesus, let me suggest that we reflect on the blessed reversal of priorities, symbols, and systems—and even ponder the *death*—that our consecrated bread and wine represents. What a simple and still profound contrast the Eucharist of today offers to the gruesome animal sacrifices of old. I'm so glad we have moved on!

Finally, let's try to imagine all of us "embodying Jesus" on this feast of the "Body of Christ." We certainly embody what we eat and drink, don't we? And who could doubt that Jesus wanted us to incarnate him in this way?

But . . . in the perspective of whole lifetimes, how we en flesh Jesus' *teachings* in our daily lives may even be more significant. Think of the righteous men and women of Galilee, Samaria, and Judea who never partook of the bread of life or the cup of salvation, but earned Jesus' praise! They understood what was needed; they were compassionate!

I feel quite certain that our unbaptized, unchurched brothers and sisters are no less loved by God. I believe that many bring a refreshingly different dimension to the idea of "embodying Jesus," just by the way they live. I dare say . . . we all know and love people like that. May we come to understand more clearly now, on this feast of the "most holy body *and blood* of Christ," the bigger picture, in Jesus' words, as quoted in Luke 4: "We do not live by bread alone!"

Yes, bread is important, but "We do not live by bread alone!" It's not what we eat, but how we treat one another, that matters most. Amen!