

Some words for Corpus Christi

*'O God, who in this wonderful Sacrament have left us a memorial of your Passion, grant us, we pray, so to revere the sacred mysteries of your Body and Blood, that we may always experience in ourselves the fruits of your redemption.'*¹



Readings:

Deuteronomy 8:2-3. 14-16.

Psalms 147:12-15. 19-20. R.v.12

1 Corinthians 10:16-17

John 6:51-58

Dear Parishioners of St Joseph's & St Charles,

Following his homily and instruction at an ordination to the priesthood the bishop examines the candidates for ordination. He asks each candidate *'Are you resolved to celebrate the mysteries of Christ faithfully and religiously as the Church has handed them down to us, for the glory of God and the sanctification of Christ's people?'*² The mysteries of Christ referred to here are of course the Sacraments but most especially the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. The fact that the question is asked publicly speaks to the nature of the matter itself. The celebrations of the mysteries of Christ are, always and everywhere, *public* acts of the faith and life of the Church. In this sense even an individual's celebration of the Sacrament of Confession is a public act, though it remains private and indeed sealed in every other respect. So it is then that

the priest promises, before God and his holy people, to serve them by his faithful celebration of these public acts. If this is the case, then why we might ask on this feast of *Corpus Christi*, have our priests being celebrating Masses privately during the lockdown?

The truth of course is that no priest has been celebrating Mass privately, though perhaps many of us have been guilty of some woolly use of words. The Catechism of the Catholic Church professes, *'The Eucharist is "the source and summit of the Christian life." The other sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate, are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented toward it. For in the blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself.'*³ Thus, even when Mass is celebrated *sine populo*, that is without the people, and with only the priest himself present, it is still a public act of the Church offered *'for the glory of God and the sanctification of Christ's people.'*⁴ I cannot just wander into church and decide to give myself Holy Communion, spiritually self-medicating whenever I want to; it would be an abuse of what has been entrusted to me. I am a steward of a thing that belongs to my master, I serve a Lord. Most priests I have spoken with have found it spiritually difficult or painful to celebrate without a congregation but they are sustained by their sense of duty and the realisation that the Mass is a far greater thing than the eye can see.

One way or another, we are all participants in the mystery. Yes, we are still physically separated and unable to come together today to celebrate the great feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, but the Eucharist nevertheless remains, *'the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being.'*⁵ From the earliest times when St Paul recorded that, *'though there are many of us, we form a single body because we all have a share in the one loaf,'*⁶ the Church has recognised that the Eucharist is both the sacrament and source of the Church's unity. This unity is not though just simply the means of celebrating our communion with each other. It is a unity and a communion brought about by our Saviour for whoever *'eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him.'*⁷ Yes, we are one with each other, but that is because we are first made one with the Lord, for *'Those who receive the Eucharist are united more closely to Christ. Through it Christ unites them to all the faithful in one body - the Church.'*⁸ It is when we celebrate the Lord's sacrifice *'in communion with the altar'*⁹ that we are most truly in communion with Christ and his Body.

First humbled and then fed by the Lord God with *manna* in the desert, we read today that the people of Israel must come to *'understand that man does not live on bread alone*

... but on everything that comes from the mouth of the Lord.'¹⁰ A 'taste of eternity in time'¹¹ the Eucharistic celebration provides the means by which 'we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all.'¹² I am not alone when I celebrate the liturgy. It is impossible. The sacred liturgy is always and everywhere a public act of the Church, celebrated in communion with Angels, Saints and each other. Across the face of the earth, 'The Eucharist, memorial of Christ's Passover, is by its nature the bearer of the eternal and the infinite in human history.'¹³ The communion of the entire Church is affirmed thereby, be it in heaven or on earth, visible or invisible.

The life and gifts of God are communicated and bestowed on us in all the mysteries of Christ, yet it is the Holy Eucharist that holds a particular place of honour as the most Blessed Sacrament. The Eucharist is so central to the life of the Church because it makes uniquely present for us the *Paschal Mystery*, the life, death and resurrection of our Saviour. By holding to his memory and following his instructions, our Lord has empowered us to call upon his Father and, by the power of the Holy Spirit, make his offering on the Cross our own. What has passed in time becomes present to us again for, tangible and digestible, the very life of Christ is shared among us; 'The blessing cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ, and the bread we break is a communion with the body of Christ.'¹⁴

The Eucharist, born at a particular point and place in history, is also now transcendent, ranging across time and space. Intensely physical yet also utterly metaphysical, the Bread of Heaven originates from a love beyond the realm of our physical world. Pope St John Paul II observed that, as it contains her '*entire spiritual wealth ... the Church draws her life from the Eucharist.*'¹⁵ So rich is this treasure and so vast the tapestry of the life and history of the Church, then it is not perhaps surprising that in each and every age different aspects of this great mystery have come to the fore. Confronted with something almost incomprehensible in its meaning and scope, our history is littered with examples where the sense of our sinfulness, of the scared and the solemn, of awe and majesty, of God's remoteness or the joy of God's closeness, has predominated. Yet every age has also witnessed a deep and abiding sense of the individual gift of Christ's presence.

Many of the great saints of old, faithful in their attendance at Mass, received Holy Communion but once a year. Although they attended Mass it was Confession that was the more regularly received sacrament. The twentieth century saw a return to the regular reception of Holy Communion during the celebration of Mass (and sadly a decline in the practice of regular Confession). This is a good and noble practice but

at a time when the cult of individualism is so strong in our society we must be careful not to allow the full scope of the Eucharist to become obscured also. It is the Eucharist, the work of Christ, which is the source and summit of the Christian life, not my individual and personal reception of the sacrament in Holy Communion. Yes, I take and I eat, and I do so in memory of him, but it is I who am caught up in the mystery of the Eucharist, not the mystery of the Eucharist that is caught up in me. My receiving Holy Communion is wondrous indeed yet, if I were suddenly found in a coma, and unable to receive Holy Communion ever again during my life here on earth, I would nonetheless still be a participant in the mystery of Christ; I am not suddenly excluded from his Body. As Pope Benedict XVI noted, *'Even in cases where it is not possible to receive sacramental communion, participation at Mass remains necessary, important, meaningful and fruitful.'*¹⁶ Throughout my life as a priest I have been asked to offer the holy sacrifice of the Mass, pressed down and overflowing, for the living and the dead, the sick and the healthy, and for Catholics and non-Catholics alike. We speak of Full Communion and degrees of Communion; it is not a case of all or nothing. Our young children, not able by reason of their age to receive Holy Communion, are still part of the Lord's Body. Our present situation has reminded us of this truth. Our communion has been tested and it is not being expressed in all its fullness but in Christ it continues to endure, for the Eucharist is a portal into a heart far greater than our own.

'O food of life,' sings St Alphonsus of Liguori, *'God gives me life, God lives in me.'*¹⁷ The Body of Christ received in Holy Communion is the fruit of the body offered on the Cross and mediated to us through the Body of Christ on earth, the Church. Whenever we gather to celebrate the Eucharist we have come first and foremost to worship God and to enter into the life of Christ. A feast of Love, our communion with God is manifest in our communion with each other; *'In fact Christian life is expressed in the fulfilling of the greatest commandment, that is to say in the love of God and neighbour, and this love finds its source in the Blessed Sacrament, which is commonly called the sacrament of love.'*¹⁸ The holy Eucharist recollects, makes present and brings about this charity. Even now it is still our duty to live and proclaim that *'This is the bread come down from heaven; not like the bread our ancestors ate; they are dead, but anyone who eats this bread will live for ever.'*¹⁹ The Eucharistic fruit of heavenly food is to help us here come to the hereafter. Thankfully, the generosity of the Lord ensures that even when we cannot come to him sacramentally he will still come to us.

Please God, we will soon be able to enter church and return to the Real Presence of Christ and eventually there will be even greater joy when we come to celebrate the

sacred mysteries and once again sacramentally receive our beloved *Corpus Christi*. In looking ahead to the reopening of our churches I found myself reviewing what I had previously written concerning various practicalities at the beginning of our lockout. What I said then, I would say again; remember, that even when all this is passed some of our Catholic brothers and sisters in the world will still be unable, for fear of persecution, torture or death, to emerge in public and freely and openly go to church and take part in Holy Mass. Even now, we are more blessed than we might realise.

*'Come then, good shepherd, bread divine, Still show to us thy mercy sign;
Oh, feed us still, still keep us thine; So may we see thy glories shine in fields of immortality;'*²⁰

Our Lady of Walsingham, *pray for us.*

St Joseph, *pray for us.*

St Charles Borromeo, *pray for us.*

With my prayers,

Rev. Mark McManus

Parish Priest

14 June 2020

The picture is a detail from *La bénédiction des blés en Artois* (The Blessing of the Wheat in Artois), Jules Breton, 1857, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

1. *Collect, Proper for The Most Holy Body & Blood of Christ, Roman Missal*
2. *Examination of the Candidate, Ordination to the Priesthood, Roman Pontifical*
3. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ccc. 1324
4. *Examination of the Candidate, op.cit.*
5. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ccc. 1325
6. 1 Corinthians 10:17
7. *John 6:56*
8. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ccc. 1396
9. 1 Corinthians 10:18
10. *Deuteronomy 8:3*
11. *John Paul II, General Audience, October 25, 2000*
12. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, ccc. 1326
13. *John Paul II, op.cit.*
14. 1 Corinthians 10:16
15. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n.1, Encyclical Letter, John Paul II, 17 April, 2003
16. *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 55, Apostolic Exhortation, Benedict XVI, 22 February, 2007
17. *O bread of heaven*, verse 3, St Alphonsus of Liguori, (1696-1787)
18. *Dominicae cenae*, n. 5, Letter to Bishops, John Paul II, 24 February, 1980
19. *John 6:58*
20. *Sequence, Solemnity of The Most Holy Body & Blood of Christ, Lectionary*