

EXTERNAL SOLEMNITY OF CORPUS CHRISTI

7th June 2015

Flannery O'Connor, the American Catholic novelist, was once at a dinner party with some well-heeled sceptics who, knowing that she was a Catholic, commented what a lovely consoling symbol they thought the Eucharist must be. In her typical blunt fashion O'Connor responded, "Well, if it's just a symbol, then who cares!" Reflecting on this incident in a letter, O'Connor added, "That was all the defence I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it ... except that it is the centre of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable."

In a simple homespun fashion Flannery O'Connor was able to go to the heart of the matter, reminding us not to take the Blessed Sacrament for granted. The holy Eucharist is the greatest sacrament because, whereas the other sacraments contain the grace of Christ, the Eucharist contains Christ himself.

After the priest has spoken the words of consecration at Mass, the bread and wine no longer remain: they have been replaced by the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, along with his soul and divinity. This mystery of our faith is called the *Real Presence*. Only the outward appearances – such as colour and taste – of the bread and wine remain. The holy Eucharist is thus NOT merely a symbol. In promising that he would institute this sacrament, Our Lord insisted that his presence in the Eucharist is a "true" presence, even though the astonished crowds could not understand how this could be so, even though some of his disciples even left him because of this teaching (*cf.* Jn 6:50-55). He explained to the crowds that the bread he would give would be even greater than the manna from heaven with which God fed the Israelites during the Exodus in the desert. If our Christian Eucharist were merely a symbol, then it would be *less sacred* than that miraculous bread, and there would be no reason to pass from the Old Testament to the New.

Jesus Christ is truly present among us in even the tiniest crumb of the host or the smallest drop from the chalice. That is why we must always treat the Blessed Sacrament with the greatest possible respect; it is also why our churches should be places of great beauty. For this reason the priest must take great care when saying Mass that no particle of the Eucharist should be lost or dropped upon the floor. Holy communion is given directly on the tongue rather than in the hand in order to avoid sacrilege or any chance of disrespect to the Body of Christ that could arise from the loss of the sacred particles. As the saying goes, actions speak louder than words. Kneeling is a sign of respect because by lowering our bodies, we show our submission to the Saviour, whom we are about to receive in communion. Saint Paul says, "at the name of Jesus every knee should bend" (Phil. 2:10), and so it is all the more fitting to kneel

when receiving Christ himself in holy communion. As human beings, with both a body and a soul, we need these outward signs to help protect and cultivate our internal faith. Receiving communion kneeling and on the tongue helps to reinforce our belief that the sacred host is not merely common food, but rather the *living Body of Jesus Christ*, true God and true man. At a time when belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist has dramatically diminished, these outward signs of reverence are more necessary than ever.

As long as we are in the state of grace and have observed the minimal fast prescribed by the Church we may receive communion. To be “in the state of grace” means to have no serious sins on our conscience; if we have committed a mortal sin, it is absolutely necessary to make a good confession before going to communion, because we cannot receive Our Lord into a soul that is stained. As Saint Paul teaches in today’s Epistle, “whosoever shall eat this bread, or drink the chalice of the Lord unworthily, shall be guilty of the body and of the blood of the Lord” (I Cor 11:27), making it clear that to receive communion “unworthily,” or in a state of sin, is a grave sacrilege – one of the worst sins imaginable. Since the Eucharist is not a mere symbol, to receive this sacrament unworthily is to insult Jesus Christ himself. It is not farfetched to imagine that the chastisements unleashed on our world today are the result of sacrilegious communions.

Even if, on a given day, we are not able to receive communion, we should still attend Mass – especially if it is a Sunday or holy day! Even though the Mass does not forgive mortal sins directly (that is the special purpose of the sacrament of penance), the Mass does indirectly obtain the forgiveness of sins: a sinner who attends Mass, unless he hardens his heart, receives the spirit of penitence as an actual grace that will help him to make a good confession and be reconciled to God when the time comes. Whenever we go to communion we should do so as reverently as possible, being conscious of the great gift that we are about to receive. Our outer attitude, including the way we dress, should reflect our respect for Jesus Christ, really present in this sacrament.

Frequent, fervent communion is a guaranteed weapon against the devil, the world and the flesh. Is it any wonder that, in the words of St. John Chrysostom after communion we “return from [the altar] like lions breathing fire, having become terrible to the devil” (Homily 46 on the Gospel of John)?

After receiving holy communion, we should take a few moments to thank God for the wondrous gift of his Body and Blood with which he has fed us, poor creatures though we are. Let us approach the Blessed Sacrament worthily and devoutly, recalling the promise made by Our Lord: “If anyone eat of this bread, he shall live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world” (Jn 6:52).