



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF CORPUS CHRISTI

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Thursday 11 June 1998

1. “*You walk through the centuries*” (from a Polish Eucharistic hymn).

Today’s Solemnity of Corpus Christi invites us to meditate on the singular path which is Christ’s *itinerarium salvificum* through history, a history written simultaneously from the very beginning by God and by man. Through human events *the divine hand sketches the history of salvation*.

This is a path that starts in Eden when, after the sin of the first man, Adam, God intervenes to direct history towards the coming of the “second” Adam. The first announcement of the Messiah is present in the Book of Genesis, and from that time *mankind’s way towards Christ* unfolds from generation to generation as it is recounted in the pages of the Old Testament.

Then, in the fullness of time, when the incarnate Son of God sheds his blood on the Cross for our salvation and is raised from the dead, history enters, so to speak, a new and definitive phase: the new and eternal Covenant whose beginning and fulfilment is the crucified and risen Christ. On Calvary, *humanity’s path*, in accordance with the divine plan, *took a decisive turn*: Christ is put at the head of the new People to guide them to their definitive goal. The Eucharist, the sacrament of the Lord’s death and resurrection, represents the heart of this spiritual, eschatological *itinerarium*.

2. “*I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever*” (Jn 6:51).

These words were proclaimed a few moments ago in this solemn liturgy. Jesus spoke them after the miraculous multiplication of the loaves by the Sea of Galilee. According to the Evangelist John, they herald the saving gift of the Eucharist. The Old Covenant has no lack of significant prefigurations of the Eucharist; the most eloquent of them is the one referring to the priest Melchizedek, whose mysterious figure and unusual priesthood is recalled in today’s liturgy. Christ’s discourse in the synagogue at Capernaum is the culmination of the Old Testament prophecies and, at the same

time, foretells their fulfilment at the Last Supper. We know how on that occasion the Lord's words were a difficult test of faith for those who heard them and for the Apostles themselves.

But how can we forget Simon Peter's clear and ardent profession of faith when he proclaimed: "*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God*" (Jn 6:68-69)!

We are all moved by the same sentiments today, when, assembled around the Eucharist, we think back to the Upper Room where on Holy Thursday the Church spiritually gathers to commemorate the institution of the Eucharist.

3. "*In supremae nocte cenae, recumbens cum fratribus ...*".

"On the night of that last supper,
Seated with his chosen band,
He, the Paschal Victim eating,
First fulfils the Law's command;
Then as food to all his brethren
Gives himself with his own hand".

With these words St Thomas Aquinas summarizes the extraordinary event of the Last Supper, before which the Church remains in silent contemplation; in a way she immerses herself in the silence of the Garden of Olives and of Golgotha.

The Angelic Doctor urges: "*Pange lingua, gloriosi Corporis mysterium ...*".

"Sing my tongue the Saviour's glory,
Of his flesh the mystery sing;
Of the blood, all price exceeding,
Shed by our immortal King,
Destined for the world's redemption,
From a noble womb to spring".

The profound silence of Holy Thursday envelops the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. The singing of the faithful and, even more so, the other public displays of popular Eucharistic piety seem almost unable to express all their intensity.

4. This is why the Church felt the need for a special celebration in which it would be possible *to express with greater intensity her joy at the institution of the Eucharist*: thus the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi* came into being more than seven centuries ago. It is marked by great Eucharistic processions which highlight the "*itinerarium*" of the world's Redeemer in time: "*You walk through*

the centuries".

The procession we will make today at the end of Holy Mass eloquently recalls how Christ walked in solidarity with human history. It is significant that Rome is called the "Eternal City", because she marvellously reflects the different ages of history. She preserves in a special way the vestiges of 2,000 years of Christianity.

The entire Christian community, gathered around its Pastor together with his assistant Bishops, priests, religious and various representatives of parishes, movements, associations and confraternities, will take part in the procession that will lead us from this square to the Basilica of St Mary Major. I address a cordial greeting to all of you.

I would like to extend a special greeting to the Cuban Bishops. They have been in Rome for the past few days and have wished to join us today to give thanks to the Lord once again for my recent visit, and to pray for the Spirit's light and support on the path of the new evangelization. Let us accompany them with our affection and fraternal communion.

5. Today, as we celebrate the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of the Lord, our thoughts also go to 18 June of the Year 2000, when, here at this basilica, the 47th International Eucharistic Congress will begin. On the following Thursday, 22 June, the Solemnity of of the Body and Blood of Christ, the great Eucharistic procession will start from this square. Then, gathered in our liturgical assembly for the "*Statio Orbis*" on Sunday, 25 June, we will celebrate a solemn Eucharist with the many pilgrims from all the continents who, accompanied by their Pastors, will gather in Rome for the congress and to venerate the tombs of the Apostles.

In the two years between now and the Great Jubilee, let us prepare, individually and as a community, to reflect deeply on the great gift of the Bread that is broken for us in the Eucharistic celebration. Let us live in spirit and in truth the profound mystery of Christ's abiding presence in our tabernacles: the Lord stays with us to comfort the sick, to be viaticum for the dying, to give every soul who seeks him in adoration, praise and prayer a foretaste of his sweetness. May Christ who nourishes us with his Body and Blood allow us to enter the third millennium with renewed spiritual and missionary enthusiasm.

6. Jesus is with us, he walks beside us and sustains our hope. "*You walk through the centuries*", we tell him, remembering and embracing in prayer all who follow him with fidelity and trust.

Now at the close of this century, as we wait for the dawn of the new millennium, we too would like to join this immense procession of believers.

Let us proclaim with joy and deep faith:

“Tantum ergo Sacramentum veneremur cernui ...”.

“Down in adoration falling,
Lo! the sacred Host we hail,
Lo! o’er ancient forms departing
Newer rites of grace prevail.
Faith for all defects supplying,
Where the feeble senses fail.

“Genitori Genitoque Laus et iubilatio ...”.

To the everlasting Father
And the Son who reigns on high
With the Holy Spirit proceeding
Forth from each eternally,
Be salvation, honour, blessing,
Might and endless majesty.

Amen.

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