

**APPENDIX I:
HOMILY FOR THE CONVENTION EUCHARIST**

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SOLEMNITY OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

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THE RADICAL PARTICULARITY OF CORPUS CHRISTI

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It is no surprise that there is great depth to the verses we just heard, John 6:51-58. Read on the Feast of Corpus Christi, they can be taken as providing a foundation to the feast: nothing less than an increasingly full and unhesitating participation in Christ. Politely eating the body of Jesus is not enough, as John makes clear: consuming his body and blood in verses 51-53 by what seems to be ordinary eating (*phagein*) turns, in verses 54-57, into a fiercer consumption (*trōgein*), as if one is tearing at the flesh, ripping off pieces and chewing them up, in an entirely visceral way. One can almost see the blood dripping down the face of the disciple who would take Jesus so literally. John wants to be absolutely clear that participation in Jesus is all or nothing.

But John rarely settles for a simple message, even one so fierce as this. We are asked surely to sympathize with listeners who respond only a couple of verses later, “This teaching is hard. Who can accept it” (6:60)? Hard: rough, abrasive, needlessly offensive. Jesus’ wording is crude, and he has also just diminished their tradition: yes, God provided manna in the desert, but it was a temporary solution, “Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died” (6:49). Do more: come to me, participate in me, and step beyond the mortal limits of the very tradition you have so long prized and venerated. Unsurprisingly, a few verses later, many, probably most, walk away: “Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him” (6:66).

If we step back, we can see the arc of the whole chapter mix intensity with diminishment. The crowds listened to Jesus; he fed them, and they wanted to make him their king. They followed him around the lake, amazed that he seemed to have crossed over without a boat. And yet, by chapter’s end, Jesus is left with almost no one willing to stay on. A choice for Jesus, a choice to participate wholeheartedly, unreservedly, messily in his flesh and blood, turns out to mean also a willingness to let go of everything else: nothing but Me. No wonder they walk away.

And so Jesus turns to those who have not left and asks, “Do you also wish to go away” (6:67)? Peter’s answer is both an acknowledgment of who Jesus is—“You are the Holy One of God”—and an admission that he stays because there is no other way, nowhere else to go: “Lord, to whom can we go? You alone have the words of eternal life” (6:68). It is as if Peter is saying, “Had we options, we too might leave—but we know you better and we know that there is no one else. We are here because we are people needing a way forward, but find no way but you yourself. To whom could we go?”

Peter freely makes this choice. No one forces him to stay. But even this is not really Peter’s own achievement: “No one can come to me unless it is granted by the Father” (6:65). Freedom is a choice, yet too it is a grace. Surely this is why John ends the chapter on a darker note: “Jesus answered them, ‘Yet one of you is a devil.’ He was speaking of Judas son of Simon Iscariot, for he, though one of the twelve, was going to betray him” (6:70-71). Choosing Jesus would mean little, were it impossible to betray him.

Corpus Christi, a feast grounded today in John 6, ought not be reduced to a pious veneration of Christ in the Eucharist or a celebration of Real Presence, even if the piety is not outdated and the Presence is really Real. But consuming the body and blood of Jesus also marks a radical particularity, a singularity excluding every other larger and smaller thing, action, person, memory, tradition: this and nothing else — or everything else, but not this. Everything may come back, but only after, later.

This seems a needed, sobering message for us as we near the end of our seventy-seventh annual convention. We have many concerns, challenges, duties, before us; we are very mindful of the needs of God’s children all around us; we want to do our theological work, such as it is, in service of God’s people; and we are aware that the circumstances of our work, even on our campuses, are quickly changing. We shall continue to do our best, but John 6 (as I read it) casts a shadow over all we do.

It reminds us that to flourish in an uncertain era, participating in the reality of Christ is the true bread of life, but first it may seem a diminishment. Only if we—persons, people of faith, theologians—give ourselves as fully, recklessly as did Peter, all will be well. Otherwise, we may find ourselves drifting away, as did the crowds. Or even worse, we may by indirection put aside his scandalous particularity, and betray the Christ who offers us an intimate sharing in his own self, his life, his freedom. As Jesus says just two chapters later, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples. You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:31-32). Let us pray that in the years to come, we as a Society continue, as best we can, on the way God has made for us from our very beginnings.