Corpus Christi

Belief in the real, physical presence of Christ in the Eucharist grew out of the teaching of the Gospels and of St. Paul. They made it plain that the Eucharistic elements were literally Jesus Christ continuing His saving mission.

Paul's letter to the Corinthians, part of which we hear on the Feast of Corpus Christi, rebuked them for making the Agape meal, which should have been a sign of unity, into an occasion of discord. He reminded them that the Eucharist is no ordinary food. It is actually the Body and Blood of Christ according to "the tradition which I handed on to you that came to me from the Lord Himself" (1 Corinthians 11: 23).

Still, the reception of communion by the laity greatly diminished by the end of the fourth century and continued this decline until, in the year 1215, the fourth Lateran Council made a rule: Go to confession and communion at least once a year at Eastertime. Some still remember this custom as their “Easter duty.” As reception of communion decline, adoration of the Eucharist took its place. The practice was known as “ocular communion.”

The feast of *Corpus et Sanguis Christi* came about at this time. It was established in 1246 by Bishop Robert de Thorte of Liege at the suggestion of St. Juliana and extended to the whole Church by Pope Urban in 1264.

In the Eucharist, the Pope said, "Christ is with us in His own substance." For "when telling the Apostles that He was ascending into heaven, He said, 'Behold I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world,' thus comforting them with the gracious promise that He would remain and be with them even by His bodily presence." (August 11, 1264).

On this feast, the Blessed Sacrament was carried in procession, but still not consumed by the laity. It wasn’t until the early 20th century, when Pope St. Pius X pushed for daily communion as a norm for children, that “our daily bread” again became a reality. Sharing the cup, which disappeared around the 14th century, did not reappear until after Vatican II.

It is important to note that the text and prayers of today’s celebration do NOT emphasize the adoration aspect, but focus on eating and drinking of the Eucharist, through which we offer to God “a solemn pledge of undivided love…. a life poured out in loving service.” (Opening Prayer)

History of the Feast

Corpus Christi, or to be more precise, the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, has an interesting history - or perhaps that should be *histories*. There are two stories in Church history that claim to be the inspiration for Pope Urban IV to establish this celebration.

First is the “Miracle of Bolsena”, which happened in 1263. A Bohemian priest, Peter of Prague, stopped at a church in Bolsena to offer celebrate mass. Peter had harbored doubts about the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Those doubts were removed when the host he consecrated during mass began to bleed. Peter rushed to meet Pope Urban IV, bringing the

host with him. The Pope declared a miracle and the corporal containing the host is now sealed in a reliquary at the nearby Cathedral of Orvieto, Italy.

The second source of inspiration was an Augustinian nun, St. Juliana of Mont Cornillon, who had longed for a feast to honor the Blessed Sacrament. Her desire is said to have increased after a vision of the church under a moon bright and beautiful, except for one dark spot, which she believed signified the absence of such a feast.

Juliana took her concerns to Bishop Robert de Thorte of Liege. At that time, Bishops had the right to proclaim feasts in the calendar of their own diocese. Bishop Robert established the feast of *Corpus et Sanguis Christi* in 1246. Jacques Pantaleon was Archdeacon of Liege at the time, but later became Pope Urban IV. As Pope, he took his admiration for the local feast and ended it to the whole Church in 1264 in the papal bull “Transiturus”.

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Ironically, all this happened during a time in which the reception of the Eucharist in communion was on the decline. In its place, the laity had begun the practice of adoration of the Eucharist, a practice known as “ocular communion.” It wasn’t until the early 20th century, when Pope St. Pius X pushed for daily communion as a norm for children, that Sunday, and even daily, communion became a reality once more. Sharing the cup, which disappeared around the 14th century, did not reappear until after Vatican II.

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