

A Catechetical Homily
Corpus Christi
19 June 2022

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St. Thomas's Anglican Church
Concerning the Feast

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

This morning, we celebrate Corpus Christi, a great solemnity of the Church. However, this is the first Anglo-Catholic church I've served in which we do *not* do certain special things liturgically to observe this feast with the dignity befitting our devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, the Body of Christ.

One thing that I was really looking forward to about coming here was returning to a parish with weekly Evensong. My last parish, St. John's in Newport, Rhode Island, held special services of Evensong & Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament several times a year and had an annual Corpus Christi procession, but at St. Paul's, K Street in Washington, DC, we had Evensong & Benediction every single week.

The form of Evensong & Devotions we keep here is very similar, and yet surprisingly different. I think it behooves us to consider what it is that we are doing currently and what it means theologically. So this morning, rather than dwelling upon any particular passage of Scripture, as I usually do, I intend to preach something of a "catechetical homily," that is, a sermon designed to explain our faith and practise for those present who may be unfamiliar with it, and to give a *personal* take on what we do for those of us for whom what we do may be all *too* familiar, so familiar perhaps as to be taken for granted. I should note that this is not an exercise in apologetics or polemics, much as I love that sort of thing, but an exercise in *exposition*.

But first a bit of full disclosure: I preached a different version of this sermon this past Thursday at St. Bartholomew's Church in Regent Park, which featured a procession around the block with the Blessed Sacrament in a monstrance. As I participated in that service, I remembered that not only was it eleven months to the day since my arrival in Canada, but it was also the first liturgical anniversary of my final service in Newport, where I was the officiant at a Corpus Christi Evensong, Outdoor Procession, and full Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, monstrance, canopy, and all.

When I was at St. Bart's, the service booklet explained that we were there to adore, and I quote, "*the whole Christ—body, blood, soul, and divinity—present under the appearance of lowly wheaten bread.*" This is the Catholic doctrine to which I ascribe. And that is indeed what we did. But that service wasn't just about what *we* did. It was also about something that *happens to us* whenever we gather to worship and adore "*the whole Christ—body, blood, soul, and divinity—present under the appearance of lowly wheaten bread.*"

For me, the central truth that Corpus Christi celebrates comes down to a single rubric in the ritual of the Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, a rubric that is, however, missing from our own form of Eucharistic Devotions because we don't do it at St. Thomas's. Now, before I continue, I should be clear that we're not going to start doing it any time soon.

The main difference between Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament and Eucharistic Devotions is that at St. Thomas's, while the consecrated bread is placed on the altar, it remains covered with a cloth rather than exposed in a monstrance. Thus, the heart of the liturgy of Benediction itself is cut out of the rite, and instead, we spend some time in adoration, and then we repose the veiled Sacrament. As far as it goes, it expresses adequately our adoration of Christ in the Holy Sacrament. But I would like to suggest that we also thereby deprive ourselves of something Christ gives to us in Benediction that we have apparently decided we can live without.

For by contrast to what we (don't) do here in *Devotions*, at the apex of the liturgy of *Benediction*, after the Officiant is vested in the humeral veil and ascends to the altar, the Ministers genuflect before the Sacrament, and the Deacon places the *Monstrance* containing the consecrated Host, the Body of Christ, in the Officiant's hands, which are covered by the humeral veil. The Officiant then turns, holding the Monstrance in front of his face. (Have you seen this elsewhere?) And then...How would you describe what happens next? At St. Bart's, the rubric simply read, "*All reverently adore as Benediction is given.*" But what is the "Benediction" itself?

When I first arrived at St. Paul's, K Street, the Benediction booklet had the simple rubric, "*The Officiant blesses the Congregation with the Sacrament.*" That's straightforward enough. For indeed, the Officiant at that point makes the sign of the cross over the congregation while holding the Monstrance. A few years later, however, we revised our liturgical publications for Evensong & Benediction, and since I was the editor for that project, I found myself contemplating that rubric. Something was off about it. Something wasn't quite theologically *correct* in the *strictest* sense. So I changed it from "*The Officiant blesses the Congregation with the Sacrament*" to, "*The people are blessed by the Sacrament.*" This is because it's the *Sacrament* that does the blessing, not the *Officiant*. In fact, before Benediction proper, once the Sacrament is exposed on the altar, the Officiant *doesn't even bless the incense*, because Our Lord's Real Presence in the Sacrament is all the blessing anyone or *anything* needs. The whole point of the humeral veil and holding the Sacrament in front of the Officiant's face is to get the Officiant as much as possible *out of the way*, in effect rendering him a part of the ecclesiastical furniture, an extension of the Sacrament itself. Because in that moment of Benediction, it's all about *Jesus*. And it's all about you, the people, being *blessed* by Our Lord's Real Presence in the most holy Sacrament of the altar.

And because I believe that "*the people are blessed by the Sacrament*", there's a particular way I give blessings to non-communicants during the administration of communion at Mass, which some of you may or may not have noticed. Here's what I do: If you have not been baptized or do not intend to be a communicant, you are invited to come forward and ought to be instructed by rubric to cross your arms over your chest like this. (Currently, the instructions in our booklets aren't clear that this is the custom here, though in fact it has been, long before my arrival, but we are in the process of clarifying this, since there's a lot we do here that we don't tell people about when they are visitors or newcomers. If you notice something we do that's otherwise inexplicable, drop me a line about it, would you?) In any event, when a person who knows that they *should* cross their arms like this comes forward for a blessing, instead of administering the Host, I say, "The Body of Christ bless you," making the sign of the cross over the non-communicant with the Host or the ciborium containing the Body. In many Anglican Churches, the priest lays hands upon the non-communicant and gives a

standard blessing of some sort. And indeed, at more ecumenical occasions and with children, I will do something more explicit. But normally, if you are a non-communicant, I simply sign you with the Sacrament, because in that moment, *I am not the one blessing you*. Our Lord in the Sacrament is. Thus, with me, whenever you come forward to receive a blessing rather than the Sacrament itself, I am giving you a “mini-Benediction,” a personal, individual moment where *Our Lord* in the Real Presence of the Sacrament *blesses you*.

One thing we are also trying to inculcate here is that when you come up to the chalice, whether you choose to receive from it or not, the Deacon or Subdeacon should present the cup and say at least, “The Blood Christ”, even if you have received the Host but decline the cup. This gives you the opportunity to worship and adore Christ’s Real Presence in the chalice, making it a “mini-exposition.” For just as we practice a form of Eucharistic Exposition and Adoration at Devotions, at communion, in the moment of the cup being presented to you, whether you drink from it or not, you are being given the opportunity for a personal mini-adoration, just for you. So, even if you are not in the habit of taking the chalice, I recommend that you at least take a moment to reverence the chalice with a nod, or a bow, or a genuflection, or by crossing yourself, so that you allow yourself a brief moment to adore Christ’s Real Presence in the Sacrament before returning to your seat.

Now, whether you agree with this Eucharistic theology and practice or not, you can choose to ignore or even scoff at such foolishness regarding the Bread and Wine, but I don’t mind being a fool for Christ’s sake at St. Thomas’s, and I know that’s true of the other clergy and lay ministers who serve here. So we will persist in giving everyone an opportunity to be blessed by and to worship and adore “*the whole Christ—body, blood, soul, and divinity*” in the most holy Sacrament of the altar, at every Mass and at every “Devotions”, because in the final analysis, what we do isn’t about me, or you, or even us, but about *Jesus*. Or, perhaps a better way to put it is to say that it is *only* about me or you or us insofar as it is *first* and *foremost* about *him*, for what we do here is all about our *relationship* to him, and *through* him, to each other.

When Christians receive the Eucharist, we remember the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, and we look for his coming again in glory. We anticipate with hope our eternal union with God the Father through the Son in the power of the Holy Spirit. And we express this remembrance and hope in thanksgiving, which is what the word “eucharist” means, as any Greek scholar will tell you. Whether we are in a hospital bed or a cathedral, a simple wooden chapel in northern Ontario or the Sistine Chapel in the Vatican, whenever we receive the Body and Blood of Christ, *if we are paying any attention at all to what we are doing*, we will find ourselves caught up in wonder, love, and praise.

And that’s what Benediction does. Benediction takes that brief moment of wonder, love, and praise that we experience between the time that the priest places the host in the palm of our hand and we consume it, and stretches that moment out in time and space so that we have the leisure to reflect and meditate on the wonderful mystery of our redemption, so that we can linger just a little bit longer in wonder, love, and praise. Benediction is a time warp in the sacramental space-time continuum that allows our hearts and our minds to catch up to something true, good, and beautiful that hits us at warp speed. Benediction lets our hearts burn with the thanksgiving and hope that Jesus’ mighty act of giving his Body and Blood kindles in us.

It is my belief that in order to receive the Sacrament as worthily as possible, one must not only approach Communion with a clear conscience, but also be given the opportunity to contemplate what it is that one is doing. Benediction is one way of being *intentional* about being communicants. Perhaps Devotions can serve the same purpose without the monstrance, which is why I'm not in any rush to introduce it.

For in the end, the best thing about Devotions, Benediction, and Corpus Christi, to my mind, is that none of these things *explain* anything. We are not required to *understand* the mystery, after all, simply to *enter into it*. Of course, I personally hope that by entering into the mystery of Christ's Real Presence in the Sacrament, we will all be given the grace to *embrace* that Presence, to *participate* in it, and to be moved to *share* it with others so that others, too, may be *incorporated* into the Body of Christ. But the main action is God's action in the Sacrament.

And so my prayer for all of us on this great feast of Corpus Christi is that, whether we are communicants at this Mass or not, we may with open hearts and open minds receive Our Lord's blessing in the Sacrament, and thereby become a blessing to others. And for those of us who *are* communicants, may our incorporation into the Body of Christ move us to seek out those whom Christ is calling to be incorporated, so that they, too may come to embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope we enjoy as members of his Body, and also be made partakers of his most blessed Body and Blood.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.