CORPUS CHRISTI (Year A)

I. Introduction

The Catholic Church teaches that the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, truly is the Body and Blood of Christ. Protestants generally believe otherwise, claiming it’s just symbolic, or is both the Eucharist and bread and wine at the same time, or is only Christ’s Body and Blood for as long as the service lasts and then reverts to bread and wine, or that it’s the faith of the community that makes it the Eucharist, or various other ideas. It’s impossible for the Catholic teaching and Protestant beliefs to be correct simultaneously—so which position is right?

Earlier this year a megachurch Evangelical pastor named Francis Chan surprised his Protestant congregation by preaching that the Catholic teaching is correct. In researching his sermon on this subject he discovered that, in his words, “for the first 1500 years of church history everyone saw [the Eucharist] as the literal Body and Blood of Christ—and it wasn’t till 500 years ago that someone popularized a thought that it’s just a symbol and nothing more.” As you might imagine, a lot of people did not appreciate Pastor Chan correcting their mistaken theology; he was severely criticized for agreeing with the traditional Catholic teaching. However, the truth is the truth, no matter how unpopular it may be. In the words of a former Anglican priest, Dr. Gavin Ashenden, “While researching for a sermon series on the Eucharist, I discovered to my shock that no one (except heretics) ever denied the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist for the first 1500 years [of Christianity].” As a result, Dr. Ashenden converted to Catholicism, since only it and the Orthodox Church believe in the Real Presence of Jesus and have a valid Eucharist (Church Militant website, January 9, 2020). In fact, there are hundreds of former Protestant ministers and pastors who’ve become Catholic here in the United States in the 21st century—and the Church’s teaching on the Eucharist is a major reason why. It’s easy for us as Catholics to take Holy Communion for granted, but this would be a serious mistake. Jesus truly is present in the Most Holy Eucharist—and worthily receiving Him is the single most important, effective, and powerful way of preparing ourselves for eternal life.

II. Development

Perhaps the reason many Americans have trouble believing in the Eucharist—even many who call themselves Catholic—is that people today have lost their sense of the miraculous and of mystery, and in their pride don’t like to believe in something they don’t understand and can’t control. We are quick to forget that God is all-powerful, and that if Jesus is capable of rising from the dead and giving us eternal life, He is certainly capable of changing bread and wine into His Body and Blood. Today’s readings challenge us to let go of pride and unbelief, and to open our hearts to the fullness of God’s gifts. In the 1st Reading Moses had to remind the people of the wonders the Lord had worked on their behalf, and in the 2nd Reading St. Paul insists that the bread that is broken, and the cup that is shared, in the Lord’s Supper is truly a participation in Christ’s Body and Blood. This echoes Our Lord’s words in the Gospel, in which Jesus describes His flesh as true food and His blood as true drink. Nowhere does He use symbolic terms, saying, “this is a sign of My Body, and this is a symbol of My Blood.” At the Last Supper Jesus said, “this is My Body; this is My Blood”—and, until the time of the Protestant Reformation or Revolt
in the 16th century, all Christians understood and accepted this truth. In fact, some modern-day Protestant pastors and biblical scholars researched the beliefs and teachings of the Church Fathers, or patristics—and discovered, to their shock, that even 1st and early 2nd century Christian writings spoke of the Eucharist as literally the Body and Blood of Christ. This is how we must understand and reverence the Eucharist if we want to be in accord or united with believers throughout Church history, back to the very days of Jesus Himself.

III. Conclusion

The traditional Latin saying lex orandi, lex credendi, roughly translated, means the law of prayer is the law of faith—in other words, what we believe is supposed to go hand-in-hand with how we worship (cf. CCC, n. 1124). If we personally believe, despite the clear teaching of Scripture and the unchanging 2000 year teaching of the Church, that the Eucharist is only symbolic, then we’ll probably treat it casually and merely go through the motions in receiving it, and we’ll be closing our hearts to the immense spiritual benefits and blessings that can be obtained through it. Catholics who don’t truly believe in the Eucharist are no better off spiritually than Protestants who don’t have the Eucharist. If, however, we humbly acknowledge the words of Jesus and the teaching of His Church, and believe that Holy Communion truly is Our Lord’s Body and Blood, this belief will—or at least should—make a real difference in our worship and in how we receive the Sacrament.

For instance, we will make sure we’re in a state of grace before coming forward for Holy Communion, with our soul free of all serious sin. That’s why Confessions are traditionally heard on Saturday: so that Catholics can have their sins—especially mortal ones—forgiven in time for them to receive Communion on Sunday. Believing in the Eucharist means we will observe a one-hour fast from food and drink, except for water and medicine, prior to receiving Communion. We will also come forward in the Communion line in a reverent spirit, focusing on Who it is we’re about to receive, and afterwards pray in thanksgiving—and in this intimate spiritual moment, we’ll ask the Lord’s blessings not just for ourselves, but also for others. If we believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in this Sacrament, we’ll remain reverent here in church, especially by not interfering in the prayer of those remaining after Mass, and by genuflecting in adoration toward Christ present in the tabernacle as we leave. Lastly, we’ll try to remember that the Eucharistic Jesus is present within us and that we’re carrying Him out into the world—and act accordingly.

We as Catholics can easily take the Eucharist for granted—so it’s a good thing when former Protestants, or those moving closer to Catholicism in their faith, remind us of the great Gift available to us. The words Corpus Christi mean “the Body of Christ,” and that is truly and literally what we receive in Holy Communion. If we accept this truth in a spirit of faith, humility, and gratitude, we are truly following Jesus here on earth, and preparing ourselves to live with Him in Heaven.

I.C. — June 13-14, 2020