

‘A unique Consolation’

Dt 8: *He fed you with manna which you did not know ...*

1Cor 10: *participation in the body of Christ*

Jn 6: 51–58: *my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink ...*

The final big feast-day linked to the movable date of Easter is this coming Friday: *the Sacred Heart of Jesus*; today’s is the penultimate one, *Corpus Christi*. Feasts such as these fill out the picture of salvation in Christ that we have been celebrating ever since Holy Week two months ago: Easter, Ascension, Pentecost, Trinity ... It all culminates in these two final feasts celebrating the love of the Lord Jesus for us: *His Sacred Heart* burning with divine love, and — in the most extraordinary expression of that love — *His Body & Blood* given to us as food for our souls, His sacrifice made present in the Blessed Sacrament. It is always special in years such as this, when these feasts just about squeeze in to term time, that before we disperse for the summer we can honour the Lord in these liturgical expressions. There is joy in being able to see the whole arc of Eastertide, and its follow-on, before we move on and move away.

Today, in particular, after Mass, we will make a *Corpus Christi* procession: we will take the Blessed Sacrament onto the streets of Bloomsbury. In doing so, we make a public statement about what the Most Holy Sacrament means to us — *who* the Sacrament truly is, namely the living and real presence of Our Lord Jesus. This is a very Catholic practice, a continuation of traditions begun back in the early 13th c. *Corpus Christi* as we know it started in Liège, Belgium, with the inspiration of St Juliana, a Norbertine prioress. She shared her mystical visions of a new devotion to the Holy Eucharist with some local clergy, and in 1246 a local feast of *Corpus Christi* began to be celebrated in her diocese. By God’s Providence, one of these priests in Liège that had some knowledge of St Juliana’s experiences, the Archdeacon Pantaleon, ended up a few decades later being chosen to be Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and subsequently elected Pope Urban IV in 1261, (one of the few popes ever who weren’t a cardinal when elected Pope). A variety of influences, including the *Eucharistic miracle of Bolsena* in the diocese

of Orvieto in 1263, came to bear on the papacy of Pope Urban, who decreed that the devotion celebrated until then only in Liège would now be celebrated in the whole Church. His Bull of 1264, *Transiturus de hoc mundo*, made *Corpus Christi* a universal feast, and it has continued so right down to our own day — the way in which we celebrate today is almost 800 years old. Pope Urban’s Latin text is very moving ... and I would have quoted you a few lines as he teaches the whole Church the need to commemorate this saving Sacrament in quite so solemn a way. But the English translations available are clumsy and would obscure the meaning. I’ll quote you something else instead, in a bit ...

You see, a key architect of this feast day — he may well have helped write that Bull — was the Pope’s key theological advisor, and one of the greatest theologians of the 13th c., St Thomas Aquinas. He composed new texts for the missal and the office for today, including the famous hymn, *Pange Lingua Gloriosi* — its last two verses we always sing at Benediction, as we will do today as we

get back to the chapel after the Procession, *Tantum Ergo Sacramentum veneremur cernui*: “therefore, bending down low, we venerate so great a Sacrament. Along with that hymn he also wrote the *O Salutaris Hostia*; he wrote the sequence we heard sung earlier, *Lauda Sion Salvatorem*; plus the sublime hymns *Adoro Te Devote* and *Panis Angelicus*. All these are outpourings of poetic love for Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar; unsurpassable in their beauty, they have stood the test of time, beautifying still the liturgy of *Corpus Christi* today.

But I have saved the best until last. In the Divine Office for this day, St Thomas Aquinas, again crops up as the author of the 2nd (Patristic) Reading — it is a passage from a theological work of his, but the language is very similar to the words of the papal Bull for *Corpus Christi*. They are words that I have read each year on this feast day for, maybe 30 yrs. But on one of those occasions — I think it was *Corpus Christi* 1997 — a dear friend was leaving Rome and I had no certainty of our ever being able to meet again. St Thomas’s final words broke in on that

uncertainty, into those feelings of separation, those human emotions of needing connection:

“And so, in order to imprint the immensity of [His] love more deeply in the hearts of the faithful, at the Last Supper, when the Lord had celebrated the *Pasch* with His disciples and was about to pass from this world to His Father, He instituted this Sacrament as a perpetual memorial of His Passion. It fulfilled the types of the Old Law; it was the greatest of all the miracles that He worked; and *He left it as a unique consolation to those who were desolate at His departure.*”

As we come close to the end of term, the end of an academic year — for some of you, the end of a university degree, or even the end of your time in London and at Newman House — this insistence of Thomas Aquinas surely holds out a spiritual lifeline, a theological reminder that the Eucharist is “a unique consolation for those who were desolate at departure.” For just as the apostles could know Him in the Breaking of Bread, so we also know Jesus in the Mass; and as we know Him in the Mass, so we know we are united with Him in His Sacred Body. And

even if we go away from here, and are not at Newman House, and maybe not close to these Catholic friends whom we have come to love dearly, yet, whenever, wherever, we are at Mass, we are together still. The Blessed Eucharist of Jesus’s real presence binds us as one, so that we keep Sunday together, even when apart, and our love & affection for one another is not diluted but is alive in the Spirit. Being at Mass, never forget, is always “a unique consolation for those who were desolate at departure.” This is what it means to be Catholic, in the Church, united in the living Christ at Mass — and “with such thoughts as these you should comfort one another.”

Let’s leave the final encouraging word to Pope Urban IV — or Thomas, or whoever wrote that papal Bull *Transiturus*. And let us take these words into the summer, and beyond, knowing that He whose sacred memorial this Sacrament is, is with us always, yes, to the end of the age:

“Glorious memorial, you should be kept between the deepest heartbeats, indelibly imprinted on the soul, locked in the intimacies of the spirit, honored with the most assiduous and devoted piety!”