

Solemnity of Corpus Christi, B – June 3, 2018 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,175 words

We often refer to the feast that we celebrate today by its historic Latin title, “Corpus Christi”, which, as we know, means, “The Body of Christ”. In fact, historically, there was a separate feast on the calendar for the Precious Blood – it was the first Sunday of July; moreover, that entire month was devoted to honoring our Lord’s holy Blood. Pope St. John XXIII, for example, in a letter on this topic once warmly recounted how, when he was a child, his family prayed the Litany of the Most Precious Blood together each day during the month of July.¹ When the newer form or “Novus Ordo” of the Mass was introduced in Advent of 1969, the two feast days were combined, so that now we celebrate both realities together: the Body and the Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ – even if we still tend to refer to it by its older and simpler title of simply, “Corpus Christi”.

I raise this historical note because our readings this year – recall that the Sunday lectionary has a three-year cycle – have a special emphasis on blood. There is the Old Testament blood of the covenant in the first reading, sprinkled upon believers and their homes. Then we have a priestly psalm that speaks of taking up “the cup of salvation” in gratitude for all that God has done. The second reading makes the connection between the Old Testament blood of the covenant and its fulfillment in the blood of Jesus Christ. The gospel takes it all a step further, to the Upper Room, where our Lord instituted the sacrament of his Body and Blood. And finally, the sequence, written by the great St. Thomas Aquinas, reminds us that the whole Christ is contained in each one of the Eucharistic parts:² thus, we truly do receive his Blood – as well as his Body, Soul, and Divinity – even when we only receive the Sacred Host.³

I’ll return to the theme of blood in the readings in a moment, but we need to preface that consideration with a question: Where has all of the wonderful devotion to Christ’s Precious Blood gone? The pope who called the Second Vatican Council spoke of praying a special Litany each day, every July, but many now do not even know of the devotional association of that month, never mind that there is a Litany of the Most Precious Blood! Whole books have been written on this subject – for example, by Fr. Faber,⁴ who also wrote our wonderful closing hymn;⁵ people used to belong to confraternities that promoted this devotion, as well. But again, in these past decades it has all but disappeared. Why is that? I think what has happened is that we have reduced our understanding of the Precious Blood solely to the act of communion;⁶ but our theology tells us that it is a much richer reality than that. So let’s go back to the readings.

It is important to say, first of all, that Holy Communion is not the only “place” where we come into contact with our Lord’s Blood; in fact, it’s not even the first “place” we do so. It is the Blood of Jesus that saves us; as the second reading said, Christ “entered once for all into the sanctuary, not with the blood of goats and calves but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal

¹ Cf. Pope John XXIII, *Inde a primis*, 30 June 1960; see <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/john23/j23pb.htm>.

² “When the sacrament is broken, / Doubt not, but believe ‘tis spoken, / That each sever’d outward token / doth the very whole contain. / Nought the precious gift divides, / Breaking but the sign betides / Jesus still the same abides, / still unbroken does remain.”

³ This is known as the doctrine of concomitance. Christ is present whole and entire in the Host and in the Chalice. We are never required to receive from the Chalice at Mass; those who choose to do so receive no more of Jesus than those who only receive the Host.

⁴ Cf. Fr. Frederick William Faber, *The Precious Blood: The Price of Our Salvation*, TAN Books: 1979 reprint.

⁵ *Jesus, My Lord, My God, and My All*.

⁶ Having communion under both kinds – in some places, at every single Mass – has surely encouraged this. In fact, there are now many people who believe that it is necessary to receive not only the Host but also from the Chalice, or else they have not made a complete communion. This is false – even a condemned proposition! (It’s called the “utraquist” heresy.)

redemption.” The blood from animal sacrifices effected only an external or ritual cleansing of the people, but Christ’s Blood causes a deep and total renewal of our consciences, washing them clean. This means that our first contact with the Lord’s Blood comes at Baptism: the sacramental cleansing with water brings us into the reality of Christ’s death, and as the water washes our bodies, so to speak, his Blood washes our souls clean. A similar thing happens in Confession, when we are purified anew; our own tears of repentance, as it were, cleanse our bodies, while again, the Precious Blood of Jesus is poured over our souls.

The spiritual contact that we have with Christ’s Blood in Baptism and Reconciliation goes to a new level and takes on a certain physicality in Holy Communion. We profess our faith in the Real Presence: in the Holy Eucharist, Jesus is present in his full reality – Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. We profess that he is “really and truly present” in the sacramental signs of bread and wine which, in fact, are no longer bread and wine after being consecrated by the priest. Therefore, even when we receive just the Host, we really do receive Christ’s Blood. And that physical reception results in spiritual renewal: when we receive worthily – that is, with all of our mortal sins having previously been forgiven in Confession – his Blood washes our souls clean of all venial sin. It, moreover, strengthens us and gains for us protection from evil. As the Litany of the Most Precious Blood proclaims, the Blood of Christ is “victor over demons”.

This understanding of the Precious Blood of Christ as a reality that we encounter in multiple ways – not just in the physical act of receiving communion – is what led to such a strong devotional life surrounding it in the Church’s tradition of prayer. Since God established that it should be by the shedding of blood in sacrifice that we be saved, and Christ’s blood is the “price of our salvation”,⁷ then the saved may call upon it always and access it in a plethora of ways. Just as the blood of the ancient Passover sacrifice, sprinkled on the doorposts of the homes of believers, saved them from the angel of death as it passed by, so also Christ’s blood, washed over our souls and even received into our bodies, keeps us safe and, indeed, saves us. We should wish to be under the protection of the Blood of Christ always; we should live in such a way as to merit that; and the Church’s sacraments and wonderful prayers help us in this regard.

Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity: we truly do encounter the full reality of our Lord Jesus Christ in each and every celebration of the Holy Eucharist. He is really and truly present on our altars, in our tabernacles, and in us through Holy Communion. When we receive him worthily we are renewed and protected. I would invite you to rekindle a devotion to the Precious Blood – to think about it and pray for it often. And thus I conclude with the final prayer of that Litany that Pope St. John XXIII prayed daily with his family during each month of July:

Let us pray. Almighty and Eternal God, you appointed your only-begotten Son the Redeemer of the world and willed to be appeased by his Blood. Grant, we beseech you, that we may worthily adore this price of our salvation, and through its power, be safeguarded from the evils of this present life, so that we may rejoice in its fruits for ever in heaven. Through the same Christ, our Lord. Amen.

⁷ Cf. Litany of the Most Precious Blood