

PREACHING AT CONVENTION LITURGY

Feast of Corpus Christi, Our Lady of the Angels Parish, San Diego

Readings: Deut 8:2-3, 14-16; 1 Cor 10:16-17; John 6:51-58

Preacher: Elizabeth Johnson, CTSA president

Text: "I am the living bread . . . if you eat this bread you will live forever . . . the bread I will give is my flesh (my very self) for the life of the world."

We are gathered at this Eucharist on this beautiful evening to celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi, or the Body and Blood of Christ. This is a feast of nourishment. We gather to celebrate how God feeds us, how our many hungers are fed by God. And this is also a feast of challenge. We gather to be transformed by the bread of life so that we can join God's nourishing work by becoming bread for others, especially the poor and needy.

Think for a minute of how we human beings are a bundle of hungers. Our bodies have a daily need for food and drink. If this need is not satisfied, it turns into a painful craving and ultimately we die of starvation. How marvelous it is that the earth brings forth nourishment for our bodies—one way God has of feeding us. Some mystics say that the earth is the body of Christ, the cosmic Christ.

We also have other strong hungers: for meaning in life, for truth, for love in our lives, for peace and justice, for the fullness of life for ourselves and others. If these needs are not met, we can starve to death in our spirits. How wonderful it is when the hunger of our spirit is fed by the wisdom, courage, and goodness of others, others who form part of the Body of Christ.

In some ways, the deepest hunger of all is our hunger and thirst for God: for infinite mercy and compassion, for gracious love that quickens us to life. It is no coincidence, then, that the saving power of Jesus is set forth in the Eucharist in the form of food, because this bread is a response to our deepest hunger. During his ministry Jesus was always feeding people, in homes, in fields, by the lakeside. This gospel is but one example, the feeding of the multitude. Crucified and risen, and present now in the power of the Spirit, Jesus himself becomes food, the Eucharist, God's gracious gift that nourishes us at many levels. He is indeed the living bread, given for the life of the world.

But how can one person be food for another? In at least two ways. Quite literally, a woman who is pregnant or who is nursing a baby is food for another, as her own body nourishes the little one into life. In other instances, a person can be food for others by giving them physical nourishment, or meaning, or truth, or

love, or encouragement, or compassion—in other words, by keeping alive the spark of life in them.

Jesus is the living bread in both of these senses—like a mother, nourishing us with his very own body, and as the Word made flesh, satisfying the deep hunger of our spirit for truth, love, God. Christian mystics have expressed this in beautiful ways. Listen to the words of the fourteenth century English mystic Julian of Norwich:

We know that all our mothers bear us for pain and death. . . . But our true Mother Jesus, he alone bears us for joy and for endless life, blessed may he be. So he carried us within himself in love and travail, until the fulness of time when he delivered us, suffering the cruelest pains (on the cross). And at the last, he died. And when he had finished, and had borne us so for bliss, still all this could not satisfy his wonderful love. . . .

What else could he do?

The mother can give her child to suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus can feed us with himself, and does, most courteously and most tenderly, with the blessed sacrament (his own body), which is the food of true life. . . .

Today's feast helps us remember and revel in the fact that we are nourished in amazing ways by God, who in motherly concern feeds our bodies through the whole physical world, feeds our spirits by the wisdom and love of one another, and feeds our souls with the sacrament of the Eucharist, Christ's own body and blood.

All of this is most comforting. But today's feast also contains a challenge, because Jesus, who was always feeding people in his ministry, invites us now to join him. To be nourished by Jesus as the bread of life means to take him into ourselves, to get strong and fat with his life, and thus to become as a community a living source of nourishment for others. The bread of life is here on the altar not just for our own consolation. It is also here to build the whole Church up into the body of Christ, one body partaking of the one loaf (as we heard in the second reading in Spanish).

Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador knew this well. On the last feast of Corpus Christi before he was murdered, he preached:

It is most opportune to pay homage to the body and blood of Christ while there are so many outrages to his body and blood among us. I should like to join this homage of our faith to the presence of the body and blood of Christ on our altar to all the blood shed, and the corpses piled up, here in our own land and throughout the world.

The Church is the body of Christ, sometimes wounded, persecuted, killed like Jesus was. And also like Jesus, meant to be the bread of life for others, just like the witness of the Salvadoran people and many others sustains our faith.

To celebrate the Eucharist and to receive the living bread is to be challenged to become bread for others, especially for those most in need. We do this by

feeding the hungry with real physical bread. Lack of food leads, at its most brutal, to starvation and death. Millions of people in this world are constantly hungry in this way. How can we receive the bread of life and not organize politically to help them? We also feed the world by passing on wisdom. Parents who teach their children, catechists, preachers, teachers of all kinds, help to feed the hunger for truth. I would like to mention in a special way theologians, present in large numbers in this assembly. Their whole life is dedicated to searching for fuller understanding of the faith, to nourish the minds and hearts of the whole Church. Theology is a truly nourishing ministry. The whole Church, too, is bread for others through action on behalf of justice, through authentic and generous compassion, through healing love, through our life as a welcoming community.

Selfishness and indifference sometimes stand in the way—we don't want to be bothered. But every time we gather around the altar, we enter into the dying and rising of Jesus, and so are purified and transformed just a little bit more as a community to become bread for the world.

As we continue with this Eucharistic celebration, let us praise and thank our gracious God who feeds us with this sacrament so courteously. And let us heed the call to become as Church a sacrament of nourishment for others, by the power of the Spirit. We are meant to become crumbs of bread in the Bread, drops of wine in the Cup, for the sake of the world which God loves so much.