

THE SOLEMNITY OF CORPUS CHRISTI: THE EUCHARIST AND HYMNS

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In the past, my homilies on music have concentrated primarily on the influence of the music itself but today, I'd like to look at the texts of hymns that have been written within the last forty-some years. Few people have looked at them critically and admitted that most aren't good hymns. Not only do many of the texts lack the spiritual depth and beauty of earlier Catholic poetry but many of the melodies are simply not good music. What's worse, some even have serious theological flaws.

Just as some of melodies of modern hymns sound as if they came out of a 70s coffee house, their lyrics also reflect the self-absorbed spirit of that same generation, the "Me" generation. Historian and social critic, Christopher Lasch, wrote that we live in a culture of narcissism. "He didn't mean that we indulge our vanity in dress and makeup. He meant that we had elevated the self to the standard by which all questions of good and evil were decided—a self turned inward, analyzing its feelings, picking its scabs, whining about its needs, fearing the frankness of open conflict, suspicious of the claims of reason, severed from tradition, relieving the emptiness of modernity by imagining itself as the central character in a great psychodrama. It is an arrested infantilism. Our economy depends upon it, and our major cultural institutions (most obviously the schools, but also the arts, the family, and the churches) have followed tamely."¹

Because hymns are a part of the liturgy, they are supposed to be God-centered. But the problem is that many of our modern hymns are not so much about God as they are about us. They are warm and fuzzy narcissistic lyrics that "highlight the feelings and wonderfulness of the people, who are supposed to be singing them."²

At the table of the world, some have honor, some have scorn,
At the table of our God, all are welcomed and acclaimed.
Set the table of our God in the Church and in the world,
Till the children, fed and loved, taste and see that life is good.

Another puts the following touchy-feely words into Christ's mouth:

Here I am; do not be afraid.
Here I am, waiting like a lover.
I am here, here I am . . .
I am here in every warm embrace.³

One would think that such lyrics would make most men blush.

Some hymns are just contrary to revelation. The Book of Revelation says that in heaven we "will need no light from lamps or the sun, for the Lord God shall give them light."⁴ But the author of one hymn seems to think otherwise.

Not in some heaven, light years away,
But here in this place, the new light is shining.

And is the author of the hymn "Christ Has No Body Now But Yours" aware that when Christ ascended into heaven He did so in His body?

Because today is the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, let's take a particular look at modern Eucharistic hymns. During our procession today we will sing the words of St. Thomas Aquinas' Eucharistic poem, *Adoro Te*. The first verse translates:

Godhood here in hiding Whom I adore,
Masked by these bare shadows, shape and nothing more,
See Lord, at Thy service low lies here a heart
Lost, all lost in wonder at the God Thou art.

Compare that to the following modern hymn, a trite rhyme about the most sublime mystery of our faith that sounds more like a jingle.

We come to share our story, we come to break the bread,
We come to know our rising from the dead.⁵

Many of the modern Eucharistic hymns no longer celebrate Christ, who comes to us sinners as sustenance for our souls. Instead, we celebrate ourselves, who become sustenance to others. We hug ourselves not as receivers but as *givers* of the Eucharist.⁶

I myself am the bread of life.
You and I are the bread of life,
taken and blessed, broken and shared by Christ
that the world might live.⁷

But it doesn't stop with warm fuzzies. Some lyrics clearly profess concepts that are not in conformity with the faith. "One bread, one body, one Lord of all, one cup of blessing which we bless"⁸ strangely sounds like the modern heretical concept in which the assembly consecrates, not the priest. Another one—"Bread of life, cup of the world, which we now become."⁹ Excuse me!? Is this supposed to mean that **we** become the Body and Blood of Christ? Some are just weird, bordering on New Age that has nothing to do with the traditional understanding of the Eucharist. "We eat the bread of teaching, Drink wine of wisdom . . . Come and gain from Wisdom's learning; Bread and wine she is preparing."¹⁰ Or "break the bread of true communion, Pour the cup of true concern."¹¹ Frankly, I don't know what they're talking about. It's just weird! Then, compare **these** words with the sublime poetry of one of the most beautiful Eucharistic hymns ever written, *Panis Angelicus*.

Jesus, our living bread, Great gift from heaven sent,
Fulfill the signs of old, and be our nourishment.
We humble people come to eat your sacred food.

These words express the true beliefs of our faith about the Eucharist. All of the others pale in comparison And with people singing them Sunday after Sunday in churches across the country, we shouldn't be surprised that 70 percent of American Catholics don't believe in the Real Presence! You may say, "trite lyrics, schlocky melodies. OK. But what does that have to do with what Catholics believe?" It has a lot to do with it! A favorite technique of heretics through the centuries has been to spread their new doctrines through song. Martin Luther took his new teachings and put them to popular German folk melodies, catchy tunes that people would easily remember, and before long, large numbers of Germans were following the new Pied Piper right out of the Church. The beliefs of Catholics are being subtly influenced without them even being aware of it. Perhaps, our hymns have played a larger role in our present state of affairs than we could have imagined.

So, this brings us then to the issue of how we receive Communion and the subtle effect that modern hymns have had on it. In hymn after hymn we have heard so much about “the bread” and “the cup” that many American Catholics now believe that they are receiving only bread and wine. There was a time when all Catholics believed in the Real Presence. In hymn after hymn we no longer sing about receiving the Bread of Angels. Instead, everyone is singing “take and eat” and that’s the way that so many American Catholics treat the Eucharist. Instead of receiving, they come and take what is theirs. And perhaps this is why so many Catholics in this country receive Communion on the hand in a very casual manner. Some are adamant in their conviction that this is their right. Almost none of them know that the universal practice of the Church continues to be Communion received on the tongue and that Communion in the hand is merely allowed in this country under a special indult, which can be revoked at any time.

No one has a right to Communion—either kneeling on the tongue or in the hand. The Most Holy Eucharist is a gift and a privilege that is granted to those of us, who are in a state of grace. And it’s this last point, which has caused such grave scandal in the Church. Because certain Catholic politicians, who persist in grave public sin, continue to feel that they have a right to receive Communion, many other Catholics have gotten the impression that it doesn’t matter what state one’s soul is in.

This has also translated into the mentality that it doesn’t matter how one receives Communion. The instruction on the Eucharist *Redemptionis Sacramentum* issued in 2004 under Pope John Paul II states: “The faithful should receive Communion kneeling or standing, as the Conference of Bishops will have determined . . . However, if they receive Communion standing, it is recommended that they give due reverence before the reception of the Sacrament, as set forth in the same norms”.¹² That means that before one receives Communion standing, one is to either bow or genuflect as a sign of reverence. This isn’t necessary if you receive Communion at the rail because the fact that you are kneeling is an act of adoration and reverence in itself. This, I believe is why there is a movement to return to Communion received at the rail on the tongue. By distributing Communion to people **only** kneeling and on the tongue, I believe that Pope Benedict is trying to show us that this is the way it should be done.

Yet, we so often see people, who receive Communion so casually that it looks as if they are just popping a cracker into their mouths. Do such people really believe that what they hold in their hand is the Lord of the Universe, the God, who created them and sustains them in existence every moment of their existence? If you choose to do so, you are to extend your hand in humble reverence, not to “take” as the song goes, but to receive the Lord. And one is supposed to consume the Host in front of the priest before turning to leave.

In the fourth century, St. Cyril of Jerusalem counseled the faithful to “make a throne of your hands in which to receive the King [in Holy Communion]” and further counseled them should take “great care for any fragments which might remain in one’s hands, since just as one wouldn’t let gold dust fall to the ground so one should take even greater care when it is a question of the Body of the Lord.”¹³

There is a famous Eucharistic miracle concerning a certain priest, who doubted the Real Presence. Once while celebrating Mass, “he dropped the Host after consecration. (Some versions say he let it fall on purpose). The Host fell upon the steps, spilling blood

onto the marble. To this day, the relics of this miracle can still be seen in the form of the bloodstains on the steps.”¹⁴

And although receiving the Blessed Eucharist kneeling and on the tongue is a more compelling statement of one’s reverence, it also doesn’t assure reverence. When one sees roving eyes at the Communion Rail while waiting for the priest to get there, one really has to wonder whether that person really understand what awaits him. We have to constantly ask ourselves every so often: Am I properly disposed as I approach the Communion Rail or am I just following the herd like everyone else? Am I dressed appropriately to receive the King of Kings or do I look as if I’m at a backyard cookout? Do I act as if I am attending the Wedding Feast of heaven?

All of us get lazy once in a while. All of us lose focus and slip into mindless routine. But that’s why we all need to be reminded every so often. Just a few days ago, Benedict XVI reminded us that on this Feast of the Most Precious Body and Blood of Christ, “we renew our faith in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Such faith must not be taken for granted!” and warns of the risk “of insidious secularization, even inside the Church” which “could translate into a formal but empty Eucharistic worship, in celebrations lacking that involvement of the heart which finds expression in veneration and respect for the liturgy.” We must always remember that in the Eucharist, “heaven comes down to earth, God's tomorrow descends into the present moment and time is, as it were, embraced by divine eternity.”¹⁵

Today, we heard the beautiful words of the Sequence for the Feast of Corpus Christ, that beautiful Eucharistic hymn composed by the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas Aquinas.

Here beneath these signs are hidden
Priceless things to sense forbidden;
Signs, not things are all we see:

Blood is poured and flesh is broken,
Yet in either wondrous token
Christ entire we know to be.

There are many things that have contributed to the present crisis of belief in the Real Presence. But perhaps, if we sang hymns like this more often, we would all have a greater consciousness of the great and awesome gift we have in the Most Holy Eucharist.

¹ Esolen, Anthony, *Pop Goes The Mass*,
(<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=8485>).

² Esolen, Anthony, *Pop Goes The Mass*,
(<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=8485>).

³ “Here I Am”

⁴ Revelation 22:5.

⁵ “Song of the Body of Christ”

⁶ Esolen, Anthony, *Pop Goes The Mass*,
(<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=8485>).

⁷ “Bread of Life”

⁸ “One Bread, One Body”

⁹ “Jesus Christ, Bread of Life”

¹⁰ “Wisdom’s Feast”

¹¹ “Go, Be Justice”

¹² *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, 90.

¹³ Huntz Jude A., “Communion in the Hand,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review*, March 1997 (<http://www.catholic-pages.com/mass/inhand.asp>).

¹⁴ Lev, Elizabeth, “Doubing Thomases: the Pitfalls of Folly,” Zenit, 11 June 2009 (<http://www.zenit.org/rssenglish-26148>).

¹⁵ “Benedict XVI cautions against Eucharist worship becoming empty” Catholic News Agency (CAN), 12 June 2009 (<http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/new.php?n=16266>).