

Homily for the Feast of Corpus Christi – 2020.

The first words of our Lord known to be transmitted in written form are recorded by St Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians written sometime in the 5th decade of the first century AD and before any of the four gospels were completed. The words St Paul records, which I am about to discuss with you, are clearly and undoubtedly the earliest written words of our Lord Jesus Christ to be found in the New Testament.

Paul prefaces these words of our Lord by telling the people of Corinth that the tradition of celebrating the Lord's Supper is one that goes back to Jesus Christ himself. **“For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you”** (1 Corinthians 11:23).

Now Paul did not personally receive this tradition from the Lord, since he was not one of the twelve apostles present at the Last Supper. After his conversion to the Christian faith, he received the tradition from those who were Christians before him. In his first letter to the Corinthians he is handing on to the church he founded at Corinth the same tradition that he himself had received. The only difference is that whereas up till the time of Paul the tradition was passed on by word of mouth, Paul was the first to put it down in writing because he could not actually be there physically with the Corinthians.

What is the apostolic tradition and what are the words of Christ that Paul received and is now passing on? It is this: **that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when He had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way He took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."** (1 Corinthians 11:23-25)

The night Jesus was betrayed was the last night that He spent with his disciples before his passion and death. In the ancient world most people did not write their wills. They spoke their wills, usually as their last words before death. What do these words of 1 Corinthians 11:23-25 tell us when we read them as the last words, the will and testament of Jesus?

First, the “will” of Jesus does not say a word about what Jesus taught. Its focus is on what Jesus did. He gave his body to his followers as food and his blood as drink. Remember, this was taking place in the context of the Jewish Passover meal. So Jesus was presenting himself as their Passover lamb. The Israelites in Egypt had to eat the flesh of the Passover

lamb to identify themselves as God's own people. They marked their doorposts with its blood as a sign to keep away the angel of death. Every Israelite was supposed to participate in this ritual every year to renew their identity as God's people who enjoy God's special blessings and protection. Seen in this light, the Eucharist becomes for us the place where we come to renew ourselves as God's new people in Christ.

Second, the Our Lord's "will" speaks of a "new covenant." In the Old Testament the people of God came into being through a covenant. By speaking of a new covenant Jesus is saying that a new people of God has come into being. In the sacrifice that seals the covenant, Jesus is both the officiating priest and the lamb of sacrifice. We are the beneficiaries of a life-giving grace. That is why the name "Eucharist" (meaning thanksgiving) is so appropriate for the Holy Communion or the Mass. Jesus did it all for us. All we have to do is receive it and give thanks.

Thirdly, the "will" of Jesus (these last words spoken on the night of his betrayal), invites us to the banquet. **"Do this in remembrance of me ... Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me"** (verses 24-25). Remember, this is the last thing Jesus asked his followers to do before he died. He even asked his followers to keep doing it as often as possible until his return in glory (verse 26).

How is it then that so many of us who say we are Christians take the Eucharist so lightly? How is it that there are churches which do not even celebrate the Eucharist? How is it that regular Sunday and weekday participation in the heavenly banquet is so easily discarded by so many? The slightest excuse will do. "I just didn't feel like going ... We were on holiday... Friends are coming for lunch.... I'm always so tired on Sunday mornings after a big Saturday night.... I don't like Fr So and So's preaching... I'm not getting anything out of it.... I seem to get more from watching Hymns of Praise on TV and so it goes." Yes, its a very short walk from faithful worship and reception of the sacraments, to irregular worship, to occasional worship, to no worship at all and the extinguishment of the spark of faith.

The greatest defence against falling away from regular participation in the celebration of Holy Mass is to contemplate what the Eucharist really is for us as individuals and what it is for us communally as the church. Without doubt, the Eucharist is the most precious gift that Jesus gave to his church - the gift of His own body and blood received by the faithful under the appearance of bread and wine.

But how is this so? This is the constant question of the doubters. Let some words of St John Chrysostom (fourth century) provide the answer. St John says:

Let us submit to God in all things and not contradict Him, even if what He says seems contrary to our reason and intellect; rather let His words prevail over our reason and intellect. Let us act in this way with regard to the Eucharistic mysteries, looking not only at what falls under our senses but holding on to His words. For His word cannot lead us astray. . . When the Word of God says, 'This is My Body', be convinced of it and believe it, and look at it with the eyes of your mind. . . St John continues, saying .. So many say, 'If only I could see His shape, His appearance, His garments, His sandals.'

Only look! You do see Him! You do touch Him! You eat Him! (St John Chrysostom - Homily on St Matthew's Gospel)

Dear People on this beautiful Feast day of the Body and Blood of Christ, let us ask our Lord to renew and greatly re-invigorate our faith in the Sacrament of his Body and Blood which He gives to us under the appearance of bread and wine.

A superb prayer by St Augustine magnificently sums up the attitude of one who would sincerely believe that at the Holy Mass and in the Holy Communion, Christ is truly present, offered and received. Let it be ours today on this joyful and heartfelt festival.

O Sacrament of piety! O Sign of unity! O bread of life! All who desire life find here a place to live in and a means to live by. Let us approach, let us believe, let us be incorporated so that we may receive life. Let us cleave to the Body, let us live by God, and for God. Let us now labour here on earth that we may hereafter reign in heaven. Amen. (St Augustine - Homilies on the Gospel of St John)