

God in the streets of Oxford

*A Sermon preached on the Solemnity of Corpus et Sanguis Christi (The Body and Blood of Christ)
23 June 2011 in the Chapel of Pusey House, Oxford by Father William Davage, Priest Librarian
and Custodian of the Library*

WHAT is truth?"¹ asked the cynical, jesting Pilate. Truth is in the midst of us. The Christian life, properly understood, has at its heart the Holy Eucharist, the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. It is the Last Supper of Our Lord before his sacrifice on Calvary's hill and it is that self-same sacrifice re-presented, that moment of history brought into the present. It is the consolation of Christians. It is the focus of the Christian life. It is the indispensable means of grace and hope of glory. It is the eternal promise kept and maintained that he would be with us until the end of time. It is the assurance of the living reality of Christ, the animating principle of his love and mercy; and it is the means of communicating that love and mercy, of communicating divine grace here and now.

Here we are engaged in a personal and collective participation in the Passion and Death of Jesus Christ and of his glorious resurrection from the dead and in the mystery of our salvation and redemption. It is only secondarily, and then only by contingency, an affair of human fellowship.

The truth and the authenticity of Christ's religion are to be found in the great succession of teaching from those who stand in the tradition of the Apostles. The first Apostles themselves were those who were present at the Last Supper; who witnessed to the death and the resurrection of Christ and those who had first received the Body of the Lord and the cup of his salvation and they handed on what they had known, the truth and knowledge of his objective presence in the Eucharist that they were bidden to repeat. Catholic Christians believe and hold that when a validly ordained priest celebrates the sacrifice of Christ's Body and Blood, Christ himself, under the Eucharistic species of bread and wine, is present among the faithful. As he descended from heaven at the Incarnation and Nativity to be the Word made flesh, so he descends to the earth from that same place where he was raised from the dead veiled from human sight in the forms of bread and wine. "I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh My flesh is food indeed and my blood is drink indeed."² The rite which enacts, which oblates, which confects these divine promises is the most solemn moment in the Christian life and experience. It is nothing less than the union of heaven and earth: the communion of all the faithful, living and departed. By submitting to Christ in this world, Christians become citizens of a greater commonwealth, of the unseen kingdom of the blessed, those who beckon us to eternity and who safeguard our way.

Our discipleship is a serious obligation. Christ did not deliver his abiding truth to a form of words, nor a written text. Even the sacred books of our religion, the sacred books of Scripture bear their authority because they were selected and formed into the canon by the early Church to be received as the Word of God. Christ did not found a school of thought, nor a philosophical system, as did many of the teachers and seers of the ancient world, nor a theology faculty. Rather, and significantly, he entrusted his everlasting truth,

¹ S. John 18: 38

² S. John 6: 48 – 51, 55

to a people: he has entrusted his truth to us. We are the guardians of that truth. What human society will know of Christ is what we convey and communicate by our teaching and, more importantly, by our lives.

And there lies the core significance of the Mass, of the Sacrament of his Body and his Blood, his presence with us in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, and of the mission of the Church. In his sacrifice Christ consummated our redemption and in this, and every Mass, in this Sacrament he authenticates and authorises his truth.

If there are human beings who are inclined to reduce this priceless gift of himself to a mere personal consolation, and there are some, as a means of self-understanding or individual therapy, and there are some, as a celebration of human fellowship and amity, and there are some, or as a mere aesthetic experience, and there are some, that is to their shame. The message of Christ articulated and presented in the Mass is the blood and nails, the crown of thorns ripping flesh and the execration of the multitude, overcome and defeated, transcended, transformed, transfigured and transubstantiated. The Eucharist, this Mass is not a piece of sentimental drama: it is the actual and real presence of Christ amongst those whom he came to save. And it is that same Christ, that disc of bread which is God in Christ Jesus, whom we will take into the streets of Oxford, into the public square, to confront and challenge the world, to touch and to engage lives. He leads the way and we follow him for this is our shepherd and our king.

This is the Lamb of God

This is the spotless Lamb

This is the Bread come down from Heaven

This is the Body of Christ given at the Last Supper

This is the Divine Victim who hung upon the tree

This is the Sacrifice of Calvary

This is the Immaculate Sacrifice

This is the Pure and undefiled Sacrifice

This is the Adorable Sacrifice

This is my Lord and my King

This is my Lord and my God.