

Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ (*Corpus Christi*) – Cycle C
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – June 23, 2019
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As you may have guessed by now, from my homilies or from my waistline, I like food – some foods more than others, I suppose, but food in general. And I have learned to appreciate a variety of cuisines. When I lived in St. Louis, the best restaurants were Italian; in New Orleans, French, Creole and Cajun; in Memphis, barbecue, of course and – increasingly everywhere – Mexican. Every cuisine has its specialties, but all of them have something in common – bread. It is hard to imagine a perfect Italian dinner, for example, without that hard knot bread that is so soft and tender inside. In New Orleans, every meal, it seems, came with a French baguette – either served fresh or as an essential ingredient in bread pudding. We cannot imagine a barbecue sandwich without a bun or Mexican food without a tortilla. No matter where we eat or what we eat, bread is an essential element to our understanding of a meal; it is a building block of culture and cuisine.

As we heard in our first reading from the book of Genesis, bread is not a modern invention. Approximately 3,800 years ago, when Abraham encountered Melchizedek, bread and wine were blessed and offered in the name of God Most High. In addition to being the king of Salem – the King of Jerusalem, the King of Peace – Melchizedek is also described as a priest – as one entitled to offer sacrifice on behalf of the people. Eventually the descendants of Abraham would have their own High Priests – those of the tribe of Levi – but Melchizedek comes before the Levitical priesthood. He is a priest of God Most High – one appointed not by accident of birth, but one chosen by God. And just as we will do in a few minutes, Melchizedek offered bread and wine – the most basic building blocks of the ancient diet – the most basic building blocks of every cuisine.

After offering thanks to God the Father, Jesus himself fed others with bread. In our gospel account, Jesus feeds the large crowd with only five loaves and two fish. And the crowd was not only fed – they were satisfied. They received enough in spite of the small number of loaves. And they were certainly talking about it. From this point on, the crowds that Jesus attracted would get larger and larger. His fame grew – and so did the discomfort of those who were threatened by his teaching. If this Jesus could multiply loaves and fish, what other miracles might he accomplish – whose authority might he undermine. Yes, the multiplication of loaves was remarkable, but it was also disconcerting to those in power.

Even more troublesome, of course, would be the event described in our second reading. At the Last Supper, Jesus once again fed his disciples, fed those

gathered at table with bread that he blessed, broke and shared. But the miracle of that meal was not found in the multiplication of bread, but in its substantial change. Jesus took ordinary bread and ordinary wine and proclaimed them to be his most sacred body and blood. He changed them, not in appearance, but in substance to his own body and blood. Yes, Jesus gave himself to his disciples, **to us** as our physical and spiritual nourishment. It is one thing to believe in a God who created all things, to see all things – even our nourishment – as God’s gift. Most people of faith do that. They give thanks to God before each meal for the gift of food. But Catholics believe in a God who comes to us in the ordinariness of bread and wine – in the most basic elements of our cuisine – not just as gift, but as self-gift. Our loving God comes directly, intimately into our body, our being as food and drink, as God’s very self. The Eucharist is profound. The Eucharist is intimate. The Eucharist is threatening.

For a culture such as ours that tolerates God as long as he is kept at a distance, as long as he doesn’t affect our lives, a God so intimately connected to humanity that he feeds us with his very self is threatening. Indeed, most of our Protestant brothers and sisters have backed away from St. Paul’s description of the Eucharist. If you profess belief in Scripture alone, then you can interpret Scripture in any way that is convenient. God can come to you on your terms. But if we truly believe that God comes to feed us in the Eucharist, in the form of bread and wine, then we must believe in the Church’s tradition that makes that possible. And we must accept that God does not come to us on our terms – we must surrender to his terms. We must conform our lives to his. Our God is not some cultural artifact that we can keep on a shelf and feel good about possessing but which has no impact upon us. A God who feeds us with his very self wants us to become what we receive, wants us to become like him in our care and concern for our brothers and sisters, like him in our self-sacrifice, like him in our love. Just as bread is the foundation of every cuisine, so the Eucharist, God’s self-giving love must be the foundation, the central focus of every Christian life. Without the Eucharist, our relationship with God is distant. With the Eucharist, we continuously renew our communion with God and with one another. We become the Body of Christ. As we celebrate Corpus Christi, may we give thanks for the nourishment God provides. May we rejoice in the intimate connection with God we are afforded in the Eucharist. May we become what we receive.