

The Body and Blood of Christ: Corpus Christi
Sunday, June 6, 2021

The Church of Saint Mary the Virgin
Said Mass with Music

By the Reverend James Ross Smith

Exodus 24:3–8; Psalm 147:13–21;

1 Corinthians 10:1–4, 16–17; Mark 14:12–26

I've known my friend Sam since he and I were fifteen years old. We went to the same high school, and for three years took most of our classes together. We became good friends during that time, but we went to different colleges, and, in the end, we drifted apart, as we went our separate ways. I saw Sam a few times here in New York over the years, but not often. We reconnected a couple of years ago when we both went home for a high-school reunion, and we talk regularly these days.

The last couple of months, Sam and I have been talking a lot about religion. We've mostly been discussing the externals of religion, but I think, in the end, we're really talking about faith, which means we're really talking about God. Sam hadn't gone to church much for a long time, but he'd felt the need to do something about that when he'd retired and moved to the Northwest a

while back. He tried the Unitarians, but that didn't work out. Nice people, but it wasn't for him, he said. So, he returned to the Roman Catholic Church, which worked well for a time.

A few months ago, disappointed by some recent Vatican pronouncements about same-sex marriage, he started going to an Episcopal parish. He likes it, and he seems a bit surprised that he likes it. The rector is a woman, and he's just fine with that. He likes her a lot. The structure of the liturgy is familiar, and he's discovered that the people are neither stuffy, nor snobbish, nor particularly formal, which is what he'd expected. He's trying to make sense of the subtle cultural differences that he's encountering.

Sam called me the other day to ask me about a couple of things: he wanted to know whether we Episcopalians had preserved the apostolic succession—he wanted to know if our bishops are really bishops—and whether we believed that Christ was truly present in the Eucharist. He also asked me, if he becomes an Episcopalian, will he have to go to coffee hour. Sam is one of the most extroverted people I've ever known,

but apparently the idea of talking to a few strangers with whom he may or may not have much in common makes him anxious. This surprised me, but more about that in few minutes.

Now, setting aside that business about coffee hour, you may have noticed that Sam's questions are rather technical. They are questions out of a theology textbook. They are questions of the head, which is fine, but I'm not sure they're the questions Sam is really interested in. He's not just looking for information. He's searching for something, as I suppose we all are, one way or another. Sam is seeking God because God is seeking him. So, in the end his concerns about valid orders, transubstantiation, and the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, though important, have a deeper meaning, a meaning that involves both heart *and* head. I think that Sam is looking for a place where he can experience the presence of God more fully and more intimately and in every part of his life.

Corpus Christi is a feast dedicated to the real presence of God in Jesus Christ. It's born at a time when lay Christians in Western Europe seldom received the

consecrated Bread and never received the Cup. It's also a time when theologians teaching in universities were trying to define with almost mathematical precision how bread and wine could be transformed into Christ's body and blood, though that transformation wasn't visible. The philosophical concepts underlying this transformation—this “transubstantiation”—were neither discovered, defined, discussed, or proclaimed at the Last Supper. They were formulated in the Middle Ages. Anglicans avoid the word transubstantiation. I suppose we think of it, at least I do, as an attempt at exactitude where exactitude is neither possible nor particularly desirable. Still, I can't help admiring that medieval attempt. Both the popular feast of Corpus Christi and the theologian's desire precisely to define the “real presence” of Christ in the Eucharist are born of the same emotions: wonder, amazement, awe, gratitude—and perhaps insatiable curiosity—in the face of God's generous gift of his presence within the simple, recognizable, everyday elements of bread and wine. To the unbeliever's eye the idea is improbable. I suppose it looks like we're trying to capture the sun and place it in a small, silver box. Not likely. But, in fact, that's why the gift of the Eucharist is so beautiful. It's a

gift that only God in Jesus Christ could give. God's improbable gift is exactly that, pure gift. It inspires gratitude, and that's why we call it Eucharist, which means something like "thanksgiving."

The gift of Christ's Body and Blood is not a gift designed to establish what the sociologists call a patron-client relationship. Jesus gives us the gift of himself, not because he desires submission, tithes, tribute, or taxes in return. He gives of himself because he loves us and hopes that his love will help *us* to love. In the end, the eucharistic gift is the gift of intimacy with God, at least that's how the New Testament writers conceive it. In the Second Letter of Peter, the apostle writes, "...[Christ's] divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may *participate in the divine nature*, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires" (1:4). The Greek word translated here as "to participate" is the same word¹ used in today's second reading from

¹The substantive *koinonoi* ("participants") in 2 Peter and the closely related substantive *koinonia* in 1 Corinthians.

First Corinthians, “The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” So, in the end, when we are talking about Christ’s “real presence in the Eucharist,” we are not just talking about an abstract philosophical idea, we are talking in the most radical way about the presence of God and our response, our involvement, our participation in that presence—God everywhere, in all places and at all times—God up close, God in our hearts, God coursing through our veins.

Which brings me finally to Sam’s odd fear of coffee hour. What Sam is beginning to learn is that Jesus’ real presence in the Eucharist is indeed personal and individual. It’s about “I” and about “you.” But it’s also about “us.” The Greek word for “participation”—*koinonia*—also means partnership, fellowship, communion, or community. Sam may never learn to love coffee hour, but he can’t really avoid community, and he knows it. In today’s gospel, at the Last Supper, Jesus creates a new covenant community. “This is my blood of the covenant, poured out for many,” Jesus says. It seems that personal intimacy with God,

paradoxically draws us out of ourselves and toward each other and toward a world, which, though broken, is being saved, redeemed, loved, and not condemned (John 3:16–17).

In his book about the divine liturgy, *For the Life of the World*, the late Orthodox theologian, Alexander Schmemmann quotes the Russian-Jewish poet, Osip Mandelstam, who, in 1922, in the Soviet Union, wrote these words, “There: the Eucharist, a gold sun,/hung in the air—an instant of splendor./Here nothing should be heard but the Greek syllables—/the whole world held in the hands like a plain apple.”² How odd and how wonderful that Mandelstam understood the paradox: simple gifts and amazing graces. God in an apple. God in bread and wine. God loving us. God in all creation. God refusing to go into exile. God with us, now and always.

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² Schmemmann, Alexander, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*. St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press Classics Series, Vol. 1 (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, Yonkers, New York, 2018), p. 33.