



St Mary's Concord

A Reflection for the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ

The feast of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ is still often referred to by its former Latin name, Corpus Christi. The feast began in Liège (in Belgium) in the 13th century

In the universal Church's calendar it is celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. In Australia Corpus Christi is transferred to the following Sunday.

The historical significance of the Thursday was its link with Holy Thursday. Before the revision of the calendar in 1970, Pentecost had its own octave and therefore the first available Thursday after Easter was in the week after Trinity Sunday.

The readings for Corpus Christi (Year A): Deuteronomy 8:2-3, 14-16; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; John 6:51-59.

To contain the spread of the COVID-19 Pandemic health restrictions remain in place. Although churches may now open Sunday Masses will not resume at St Mary's Concord until July 2020.

For many Catholics, this year has been their first experience of an extended period without any opportunity to gather to celebrate the Eucharist. The COVID-19 lockdown happened in Lent and it gave a new meaning to fasting. Our fast from receiving Communion extended not only to the celebration of Easter but to the whole of the Easter season.

However, for some members of our community, their "fasting" from the Eucharist is not a new experience. Illness and frailty have prevented them coming to Mass. Even when parish ministers of Communion to the Sick have been able to visit them and take them Communion, many will still say that they miss being part of the community.

That has been a common experience for many committed Catholics. They may have had the opportunity to watch the Mass on TV or even live streamed on the internet but it is not the same. As well as missing Holy Communion, they have also missed being part of the community that gathers to celebrate the Eucharist.

That should not surprise us because the two words "Communion" and "community" are obviously linked. The normal context for receiving the Body of Christ in Communion is the Celebration of the Eucharist. To receive Communion apart from the Mass is the exception for us but it was not always so.

In the Middle Ages people still came to Mass but did not receive Communion. The Mass had become something the priest celebrated while the people were passive spectators and because altars were set against the wall in many churches, the priest celebrated with his back towards the people. The priest would elevate the host above his head during the Eucharistic Prayer so that the people could see the consecrated host. Seeing the host had become a substitute for receiving the Body of Christ in Communion.

It was against that background that the feast of Corpus Christi was introduced in the diocese of Liège in 1246. A feature of the devotion that emerged was the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, as the consecrated host came to be called.

The feast also became associated with eucharistic processions and in the face of the criticism of the Mass by the Protestant reformers, the Corpus Christi procession came to be seen as a public profession of faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.



A consequence was that the dominant understanding of the Sacrament of the Eucharist became the consecrated host as a static object of devotion. That led to a distinction being drawn between the consecrated host as the Sacrament of the Eucharist and the Mass as the Sacrifice of Christ.

It would take 500 years for the western church to recover the much richer Patristic tradition of the Eucharist that sees the whole Celebration of the Eucharist (the Mass) as the Sacrament of Christ's Sacrifice.

Through the centuries that followed devotion to the Blessed Sacrament continued to be a feature of Catholic life. In the early 18th century the Forty Hours devotion became another popular expression of eucharistic devotion and new religious communities began the practice of perpetual adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

The focus began to shift in the first half of the 20th century. Advances in biblical studies and a better knowledge of the early Church led to a renewal movement that culminated in the reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). We have now recovered that richer understanding of the Eucharist that places the Celebration of the Eucharist at the centre of our faith.

The Celebration of the Eucharist is first and foremost the action of the whole Church, the People of God, and not just of the priest. That is why receiving Communion during the Mass is considered the norm and receiving Communion outside the Mass is an extension of the Celebration of the Eucharist.

When it is not possible to participate in the Celebration of the Eucharist, as we have experienced in the COVID-19 lockdown, other prayers and devotions such as "spiritual Communion" are not a substitute for the Eucharist. They can, however, remind us that as we fast, we hunger for the Bread of Life.

In the same way, forms of eucharistic worship outside the Mass such as the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament flow from and lead us back into full participation in the Mass.

The feast of *The Body and Blood of Christ* may have had its origin in an era when people were not receiving Communion but today it has recovered its full meaning. It is about us becoming the one Body of Christ (1 Cor 10:17).

That is best summed up in the words of article 47 of the Second Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Liturgy* where the Eucharist is described as "a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet 'in which Christ is eaten, the heart is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us'."

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