



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF CORPUS CHRISTI

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Thursday, 22 June 2000

1. *The institution of the Eucharist, the sacrifice of Melchizedek and the multiplication of the loaves:* this is the evocative triptych which the liturgy of the Word presents to us today on the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi*.

In the centre is the institution of the Eucharist. St Paul, in his First Letter to the Corinthians which we have just heard, recalled the event in precise words, adding: "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 Cor 11: 26). "As often", hence this evening too, as we celebrate the Eucharist in the heart of the International Eucharistic Congress, we proclaim Christ's redemptive death and in our hearts rekindle the hope of our definitive encounter with him.

Conscious of this, we will acclaim after the consecration, as if in response to the Apostle's invitation: "When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, until you come in glory".

2. Our gaze expands to include the other elements of the biblical triptych displayed for our meditation today: *the sacrifice of Melchizedek and the multiplication of the loaves.*

The first account, very short but of great importance, comes from the Book of Genesis and was proclaimed in the first reading. It tells us of Melchizedek, "king of Salem" and "priest of God Most High", who blessed Abram and "brought out bread and wine" (Gn 14: 18). Psalm 109 refers to this passage, attributing to the Messiah-King an extraordinary priestly character that God has directly conferred on him: "You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" (Ps 109: 4).

The day before his death on the Cross, Christ instituted the Eucharist in the Upper Room. He also offered bread and wine, which "in his sacred hands" (*Roman Canon*) became his Body and his Blood, offered in sacrifice. Thus he fulfilled the prophecy of the old covenant linked to Melchizedek's sacrificial offering. For this very reason - the Letter to the Hebrews recalls - "he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest *after the order of Melchizedek*" (5: 7-10).

The sacrifice of Golgotha was anticipated in the Upper Room: the death on the Cross of the Incarnate Word, the Lamb sacrificed for us, the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world. In Christ's pain every person's pain is redeemed; in his passion, human suffering acquires new value; in his death, our death is vanquished forever.

3. Let us now turn our gaze to the Gospel account of the *multiplication of the loaves*, which completes the Eucharistic triptych brought to our attention today. In the liturgical setting of *Corpus Christi*, this passage from the Evangelist Luke helps us to understand better the gift and mystery of the Eucharist.

Jesus took the five loaves and the two fish, raised his eyes to heaven, blessed them, broke them and gave them to the Apostles to distribute to the crowd (cf. *Lk* 9: 16). "All", St Luke remarks, "ate and were satisfied. And they took up what was left over, twelve baskets of broken pieces" (cf. *ibid*, v. 17).

This is an amazing miracle which marks in a way *the beginning of a long historical process*: the uninterrupted multiplication in the Church of the Bread of new life for the people of every race and culture. This sacramental ministry is entrusted to the Apostles and to their successors. And they, faithful to the divine Master's command, never cease to break and distribute the Eucharistic bread from generation to generation.

The People of God receive it with devout participation. With this Bread of life, a remedy of immortality, countless saints and martyrs were nourished and from it drew the strength to resist even harsh and prolonged sufferings. They believed in the words that Jesus once spoke in Capernaum: "I myself am the living bread come down from heaven. If any one eats this bread, he will live forever" (*Jn* 6: 51).

4. "*I myself am the living bread come down from heaven!* "

After contemplating the extraordinary Eucharistic "triptych" made up of today's readings, let us now turn our mind's eye directly to the mystery. Jesus calls himself "the Bread of life", adding: "The bread I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world" (*Jn* 6: 51).

The mystery of our salvation! Christ - *the only Lord yesterday, today and for ever* - wanted his saving presence in the world and in history to be linked with *the sacrament of the Eucharist*. He wanted to make himself the bread which is broken so that everyone can be nourished by his very life through participation in the sacrament of his Body and Blood.

Like the disciples who listened in astonishment to his discourse at Capernaum, we also find this language hard to understand (cf. *Jn* 6: 60). We might sometimes be tempted to give it a reductive interpretation. But this would take us far from Christ, as was the case with those disciples who "after that no longer went about with him" (*Jn* 6: 66).

We would like to stay with Christ and for this reason we say to him with Peter: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (*Jn* 6: 68). With the same conviction as Peter, let us kneel today before the sacrament of the altar and renew our profession of faith in the real presence of Christ.

This is the meaning of today's celebration, which is given special emphasis by the International Eucharistic Congress in

the year of the Great Jubilee. This is also the sense of the solemn procession which, as it does every year, will shortly make its way from this square to the Basilica of St Mary Major.

With humble pride we will escort the Eucharistic Sacrament through the streets of the city, close by the buildings where people live, rejoice and suffer; between the shops and offices where they work each day. We will bring it into contact with our lives beset by a thousand dangers, weighed down by worries and sorrows, subject to the slow but inexorable wear and tear of time.

As we escort him, we will offer him the tribute of our hymns and prayers: *"Bone Pastor, panis vere ... True Bread, Good Shepherd, tend us"*, we will say to him with trust, *"Jesus, of your love befriend us, / You refresh us, you defend us, / Your eternal goodness send us. / You who all things can and know, / Who on earth such food bestow, / Grant us with your saints, though lowest, / Where the heavenly feast you show, / Fellow heirs and guests to be"*.

Amen!

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