

The Seventeenth Sunday Ordinary Time:  
July 28, 2024 *“Do this in remembrance of Me!”*

Whatever I write today for the Seventeenth Sunday of Ordinary time can be applied to the Feast of Corpus Christi; the texts for the Feast of Corpus Christi are identical to the ones Holy Mother Church uses for this Sunday. Once again, I go begging with my hat in my hand to our Holy Father Emeritus, Benedict, borrowing some of his ideas that he wrote in a homily in 1978, while he was then Josef Cardinal Ratzinger. His homily, if you are interested in reading the entire work, is entitled “The Presence of the Lord in the Sacrament,” and is taken from a collection of his writings on the Eucharist published by Ignatius Press: *God is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*.

His Eminence, in beginning his homily, reminds the Faithful that the Feast of Corpus Christi (or, in today’s case, the Seventeenth Sunday) was certainly known in the early Church, especially in the Church of Rome, in some form, but became known to us in its present form today by St. Thomas Aquinas (+ 1274), by order of Pope Urban IV. When St. Thomas composed the hymns and verses, etc., for the Feast, Cardinal Ratzinger remarks that St. Thomas:

.... in his sermon for Corpus Christi, picked up the saying from the fifth book of Moses, which expressed Israel’s joy over its election, over the mystery of the covenant. The saying goes: ‘What great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is to us?’ (Deut 4:7) (1)

His Eminence goes on to explain:

This joy at the way that a ‘people of God’ has truly come into being, that God is so near that he could be no closer, was the origin in the thirteenth century of the Feast of Corpus Christi, as one great hymn of thanksgiving that such a thing could be. (2)

It is at this point that the Cardinal makes his usual, characteristic point, his sort of ‘jabbing remark,’ that hits us right between the eyes, (or, pierces our hearts, if we have the courage): “We do not want God as near as that; we do not want him so small, humbling himself; we want him to be great and far away.” (3) I wonder if Cardinal Ratzinger is right? I think he just might be more correct than I would like him to be.

Although Cardinal Ratzinger asks three questions about the real presence of the Lord in the Eucharist, due to lack of space, we shall deal only with his first question, namely: 1) Does the Bible actually say anything like that?

In this Holy Mass, we are reading from the beginning of the Gospel of St. John which will lead,

at the end of chapter six to the astonishing claim of the Lord: *“Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life within you... My flesh is food indeed.”* (St. John 6. 53, 55) Listen carefully to Ratzinger’s explanation:

When the murmuring of the Jews arose, the controversy could easily have been quieted by the assurance: Friends, do not be disturbed; this was only metaphorical language; the flesh only signifies food, it isn’t actually that! – But there is nothing of that in the Gospel. Jesus renounces any such toning down; he just says with renewed emphasis that this bread has to be literally, physically eaten. He says that faith in the God who became man is believing in a God with a body and that this faith is real and fulfilled; it brings full union only if it is itself corporeal, if it is a sacramental event in which the corporeal Lord seizes hold of our bodily existence. In order to express fully the intensity and reality of this fusion, Paul compares what happens in Holy Communion with the physical union between man and woman. To help us understand the Eucharist, he refers us to the words in the creation story: ‘The two [=man and wife] shall become one’ (Gen2: 24) And he adds: ‘He who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit [that is, shares a single new existence in the Holy Spirit] with him’ (1 Cor 6: 17) (5)

Forgive me for using such a long quotation, but, the Cardinal’s words are so well written that I really didn’t see the need to re-write them, or, for that matter, to re-invent the wheel.

It is at this point that Cardinal Ratzinger says something truly amazing, which brings us to the heart of the issue of the True Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This presence of Jesus in the Eucharist... this presence with Whom we are to be united, as St. Paul instructs us... “It is not something at rest but is a power that catches us up and works to draw us within itself.” (6) What does that mean?

The Holy Father has a great love for the work of St. Augustine. In light of the great St. Augustine, Bishop and Doctor, and foundation of the Medieval Church, Ratzinger explains:

Augustine had a profound grasp of this [that is, the ‘alive presence’ as it were] in his teaching on Communion. In the period before his conversion, when he was struggling with the incarnational aspect of Christian belief... he had a sort of vision, in which he heard a voice saying to him: ‘I am the bread of the strong, eat me! But you will not transform me and make me part of you; rather, I will transform you and make you part of me.’ In the normal process of eating, the human is the stronger being. He takes things in, and

they are assimilated into him, so that they become part of his own substance. They are transformed within him and go to build up his bodily life. But in the mutual relation with Christ it is the other way around; he is the heart, the truly existent being. When we truly communicate, this means that we are taken out of ourselves, that we are assimilated into him, that we become one with him and, through him, with the fellowship of our brethren. (7)

Utterly amazing! What have we learned from these two bishops – from St. Augustine and from the Bishop of Rome and our Holy Father?

We know that the presence of the Lord in the Eucharist is a Biblical teaching, rather, a Biblical fact. This Biblical fact, expressed openly in the New Testament in the Gospels and St. Paul, especially in the Gospel of St. John, finds its foundation in the Old Testament covenant promises of the Lord throughout history. We see one of the great Eucharistic precursors, for instance, already in the very first book of Scripture, in Genesis, in the person of the Priest, Melchizedek, who offers not the customary blood offering of a pigeon or dove or even an oxen, but, strangely, (really unheard of at the time) bread and wine; Scripture goes on to remark with an air of mystery: “*Abram gave him a tenth of everything.*” That is to say, Abram treated Melchizedek like unto God, giving him a *tithe*.

Now, when we come to the Eucharist, when we *communicate*, it is not just *any action*. No. Rather, we are coming to the Lord Jesus, and, whether It is the Lord Whom we receive in the action of the Mass, or the Lord reserved in the Tabernacle, His presence and power though hidden, nevertheless has the power to “catch us up and draw us within Himself!”

But to say this is still not to say enough. We must go farther. Since this Son of Man Whom we receive is also Son of God, He takes us to the Father by way of His Spirit. Since He is Son Who is enfleshed, that is to say, since He is Son Who wears the very flesh given Him by Mary Immaculate, in some mystical fashion, as He takes us to the Father in the Spirit, He does so in union with His Mother. How does He do this? Our Holy Father, Benedict, again gives us some insights into this mystery in his Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Sacramentum Caritatis: The Sacrament of Charity*, which he gave to us in 2007. His Holiness writes:

In Mary most holy, we see... perfectly fulfilled the ‘sacramental’ way that God comes down to meet his creatures and involves them in his saving work. From the Annunciation to Pentecost, Mary of Nazareth appears as someone whose freedom is completely open to God’s will. Her immaculate conception is revealed precisely in her unconditional

docility to God’s word. Obedient faith in response to God’s work shapes her life at every moment. A virgin attentive to God’s word, she lives in complete harmony with his will; she treasures in her heart the words that come to her from God and, piecing them together like a mosaic, she learns to understand them more deeply (cf. *Lk 2: 19, 51*); Mary is the great Believer who places herself confidently in God’s hands, abandoning herself to his will. This mystery deepens as she becomes completely involved in the redemptive mission of Jesus... Finally, she was given by the same Christ Jesus, dying on the Cross, as a mother to his disciple, with these words: ‘Woman, behold your Son.’ From the Annunciation to the Cross, Mary is the one who received the Word, made flesh within her and then silenced in death. It is she, lastly, who took into her arms the lifeless body of the one who truly loved his own ‘to the end’ (*Jn 13: 1*). Consequently, every time we approach the Body and Blood of Christ in the eucharistic liturgy, we also turn to her who, by way of her complete fidelity, received Christ’s sacrifice for the whole Church. The Synod Fathers rightly declared that ‘Mary inaugurates the Church’s participation in the sacrifice of the Redeemer.’ She is the Immaculata, who receives God’s gift unconditionally and is thus associated with his work of salvation. Mary of Nazareth, icon of the nascent Church, is the model for each of us, called to receive the gift that Jesus makes of himself in the Eucharist. (8)

At this point, since we find ourselves immersed in the realm of the Absolute Mystery – it would be best to stop, to whisper, to pray, and thus abandon ourselves to the God Who is Love Incarnate.

At the beginning of this paper, Cardinal Ratzinger mused on the point about whether we really wanted to have God as close to us as He really is to us in the Eucharist. *Do we really want Him to be that close to us?! Well, whether we want it so or not, He is. And whether the rest of the world likes it to be or not, He is...He is there. Jesus said: “Do this in remembrance of Me.” And whenever we gather in His Name, He is with us, as He promised, until the end of the world.*

1. J. Card. Ratzinger, *God is Near Us*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 2003, pg. 75
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid..
4. Ibid., pg. 76
5. Ibid., pg. 77
6. Ibid., pg. 77
7. Ibid., pgs. 77-78
8. Pope Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*,