

“The pages with our reasons ...”

Solemnity of Corpus Christi + June 6, 2021

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Jesus said, “Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.” The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live forever.” - John 6:47-58

If you were to enroll in a course on the history and theology of the Eucharist in an Episcopal seminary, your assigned reading might still include a 1945 book, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, by an Anglican Benedictine monk, Dom Gregory Dix. My own thoughts about *The Shape of the Liturgy* are partly told by a remark in a recent online review: “At over 750 pages in small print it’s not one of those books you finish over the weekend but it’s well worth the read.”

I might add that it’s worth reading to the end. There in the final pages, Dix allows his faith and imagination to join with his knowledge in an elegant, lengthy muse, one I wish to borrow and share with you now, as the main part of my message on this Solemnity of Corpus Christi:

“At the heart of [our faith and worship and life],” writes Dom Gregory Dix, “is the eucharistic action, a thing of absolute simplicity – the taking, blessing, breaking and giving of bread, and the taking, blessing, and giving of a cup of wine and water, as these were first done with their new meaning by a young Jew before and after supper with His friends on the night before he died

He had told His friends to do this henceforward with the new meaning ‘for the anamnesis’ [that is, the ‘living remembrance’] of Him, and they have done it always since.

Was ever another command so obeyed? For century after century, spreading slowly to every continent and country and among every race on earth, this action has been done,

in every conceivable human circumstance,

for every conceivable human need

from infancy and before it to extreme old age and after it,

from the pinnacle of earthly greatness

to the refuge of fugitives in the caves and dens of the earth.

Men have found no better thing than this to do

for kings at their crowning and for criminals going to the scaffold;

for armies in triumph or for [those to be married] in a little country church;

for the proclamation of a dogma

or for a good crop of wheat;

for the wisdom of the Parliament of a mighty nation

or for a sick old woman afraid to die;

for a schoolboy sitting an examination or for
 [those crossing oceans to discover the unknown;]
 for the famine of whole provinces
 or for the soul of a dead lover;
 in thankfulness because my father did not die of pneumonia;
 for a village headman much tempted to return to fetich because the yams had failed;
 because the Turk was at the gates of Vienna;
 for the repentance of Margaret;
 for the settlement of a strike;
 for a son for a barren woman;
 for Captain so-and-so wounded and prisoner of war;
 while the lions roared in the nearby amphitheatre;
 on the beach at Dunkirk;
 while the hiss of scythes in the thick June grass came faintly through the windows of the church;
 tremulously, by an old monk on the fiftieth anniversary of his vows;
 furtively, by an exiled bishop who had hewn timber all day in a prison camp near Murmansk;
 gorgeously, for the canonisation of S. Joan of Arc –
 one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this, and not tell a hundredth part of them.
 And best of all, week by week and month by month,
 on a hundred thousand successive Sundays,
 faithfully, unfailingly, across all the parishes of Christendom,
 the pastors have done this just to make the *plebs sancta Dei*—the holy common people of God.”¹

So, here we are, again, this morning: *plebs sancta Dei*, the holy common people of God – or aspiring to be – aspiring to be holy. Holy people of God.

Dom Gregory says that ‘one could fill many pages with the reasons why men have done this.’ Some of us here this morning could fill our own many pages with what we have sought, or found, or recovered, or affirmed, here at the Communion rail, over the years.

Our pages may tell of those moments when we knelt at the Communion rail all alone. And yet here we received the One because of whom we are never alone, the One who said, “*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.*” Our pages may also tell of rising from the Communion rail to newly and humbly see our communion with others – communion in faith, and in doubt; communion in sorrow, and in joy; communion in mission, in *living no longer for ourselves alone, sent out to do the work that we believe God has given us to do.*

In these pages, Corpus Christi leaves the arenas of theology and ritual per se. These pages mainly tell the stories of how we ourselves have become, and are becoming, the very same Body of Christ that we have found and so gratefully receive here. *Amen.*

¹ Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, London, 1945, p. 743-4

Glory and praise to you, O living God: You make our bread Christ’s body, to nourish, heal and reconcile, and to make us the body of Christ; You make our wine Christ’s living, sacrificial blood, to redeem the world. So bless us in receiving the most blessed Sacrament that, through us, others may also come to know and receive your love and mercy; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.