

## CORPUS CHRISTI

Genesis 14. 18-20

1 Corinthians 11. 23-26

John 6. 51-58

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Let me start by telling you a bit about the beginning of the feast of *Corpus Christi*. In the early thirteenth century, in response to a vision, a devout French nun named Juliana of Liège began a campaign to have the Church appoint a special festival in honour of the Holy Eucharist. After thirty years, Pope Urban IV issued a public decree (a ‘bull’, entitled *Transiturus*) commending the feast of *Corpus et Sanguinis Christi* to the faithful. The great St Thomas Aquinas had a hand in compiling the service prayers, lessons and hymns (some of which he wrote himself, such as the beloved ‘Now my tongue the mystery telling’). By the fourteenth century, the feast of *Corpus Christi* was universal in the Western Church, and was observed on the Thursday or on the Sunday following Trinity Sunday.

More than a century ago, when the Anglo-Catholic movement was making headway not only in the Church of England but in the Anglican Communion around the world, there was a mischievous English bishop who wished to put his thumb in the Catholic movement’s collective eye. He sent a consecrated Host to a chemist for an analysis of its physical properties. Famously, he published the chemist’s report, which stated that there was nothing there of the properties of blood or plasma, or of any sign of a human being’s physical body. All that was found were the properties belonging to bread. What had the prelate proved?

Whatever glee the bishop inspired in the ranks of the sceptical or the irreverent, he had actually demonstrated *one side* of what is called ‘the mystery of the Real Presence’,

and even of the doctrine of Consubstantiation or of Transubstantiation as it was developed by St Thomas Aquinas. As St Thomas argued, when the bread and wine are consecrated at Holy Communion, the ‘accidents’ (that is, the physical properties of the Sacrament) remain as they are. What the mischievous Anglican bishop did not disprove, and what cannot be proved, is the heart of the matter: that is, the ‘Real Presence’ in the Sacrament, wherein the ordinary has been changed into the extraordinary. As St Thomas argued, the ‘substance’, that is, the objective, inner and true reality of the Sacrament, has become the Body and Blood of our Lord by the designation of his Word and the power of the Holy Spirit.

I subscribe to our Anglican *Articles of Religion* in good conscience, particularly as they have been understood not only in their historical context, but also by the contemporary Ecumenical Movement.<sup>1</sup> At first glance it would seem that I have a problem. The Article on the Eucharist, Article 28 (XXVIII), says that ‘transubstantiation (or the change of the substance of Bread and Wine) in the Supper of the Lord, cannot be proved by Holy Writ; but is repugnant to the plain words of Scripture, overthroweth the nature of a Sacrament, and hath given occasion to many superstitions.’ The problem with this Article is that it misconstrues the doctrine of Transubstantiation by taking ‘substance’ to mean physical ‘accidents’, or scientifically measurable properties. Not so. St Thomas Aquinas advanced the definition of Transubstantiation precisely to exclude the error denounced by the Anglican *Articles of Religion*. This Catholic Doctrine upholds the scientific findings of the bishop’s chemist on the one hand, while it points to the mysterious depths of Jesus’s words of consecration on the other.

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<sup>1</sup> The last of the *Tracts for the Times*, published between 1833 and 1841, *Tract Ninety* (1841), by John Henry Newman, was highly controversial for its interpretation of the *Articles of Religion* and was censured by most of the Church of England bishops at the time, but its method has become widely accepted in ecumenical talks between Anglicans and Roman Catholics. This is most evident in the work of ARCIC (the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission) over the past forty years, especially in the *Agreed Statement on the Eucharist*.

When we gaze on the Sacrament, our eyes ‘see’ bread. But that little circular Host, the Body of Christ, the wafer held up by the priest and the one placed in your hand in Holy Communion, contains an entire world of grace. The whole Gospel of our Lord is there. We see the Body of Jesus who was conceived through faith in his Mother’s womb and born in Bethlehem. We see the Body of Christ who grew and waxed strong in spirit as a youth and then as an adult. We see the Body of our Saviour, who at his Baptism in the Jordan identified with what he is not, sinners like us, and in whose ministry worked wonders, healed illness, confronted evil, drove out demons, gave sight to the blind, restored sinners to fellowship, and raised the dead. We see above all the Body of our Lord who went through his Passion and to his Cross for us, who died, and who was laid in a tomb. And it is this very Body of Jesus which was *not* found in that tomb on Easter morning by his disciples, but rather revealed to them in appearance after glorious appearance of his Resurrection from the dead. This body and soul, the humanity and divinity of the eternal Son, having ascended into heaven, now reigns in glory at his Father’s right hand, where he makes constant intercession for us.

And...what is most extraordinary is this. On the night of the supreme trial of his life, Christ took the time to have his last Supper with his disciples, and to give them the means to have Communion with him: bodily, sacramental Communion, when he took the bread and the wine and said, ‘This is my Body which is given for you...This is my Blood which is shed for you.’

Before I finish, I would like to add one more essential thing. What our Lord does to the bread and wine, he *also does* to those who receive it in their hearts by faith with thanksgiving. He transforms sinners into members of his Body, his corporate presence on earth, the living Church of Jesus. *We become the gift which we take and eat.* Christ makes our sinful bodies clean with his body; and he washes our souls with his precious lifeblood, so that we may live in him and he in us.

On this Feast of Corpus Christi, blessed be our Lord: on his throne in heaven, in the most holy Sacrament of the altar and in the hearts of his faithful people.

Amen.