

## Corpus Christi 2009

Closing Homily of the ITMS Eleventh General Meeting  
June 14, 2009

By **William H. Shannon**

Today is the feast of Corpus Christi. It is a feast that probably should not have been. It came into being at a time when Eucharistic thinking and action had reached a very low ebb. Eucharist was no longer what it had been in the beginning, namely, a community conscious of their oneness with Jesus and wanting to celebrate that oneness with joy and hope. The Eucharist in the beginning had been something the people did together, with a priest presiding over the celebration.

A number of factors in the Middle Ages transformed this celebration of the Eucharist into something very different. The Mass became something that the priest did, with the laity present as silent spectators. It almost seemed as if the purpose of the Mass was to produce hosts that people could receive in communion or look upon in the tabernacle or the monstrance. As time went on people received communion less and less. This meant that seeing the host became more and more important – Benediction and other ways of letting people see the host that more and more they were receiving less and less. The Corpus Christi processions became liturgical highlights.

This way of understanding Eucharist prevailed for centuries. It was the Second Vatican Council that brought much-needed reform to the Eucharistic celebration. It would be too strong to say that the Council took the Eucharist away from the priest and gave it back to the people. It would not be too strong to say that it returned the Eucharist to what it had been in the beginning: an assembly of God's people come together to praise God, to hear God's Word and to "break bread" with the firm belief that the Lord Jesus was present among them.

What we need to remember when we celebrate Eucharist is that the Body of Christ is not only on the altar. The Body of Christ is also at the altar and around the altar. We are Corpus Christi. We are the Body of Christ. In fact, why don't you turn to your left or to your right and realize that you are seeing the Body of Christ. You could even say to that person: "You are the Body of Christ." In the Eucharistic celebration the Holy Spirit comes to transform bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. But the Spirit also comes to do something far more important than transforming bread and wine. For the Spirit comes to transform us into the Body of Christ.

And it is easier for the Spirit to do the first than the second. Bread and wine are inert. There is nothing in them to oppose their transformation into

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Christ. But in us the alienation of sin, self-centeredness, can stubbornly resist that transformation. It is only the power of God's love that can transform us. But we must realize that "God's love can only unleash its power when it is allowed to change us from within" (Benedict XVI).

Ultimately, as people of faith, we know that the secret of our happiness and our wholeness lies in giving up the futile struggle to preserve our "petty selves," our false selves. The road to wholeness and happiness for us is to become like the bread and wine: totally responsive to God's Spirit.

As the bread gives up its "breadness" to become the Body of Christ, we must give up our "petty selves," so that through Christ and in His Spirit, we may become our "true selves," our whole selves. By gradual conversion and surrender, we become, not only at the Eucharist, but in the totality of our lives, the "Body of Christ." Then we can say with St. Paul: "I live, now not I [i.e., my petty self], but Christ [i.e. my true self] lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

It is now 44 years since the Council. Does the Eucharist still arouse that exhilarating sense of joy and excitement that followed the Council or is that something we need to re-ignite? Perhaps we need to recover some of the enthusiasm that the resurrection inspired in the early disciples of Jesus: an enthusiasm that captured the imagination of the Roman world and gave people a sense of meaning and purpose and excitement in life. As a starter, we could act like people who truly believe in the transforming power of the resurrection.

Nietzsche once said: "If Christians want others to believe in their redeemer, they ought to look more redeemed." Rowan Williams, the Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, said in his first words as archbishop: "I long to see Christianity in this country able once again to capture the imagination of our culture." What a wonderful desire! What he meant by it, I think, is that he wanted to see Christian Faith once again inspiring in Christians of today the sense of joy and excitement that so moved the earliest of Jesus' disciples, as they experienced the Risen One in their midst.

A recent poll taken in our country asked people if their religion influenced their attitude toward the war in Iraq. Practically everyone said it had no influence at all. It is scary to think that on so momentous an issue as going to war hardly any one turned to faith to give them a perspective from which to view it and evaluate it. It's as if religion in America has been privatized. People keep it close to our vest. They don't talk about it in public.

It's as if people have grown old in Christian Faith. Their practice of it so easily becomes a routine that is lifeless. We pray. We go to Mass. It no longer excites us. We no longer have the feeling: "Wow, this is God-business I'm engaged in. I want to stand up and shout: 'I believe in the oneness of the human family. We are all one with Christ. We are the body of Christ.' This means accepting our responsibility to do all we can, in concert with others, to make justice and peace prevail in our own country and in our world."

This is a wondrously idyllic picture: a community of followers of Jesus who witness by their love to the presence of the transforming Lord in their midst and in the midst of the world.

But sad to say, when we look at the reality of life in the Church and in the world today, we hardly recognize this idyllic picture. We see disunity and quarreling in families, in politics, in parishes, in local churches, in the universal Church.

Forty-four years ago, we experienced a Pentecost-like transformation in the Church. It was the Second Vatican Council. It brought us to the exciting realization that when we speak about Church we are not, first and foremost, speaking about the Vatican or the hierarchy. First and foremost we are

speaking about ourselves. The Church is people. We are all called in different ways and in different circumstances to be proclaimers of the Gospel. The Holy Spirit energizes all of us. That is why Pope John XXIII called the Council “a second Pentecost.”

On Pentecost the Holy Spirit descended, not just on the twelve apostles, but upon all the 120 people who comprised the earliest community of disciples of Jesus; 120 – that was the entire Church at that time. This should make clear that the Holy Spirit speaks, not only to Church leaders, but also to all the faithful.

We need to face the future of the Church with hope. Yet we cannot ignore the fact that for the last two decades too many issues have been taken off the table – topics such as celibacy, the ordination of women to a priesthood that is drastically dwindling in size. There are many issues that admit of no easy answers. But without open discussion, Church life will become more and more dysfunctional. Honest dialogue is a necessary element if the Church is to fulfill its mission. The voice of the laity – the Body of Christ – indeed the voices of all people of good will – must be heard. And the time is getting late.