

**Solemn Words**  
**Corpus Christi (A)**  
**(Jn 6:51-58)**

In the recent rioting, statues representing the history of our country were vandalized and removed, in acts of brazen contempt and disdain. This is a provocative attack upon our heritage and tradition, in the name of some false new socialist utopia.

A favorite statue being desecrated by these moralists is that of Christopher Columbus, a great man of history whose courage and risk brought about the discovery of this land. But more than that, Columbus was God's instrument for bringing the Gospel to a people living in darkness. Chaplains always accompanied the expeditions in the Spanish empire, and newly discovered lands were always consecrated to God by planting the cross, raising an altar, and celebrating the Eucharist. There is no way to celebrate who we are, without acknowledging and honoring Columbus and his fellow explorers.

In the spring of 1519, not thirty years after the famous landing at Hispaniola, another expedition led by Alonso de Piñeda sailed down the Texas coast for the first time, exploring and mapping, and naming. This marked the moment the Gospel arrived in the place we now live. Around Pentecost they were a little north of here, in a bay they aptly named "Espiritu Santo Bay." Two weeks later, as the sailors were celebrating today's great feast of Corpus Christi, they sailed into another bay further south. We know it well. "The rest," as they say, "is history."

It is ignorant barbarians who destroy and uproot great monuments of history. In this case, our history. As Catholics we honor and cherish the deeds of our ancestors, particularly those who struggled through incredibly difficult circumstances to bring the Good News of Salvation to others. And now, 501 years later, we seek to hand on that same faith to the next generation, as our children today make their First Holy Communion.

"Corpus Christi" is a beautiful feast, and these solemn words mean everything to a Catholic. They mean "Body of Christ," and are spoken at the moment we receive Holy Communion. "Corpus Christi" celebrates the great gift of Jesus to his followers, the gift of himself to nourish them for eternal life.

It was at the Last Supper that Jesus instituted the Sacrament of the Eucharist, changing bread into his body, and changing wine into his blood, so that they might be consumed by the disciples as nourishment for both body and soul. Christ desired the power of his life, the power of the Resurrection, to be in our flesh and flowing in our veins, an "inoculation" against death itself: "*He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood will never die... I will raise him on the last day*" (Jn 6:54).

Today's Gospel is significant because it was the first time Jesus spoke of the Eucharist, after the multiplication of the loaves: "*I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world*" (Jn 6:51). People were very confused and scandalized that he spoke this way: "*How can this man give us his flesh to eat?*" (Jn 6:52).

The Eucharist is indeed something hard to fathom, and it is not until the Resurrection that the disciples can begin to appreciate how it is that the Lord will give his flesh and blood as food and drink. It is his *resurrected* body that we receive in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, which is no longer subject to the limits of this world: including mortality, space, and time. When he first spoke about the Eucharist, it was not possible to understand how this could be (even now we cannot understand how bread can be changed into Christ's flesh without any change in its form or appearance). But Jesus wanted his followers to accept and trust his words, to *believe* in him. He assured them they were absolutely true, and to be believed literally.

Instead of explaining away his words, or indicating that he was only speaking symbolically when the crowd became confused and even stopped following him, Jesus did something extraordinary: he doubled down in even more direct and literal language, using a word for "to eat" that unmistakably refers to the physical act of chewing.<sup>1</sup> Jesus wanted to be unmistakably clear what the Eucharist would be in the life of the Church.

In order to emphasize something and stress its importance, Biblical speakers would utilize a solemn form of repetition, stating and restating the proclamation with slight variety. This repetition is typically three-fold. For instance, when Moses announces the Ten Commandments, there is a particular three-fold solemn emphasis given to the third commandment, to keep holy the Sabbath (Ex 20:8-11):

- 1) Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...
- 2) Six days you shall labor, and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall not work...
- 3) For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, and rested the seventh day; therefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.

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<sup>1</sup> In recalling exactly what Jesus said, St. John switches from the normal more general Greek word for "to eat," *phago*, to a more pointed and technical word, *trogo*, which has the sense of "to masticate."

Jesus does something similar when speaking about the Eucharist. But instead of merely repeating three times, he undertakes a most solemn, seven-fold repetition of this truth which he wants his followers to accept and believe:

- 1) I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world (Jn 6:51).
- 2) Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. (Jn 6:53).
- 3) Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day (Jn 6:54).
- 4) For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink (Jn 6:55).
- 5) Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him (Jn 6:56).
- 6) As the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me (Jn 6:57).
- 7) This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever (Jn 6:58).

As we remember and celebrate these solemn words of our Lord on the Feast of Corpus Christi, let us renew our faith in them as we prepare to fulfill them.