**Homily for Corpus Christi**

**June 14, 2020**

**St. Bavo Parish**

**Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.**

*First Reading: Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14b-16a (God provided for his people in the desert.)*

*Responsorial Psalm: Psalm 147 (Praise the Lord, Jerusalem.)*

*Second Reading: 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 (Eucharist as participation in the body and blood of Christ.)*

*Sequence: Text by St. Thomas Aquinas*

*Gospel: John 60:51-58 (Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.)*

It probably would not surprise any of you to learn that all Catholic seminarians must take a course on Eucharist as part of their priestly training. After all, the Eucharist is the very heart of our sacramental life, and we expect our priests to celebrate the Mass with understanding and devotion. But, to be perfectly honest, I think that a seven-year-old preparing for First Holy Communion is just as capable as a well-educated priest to understand the *most important* thing about the Eucharist – not *what* it is, but rather, *Who* it is. If you *truly believe* in your heart that when you receive Communion, you receive *Jesus*, then you’re already diving pretty deeply into the mystery of the Eucharist.

There’s a story – maybe apocryphal, maybe not – about a Eucharist class that was being taught at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California, years ago. On the first day of class, one of the seminarians raised his hand and asked the professor, “Why do we believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist?” That’s a good question. Why *do* we believe what our senses cannot perceive and our science cannot explain? The professor, a respected scholar in the field of sacramental theology, paused for an unusually long time before answering the question. All the seminarians waited anxiously, their pens at the ready, only to hear the professor reply, “We believe… *because Jesus said so.*”

That’s the bottom line: “Jesus said so.” We heard it in the gospel today. Jesus says plainly, “My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” It’s pretty hard to listen to that statement from Jesus and then interpret his words at the Last Supper as just a figure of speech. When Jesus blessed the bread and wine of the Passover meal and declared, “*This is my body, this is my blood*,” he clearly meant for us to take that literally. And so, we believe that when we repeat that ritual in remembrance of him, the bread and wine *do, in fact, become his body and blood*. The consecrated elements *cannot* be just a *symbol*, something which calls to mind Jesus’ table fellowship with his disciples and recalls his death on the cross. Nor should the Eucharist be understood as just a symbol of the Lord’s *spiritual presence* in our lives today. Jesus would be just as spiritually present without the sacraments. He gave us the Eucharist so that he could be *physically* present to us, as well.

The celebration of Eucharist is a *sacramental encounter with the Risen Christ*, a tangible means by which the Lord invites us to enter into communion with him. That’s why we call the reception of the Eucharist “Holy Communion.” By offering our prayer of praise and thanksgiving, together with our gifts of bread and wine, we participate in Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. In turn, Christ *transforms* the bread and wine into his own Body and Blood, and then offers it back to us so that, receiving him, we may participate evermore deeply in his divine life. St. Paul conveys that concept to the Corinthians with two very pointed rhetorical questions: “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?” Our response of faith is, “*Yes*, of course, that’s *exactly* what Eucharist is.” That is what we believe.

The Corpus Christi *Sequence*, composed by St. Thomas Aquinas, beautifully expresses why we celebrate Eucharist and why we believe in the Real Presence of Christ, even though the Mystery confounds both our senses and our intellect. Near the middle of the poem, we heard these four stanzas:

*What he did at supper seated,*

*Christ ordained to be repeated,*

*His memorial ne’er to cease.*

*And his rule for guidance taking,*

*Bread and wine we hallow, making*

*Thus our sacrifice of peace.*

*This the truth each Christian learns,*

*Bread into his flesh he turns,*

*To his precious blood the wine:*

*Sight has failed, nor thought conceives,*

*But a dauntless faith believes,*

*Resting on a power divine.*Just as God had ordered the Israelites to repeat the *original* Passover ritual as a perpetual memorial, Christ ordered us to repeat this transformed Passover ritual as a perpetual memorial *to him*.

Obeying the Lord’s command, we now consecrate bread and wine, as he did at the Last Supper. Thus, the Eucharist becomes for us both a sacred meal *and* a participation in the sacrifice of Christ.

Every Christian should clearly understand this key point: *Jesus himself* turns the bread and wine into his own body and blood. The Eucharist is *his personal gift* to us.

Though we can neither see nor understand the transformation that has taken place, we *believe* by faith – a faith which rests on divine power and the word of the Lord himself.

Amen. Alleluia!

In this stirring poem, St. Thomas Aquinas was expressing not only the *faith* of the Church, but also its *devotion* to the Eucharist. For Catholics, *every single mass* has the potential to be a unique and beautifully intimate encounter with Christ. It’s possible every time, because Christ always offers his *entire self* to us, never holding back anything. But, unfortunately, *we* sometimes hold back, making ourselves an obstacle to sacramental grace. The Lord invites us to share in his life, but he also gives us the freedom to embrace his offer with gratitude, to receive it only *half-heartedly*, or to reject it outright. We can come to Mass eager to receive the Lord with an open heart, or we can show up distracted, preoccupied with other things, and content just to put in our time and fulfill our obligation. And, of course, we have the freedom not to come at all, if we so choose. Hopefully, more than two months without the Eucharist left all of us yearning as never before for that special encounter with Christ. After being denied that precious gift for so long, may we now *cherish* it, more than ever.