

Walsingham Address for Monday in Octave of Corpus Christi

Christ is now enshrined in glory, the human body of humiliation which was made for Him in the body of the B. Virgin Mary is forever enthroned in heaven. His "kingdom shall have no end." St. Paul even says: "Although we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we him no more" (1 Cor.5:16). Now that our Saviour is, not only in glory but actually interceding for us, what more could we ever need? Christ's Ascension is neither a conclusion nor a commuting from one place to another, but fulfilment and filling, filling all creation. His Presence is no longer localised or visible, but extended. It is not a remote, unnoticed prayer that is offered for us within heaven. Together with the Holy Ghost, our Blessed Lord also maintains His ministry and accessibility. Yet why, among the many ways that He has chosen to extend His Presence among us, has he commanded such an obscure way? A way, moreover, that actually provokes misunderstanding, and invites contempt and mockery? Our brethren at the pump today will no less condemn us for our worship of biscuits than for our worship of Mary; to say nothing of other mortal, and sinful, creatures. Although Himself in glory, our Blessed Lord continues to give Himself to us in the form of humiliation - perhaps - because we are still in a state of humiliation. Our setting in life is to straddle two worlds and to be subjected to misunderstanding and contempt in societies that range from prurient, to suspicious to hostile. Just as Christ accommodated to our weakened state and condescended to our humanity, so now, even when returned to His glory. He will not blind us with majesty but, as it were, draws near to us unseen. We recognise in the sacred humanity of the Christ our true and ultimate Priest, Prophet and King, but no less are we to recognise Him as our true Deacon, the servant who comes to save. There is within us a natural reticence that recoils from our Saviour's Body and Blood. In a sense it is a gift from which we should flee, just as St. Peter recoiled from Jesus washing his feet at that great Supper (for the most reverent and sensible reasons). But having recoiled we should (as Peter) then accept. Those who have been misled about the true nature of the sacraments, also have reverent and sensible reasons on their side, but man cannot live by sense alone, we have to embrace and receive "the foolishness of God."

Rarely do the New Testament writers claim to understand our Lord's purposes, even though some of them witnessed the very beginnings of His ministry. They simply try to remain faithful to what He commanded. Thus with the Eucharist, we find so few explorations and expositions, it is simply presented as a fact of the Christian life. In John 6, however, our Blessed Lord at least appears to describe this gift in terms of His humiliation. "The bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven... For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (John 6:33, 38). Yet the sacrament is not only about the Christ's humiliation: "As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me" (Jn.6:57). This gift conveys the glory of heaven to those in the wilderness of humiliation.

We may, however, be so eager to preach the Presence and the life that we miss out the memory and sacrifice. In the West we neglect the real Presence of the Holy Ghost. We have been so zealous to insist upon the Flesh, that all talk of spiritual presence has fallen under suspicion. For one of the central Eucharistic passages in John, we should, perhaps, leap forward from 6 to 14:26. The Holy Ghost "shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance." Where else does "remembrance" come but in the traditions of the Eucharist? Furthermore, how are those of us who are blessed because we have believed rather than seen, (Jn. 20:29) to remember our Master as His disciples remembered Him? only through the personal breath of the Holy Ghost. We remember before God - and articulate the Church's intention specifying Christ's death, resurrection and ascension - God also (so to speak) remembers, precisely because the Holy Ghost brings all things to remembrance.

Yet this is not a remembrance - however thankful a recollection -for something lost. The Congregationalist theologian Forsythe insisted that a "memorial" must be quite different if the person remembered is still alive. That Person's sacrifice is still alive too, explaining, perhaps, the meaning of "unbloody sacrifice" as used in Eastern rites. This is no staining, congealing, cooling blood, but cleansing, quickening blood, and Spiritual fire: the Eternal Offering ratified by the ceaseless intercession of the Eternal Son and Eternal Spirit (Rom. 8:26).

Into this sacrifice all of us are drawn. We can offer because offering exists within God Himself. We can pray because prayer exists within God Himself. Although we want to be devout here, even St. Mary herself can seem a remotely historical, shadowy figure, for we have believed but not seen. Yet, as this Eucharist may have been framed for our present humiliated state, so too might the continuing ministry of Christ's mother. A mother is 'designed' for our weakest moments and our greatest needs. A mother, by this fact alone, reduces our status. I knew a priest who, to disguise his humble origins, tried to pass off his own mother as his cleaner! Repellent though this is, it establishes the truth of motherhood. It brings us down to earth in all senses. Although we know Christ after the flesh no more. His mother will not let us forget His (fleshly) origins and we can claim Him as our own.

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