

Body and Blood of Christ
Corpus Christi 052508

The following homily words were contained in my first homily on the Sunday following my ordination to become a deacon in the Catholic Church. Thanks be to God for the gift of the Eucharist – thanks be to God for the gift of the Church... and thanks for allowing me to become a deacon. So here is a repeat of my first homily on Corpus Christi....

Brothers and sisters in Christ. Most of us are about to share in a sacred meal. A meal that is renewed as it has been continuously since Christ first offered it on Holy Thursday. And today as we gather for this singularly most important prayer of our faith, the Church gives us a solemn feast as a reminder to honor Christ who fed the multitudes... and who fed his apostles and disciples with himself on that Sabbath eve. This then is the memorial of the Body and Blood of Christ truly made present here and again.

As I began preparations for this homily, I came upon an article entitled “Welcome to the Universal Family of God.” Two people in search of truth wrote the article. Their names are Kathy & Jeff Schwehm and they were active members and leaders of their Lutheran faith. In doing work to learn to defend and teach others the tenants of Lutheran belief, Jeff decided to validate the understandings and what they practiced as Lutherans. The following words are from the Schwehm article: “So I said to myself, “I bet there were other writings from Christians who were around during the time of the apostles who could shed light on what the early church really believed.

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This led me (Jeff) to the (hundreds of volumes of the writings of what are called the) early Church Fathers. One of my favorites soon became Justin. I especially liked how the early Christians worshipped. I thought “Wow! Christians have been worshipping like the Lutherans for centuries.”

“First, I read some letters that were written around AD 107 by a Christian named Ignatius. In his letters, he talked about the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and he referred to Jesus as God. He also described the early church as catholic – as in universal. Ignatius wrote – “The true Church is where the Bishop is!” Oh my God, wrote Jeff... the early Church had a hierarchy!!!” I read the words of a 3rd Century person named Eusebius who wrote about the history of the Christian Church. Eusebius described the early church in such a way that it seemed a lot like the Catholic Church – except, of course, that the Church of today is much bigger.”

During this period, a friend gave Jeff a copy of a Catholic Catechism and said to him... If you find anything wrong in this book, you come and tell me. The Catechism is written with heavy use of Scriptural and historical documents and footnotes. It wasn't too long before Jeff and his wife Kathy had studied their way into the Catholic Faith. That's the end of what I'll share from the Schwehm article. Why do I share this story of conversion with you today? In the words of the Schwehms, their readings and study led them to the early church's historical understanding and acceptance of the Holy Eucharist.

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Jeff and his wife found not a memorial... but the reality of the presence of Jesus in consecrated bread and wine. Today, we celebrate this most special feast of the Body and Blood of Christ... a feast of Christ's continuing to feed his sheep through the actions of Peter – then through all the apostles; then their successors -- the bishops and priests. And today, through the action of our celebrant priest.

For me as a deacon – I tell you most assuredly: it is the Eucharist that led me to this point in my life today. The same Eucharist found at the beginnings of the Church. It is the Eucharist that will change your life.

One early Church Father mentioned was St. Justin, a Bishop and later a Martyr. Historical experts accept his life and writings. Justin wrote a letter to the pagan emperor Antonius Pius around the year 155... He is trying to explain the non-threatening things Christians do so the Romans would stop the persecutions ... Justin wrote these words to the emperor: "On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place. The writings of the prophets and the memoirs of the apostles are read, as much as time permits. When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things. Then we all rise and offer prayers for ourselves... and for all others, wherever they may be. Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren.

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He takes these and offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. He gives thanks, and when he has concluded, all present give voice by saying: "Amen." When the prayers are concluded we exchange the kiss. When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the 'eucharist' bread, and wine with water in it... and the Eucharist is also taken to those who are absent."

You have just heard the Mass described... in the year 155 – a mere 120 some years after Christ's death and Resurrection. Now what was it that Justine described? Readings from Scripture... then a homily... then petitions... then prayers over the gifts. And when our priest here who presides over our liturgy today says the prayers of Consecration, Christ will again be made present in the bread and wine. Thereafter, in the Eucharistic presence of Jesus who gave us the words, we will say the Our Father and exchange the Kiss of Peace... just as Justin Martyr described back then...

It is so sad that in the separated faiths, and even in some who call themselves Catholics, there has come a belief that one blessed bread is the same as any other blessed bread. There are those who believe this Eucharist is symbolic. There are people who believe this food should be given to any person who walks through these doors. Some ask why we do not offer the Eucharist to non-believers: "Wouldn't it be the Christian thing to do?" Did the Early Church give the Eucharist to non-believing Romans? Or to Jews?

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They most certainly did not. History tells us that people who wanted to come into the faith were called Catechumens and they practiced and studied – for as long as two years. They did this until they came to fully know and understand this faith that confects and celebrates the sacred Body and Blood of Jesus.

Jesus said: “This is my Body; this is my blood.” And in the ACTS of the Apostles we see the early Church celebrating the Word and the Breaking of the Bread... and early martyrs died for celebrating this Eucharist on the ‘day of the Sun.’... Around the year 425, St. Augustine wrote that Christ – the same in flesh as walked the earth – that He gave that same flesh to us to be eaten for our salvation. Moreover, says Augustine, no one eats that Flesh unless he has adored it.... and we sin by not adoring it.

The words of Thomas Aquinas used in the hymn Tantum Ergo were written in the 1200’s: “Down in adoration falling, this great Sacrament we hail. Faith will tell us Christ is present, when our human senses fail.” Does this sound like something that is to be treated as some sort of a symbolic holy bread? Does this sound like what people would do who use ordinary bread and grape juice bought from Safeway? Or some form of community friendship wafers that are used among certain of the separated families of Christianity? Or is this consecrated bread what Jesus said it is... the bread of life – the living bread come down from heaven.

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A person who was himself a convert said: "I don't see how you can know what we know as Catholics and not respond to the invitation."

Let us honor and adore Jesus present among us in his Body and Blood. Peace be with you. Amen.