

Homily on Corpus Christi
Dr. Jerry Sullivan, Reader

Some of you have been guests at my table. I hope later this summer to pick up Janice and Allen's idea of a parish potluck dinner. I became a cook by accident, as you do. My housemates said cook, and so I did pretty badly for a long time.

I have, or so I tell my students, a Chinese stomach. This is pretty much true; I can't remember learning how to use chopsticks; I pick up my bowl and slurp; all good Chinese manners. But I cook with a Southeast Asian twist and now with elements of New Zealand (no surprise there as my darling P is a Kiwi first, last, always and only) and now also more than a little Texas (not that the locals would recognize this influence). Foodies call this Pacific fusion, and as a description that will do fine.

I remember clearly one encounter that made me a better cook—watching Iron Chef for the first time, the original Japanese version and not the American one. The Japanese brought liturgy to food. And they began mysteriously with a quote from Baron Savarin: “Tell me what you eat and I'll tell you who you are.” This quote from, I gather, *The Philosopher in the Kitchen* of 1825 came to me as I napped the other day, fretting about the world (as you do) and about how to say anything at all about the Feast of Corpus Christi (Tony likes to get me to think about stuff I don't much think about, and when I do, who knows what I will find in my unbelief).

The more usual history would note that this feast is a medieval connivance of St Thomas Aquinas without much basis in scripture, but what else does one expect from a man who claimed to speak with angels and who is reported to have been able to work quickly on multiple texts.

Perhaps another track would be to note that there are three bodies of Christ.

First there was the physical body of a man. About this body there remains some real dispute. Tradition says that the man Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, remained unmarried though a Jew, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried, and on the third day he rose again according to the scriptures. Maybe. I wasn't there. Islamic tradition holds this piece of Christology poppycock. Oh yes, born, crucified but married and not so dead the man couldn't recover.

I'm not Dan Brown, nor particularly a fan of Dan Brown's; page turners don't really do much for me. But I am drawn to this image of a man with a body, with its joys (all of them) and temptations (all of them again) so like all of us. A friend once told me that she could only believe once she had read D. H. Lawrence's lovely little novella, *The Man Who Died*. Now there is a short book that repays rereading. I'll not spoil the ending for you, but it involves a woman.

Second, St Paul (Rm 12:5) describes the church as the body of Christ: “For as in one body, we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” So a metaphor, one describing a company as a body with a division of labor where all the parts should serve the whole by serving each other according to their talents and inclinations. Sounds easy, well sort of. Following Tony's suggestion of last week, we might take this to be a working guide for the Christian life.

Third, scripture provides us with several accounts of the events known as The Last Supper. “And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it

to them, saying, 'This is my body' But behold the hand of he betrays me is with me on the table" (Lk 22:19). Or again "Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to his disciples and said 'Take, eat, this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, "Drink of it, all of you for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I shall not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom" (Mt 26:26). And finally, "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that on the night he was betrayed, he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said 'This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way he took the cup and when he had blessed it, he said 'This is my blood of the new covenant which is shed for you and for many. Drink it in remembrance of me.' For as often as you eat of this bread and drink of this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (1 Cor 11:23-26).

I have left the references to betrayal and death. They are a part of the Man who died and who loved and who taught. They are part of the Mass, and at heart of the Christian myth with its double echoes of Passover and of the binding of Isaac, of the Fall and of the coming more or less willing sacrifice of one all-too-human man's life for the sins of the whole world.

Some years ago, back when I was not practicing, I went to a brief Mass celebrated by Father David Logan at a home for the mentally ill. Our friend Reed Wadley, for whom we used to pray, joined us. Reed was a Southern Baptist, I think. Fr. David did the Mass the quick way, down and dirty just as Catholics like it—you know, just the good bits, the magical bits, with a very short homily. Reed was, I gather, horrified, "You mean you do this all the time." "Yep."

Reed had a point. Following the logic of the abominations of Leviticus, human beings are not for eating (Lev 11:2-47). We have the wrong kind and number of feet; no hooves, cloven or otherwise, and only two rather than four legs. We eat the wrong things; meat, other living creatures, both wild and domesticated, so we kill and therefore suffer from corpse pollution. We swarm; what else is a city or an empire or a church?

Beside which, as my students remind me, cannibalism is icky, fascinating but really gross. How can you even think about that, Dude?

So, tell me what you eat and I'll tell you what you are? The American anthropologist Roy Rappaport (1979:173-222) wrote a lengthy and very dense essay entitled "The Obvious Aspects of Ritual." He had gone to New Guinea for his fieldwork among the Maring. His book (Rappaport 1968) about this trip, *Pigs for the Ancestors*, was widely and very justly criticized for being too simple. Rappaport's response to these criticisms had been to go back, and look more closely at Maring ritual feasts. In his later essay, Rappaport considered ritual as communicative action. When we take part we communicate thrice, to G-d, to those others present and to ourselves, that we are the sort of person who does these things. Thus, we make what we do real for ourselves and for others.

There is an old bit of logic here. Our life comes to us from outside ourselves. What we do with that life is more or less up to us. We can incline our hearts towards or away from the unknowable G-d. Insh'allah. We are existentially free; slaves only when we make ourselves so not because of or despite others.

So its pretty straight forward. On the one hand there was a life given for us and for many manifest in bread and wine to be shared among we the company, brought together through mutual recognition of spiritual obligation, each with are various talents who try, as best we can, to get along with one another, until there is some issue of church politics or the like. No worries, she'll be right, mate. All very Trinitarian.

I came back to Church to be among people who try to live simply so that others might simply live, who attempt to first do no harm, who seek to love one another in appropriate fashion. What I found myself drawn to was that simplicity in the midst of the multiplexity of the Mass. Now I try to live in and with a myth by enacting its rite. I hoped to give up anger for Lent; I failed...oh, well, that was good for a fair few laughs.

As much as I find in the Tridentine Mass that combination of fear and wonder we call awe, I really only wish for the sacrament. The rest is very elaborate window dressing for the mystery.

Thomas À Kempis ([nd]1952:216) has Christ say: “Beware of curious and unprofitable inquiry into the Mysteries of the most holy Sacrament...Blessed is that simplicity which rejects obscure inquiry and advances along the sure and open road of G[-]d’s commandments.” So Tony, I think I’ll just follow his advice. I’ve probably said too much already.

Sources

Kempis, Thomas à ([nd]1952:216) *The Imitation of Christ*, Leo Sherley-Price, trans., London: Penguin Books.

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