

## Corpus Christi [B] 2024

(St. Joe, OSF)

I am so grateful to the Sisters of St. Francis for honoring me and recognizing today fifty years of serving God, often imperfectly, as a priest in his Church. I am not going to devalue the liturgy today by spending homily time on reminiscing about fifty years as a priest. The liturgy is never about me or any other presider. It is Jesus Christ offering himself at every altar for all of us.

But I would like to make one comment before addressing this glorious feast. There have been so many blessings associated with 50 years of ordained ministry. I have served in five wonderful parishes. I have had the opportunity to do graduate studies in Rome. But one of the greatest joys has been to work with so many wonderful dedicated religious women, particularly the Sisters of St. Francis and the Sisters of Notre Dame. Where would the Church be without you? You have walked with us, sometimes challenged us, always supported us ordained ministers. Thank you!

Today is the feast of Corpus Christi, the day when we solemnly celebrate what we encounter each time we come to Mass: Jesus Christ truly present in the Eucharist: “This is my body; this is my blood.” That is at the core of our faith. It is why we don’t have, like many other Christian churches, “Communion Sunday.” *Every Sunday is Communion Sunday; everyday is Communion Day.* We cannot exist without this spiritual nourishment—as important and essential for our life as is the food and water we consume everyday.

But there are many people today, Catholics included, who try to tell us that Jesus didn’t really mean what he said when he said, “This is my body.” They tell us it’s all just symbolism. It is much more than that.

Long before the Last Supper, which we heard Mark describe in today's gospel, many of Jesus' followers walked away from him, shaking their heads in disbelief when he said to them: "Amen, amen I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you." When he saw them walk away, he didn't call them back and say, "Hey, come back; you misunderstood me!" He knew they were leaving him because they *did* understand what he said to them. At that point he just turned to his apostles and asked, "Do you want to leave too?" Jesus tells us that the food he is offering, himself, will nourish us forever. Today's feast challenges our belief in him and in his presence with us in the Eucharist.

There was a time in our history when so few people were being fed by the Eucharist that the Church had to make a law saying that Catholics were obliged to receive Holy Communion at least once a year. I can imagine people in the early Church being incredulous at that: "A *law*? You have to make a *law* to have them receive the bread of life? Are you kidding me?"

Even when I was a child, I remember only about a third or a half of the church receiving Communion at Mass. Of course fasting from food and drink after midnight had something to do with that. But there had been a heresy in the Church during the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century called Jansenism. It was an extreme emphasis on original sin and the depravity of human beings which taught that there was little chance for most of us getting to heaven, and that none of us was worthy of ever receiving Holy Communion. Or at least we had to go to confession each time before we received the Eucharist. As I say, it was condemned by the Church as heresy, but its vestiges persisted all the way into to 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Eucharist was held in such *high* respect that people stayed away. Now it seems that many people have lost their belief

in Christ's presence in the Eucharist, and they stay away too. They stay away in the sense that it's too much trouble to come to Mass. It's not "convenient." Other things are more important, even soccer games and lacrosse games. It seems to me that the devil tries every trick he can to keep people away from Communion. Either it's so sacred we shouldn't receive it, or there's nothing worth going there for anyway.

I think the real crisis in the Catholic Church these days has its origin right here in the mystery we celebrate today. There are many who no longer believe that the Eucharist is really and truly the Body and Blood of Christ. I think this lack of belief is connected with the vocation crisis. I think it's the reason Mass attendance has dropped off. You can talk about boring preachers or bad music or parking lot issues, or whatever—but if people really believed in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist and the tremendous gift we have in our midst, none of those things could keep us away.

And then, like a domino effect, when people get away from church and receiving the Eucharist, they are getting away from their spiritual roots. Without a strong spiritual foundation upon which to build our lives, we are left with fewer values to live by and fewer values to pass on to our children.

Am I overemphasizing the importance of the Eucharist? I don't think so. I don't think that is possible. Certainly God's love is shown to us in many ways, but I believe that the Eucharist helps us to see *all those ways* more clearly—the ways in which his love is present in our lives. It is the Eucharist, more than anything else which tells us that God loves us and will be with us always.

May we never take this precious gift for granted!