

Corpus Christi + 2 June 2024 + Ex 24:3-8 + Heb 9:11-15 + Mk 14:12-16, 22-26

You may have heard about how the Church in the US is in the midst of a national “Eucharistic Revival”, aimed at helping us to grow deeper in our believe in the real presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. Polling done a few years ago revealed that many Catholics no longer believe in this central tenet of our faith, and so the Bishops created this Revival to help us recover this precious gift of our faith in the real presence. In this spirit, I’d like to offer a few “reasons to believe” on this Corpus Christi celebration.

First and foremost, we believe because Jesus said so. Let’s be clear about this. To be a Christian means that you have made an act of faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And if He is God, then He cannot lie. So when we hear Him say in our Gospel today over the bread, *this is my body*, and over the cup of wine, *this is my blood of the covenant*, we take Him at His word. With sincere respect for our non-Catholic brothers and sisters in Christ, I can’t understand why they will claim every word that Jesus said is literal, except for these. Either we accept all of His words as true or we don’t—but that’s a sermon for another day.

And that brings us to the next reason to believe: the Church has always believed that Jesus meant what He said at the Last Supper. I’d like to offer a few important examples here:

St. Ignatius of Antioch was the 2nd Bishop of Antioch in Syria (modern day Turkey), which was one of the 5 most prominent churches in ancient Christendom. Writing to the church in Philadelphia (Turkey) in roughly the late first century AD, meaning, only 50-70 years after the Resurrection, Ignatius exhorts: *take care, therefore, to participate in one Eucharist, for there is one flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, and one cup that leads to unity through His blood; there is one altar, just as there is one bishop, together with the council of presbyters and the deacons...in order that whatever you do, you do in accordance with God.*

St. Justin the Martyr was a highly-educated lay philosopher and convert to Christianity in the early 2nd century AD. This was a time of great persecution for the Church, because the Romans believed that Christians were atheists, because they refused to worship the many gods of Rome. Writing around 155AD in a work known as his “Apology”—meaning, *defense* of Christianity, addressed to the Emperor Titus, Justin offers one of the earliest descriptions we have of the Mass of the 1st Christians. This is so important that I will quote it at length:

He says, *on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the letters of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs... to the imitation of these good things. Then we all rise together and pray, and... when our prayer is ended, bread and wine and water are brought, and the president... offers prayers and thanksgivings, according to his ability, and the people assent, saying Amen...this food is called among us the Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake but the man who believes that*

the things which we teach are true, and who has been washed with the washing that is for the remission of sins...For not as common bread and common drink do we receive these; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior, having been made flesh by the Word of God, had both flesh and blood for our salvation, so likewise have we been taught that the food which is blessed by the prayer of His word...is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who was made flesh.

I could offer countless other examples of the early church's belief in the real presence. In fact, there was no real challenge to this belief for roughly the first 1,000 years of the Church. And even when this belief came under attack during the reformation, the leaders of the various reformed churches did not and still do not agree amongst themselves what was the so-called "authentic teaching" regarding the Eucharist. But these days, questions of "which church is right" regarding the Eucharist is far from the minds of perhaps most people. Rather, the whole of the Creed is cast into doubt: the identity of Jesus, the historicity of His resurrection, the very existence of God is largely doubted. So, does the question of the real presence of the Eucharist even matter, some may ask?

Well yes, it does matter. Our readings today give us just a tiny snapshot of the whole, beautiful vision of the plan of God for man's salvation. When the crown of God's creation, mankind, chose to turn away from God, God went on a rescue mission. He chose one nation among all nations of the earth to be His light, and He chose one man, Moses, to be their leader. Moses gave them the Law of God to help the people begin to re-learn how to live in a way that would lead to communion with God—to Covenantal union, which was also the way to authentic human flourishing. And this way of life firstly was a way of right worship, so Moses taught them how to worship God rightly, which included both priest and sacrifice.

When, in the fullness of time, the Word of God was made flesh in Jesus, He revealed Himself to be the true Moses: the one who taught the fullness of God's Law, and was Himself both priest and victim, offered on the altar of the Cross for our salvation. But God didn't want us to be mere bystanders, just watching, as it were, God do all of this for us. No, Jesus made a way for us to enter into His sacrifice on the Cross, into an eternal Covenant with God, and He did this at the Last Supper. The Eucharist is the awesome way that God not only perpetuates the sacrifice of the Cross, but also allows us to participate in His sacrifice, by eating His flesh and drinking His blood in a sacramental way, to become one body in Him.

In the Eucharist, we are made one with God. We are made one with each other, as His body. We are united with the angels and Saints in a foretaste of the wedding feast of the Lamb in heaven. The Eucharist, which is a work of the Holy Spirit, is the fulfillment of the Lord's promise to be with us always until the end of the age (Mt 28:20). The Eucharist matters because it means that God truly is alive and real, that He has acted and is still active in this world, that we are not alone, and that He wants us to be in Communion with Him. The Eucharist means all of this, what we do in Church, matters, and it matters for all of eternity.