

Revaluating Corpus Christi

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The formula 'lex orandi, lex credendi' expresses the long-acknowledged belief that the liturgy is didactic. One major concern of the present liturgical renewal is to make the liturgy more expressive of the gospel message which it proclaims. This problem is one of communication, authenticity, and meaningfulness. But another fundamental problem also warrants serious attention. What should the expressed message be? What truths ought the liturgy to communicate? The effectiveness of liturgical teaching is one problem; the propriety and value of the content of that teaching is another. It is precisely at this point that theology reverently and respectfully asks permission to judge the liturgy. Theology urges the need of an inverted formula, 'lex credendi, lex orandi.'

Liturgy, as rite, is a pattern of sacred behaviour, and as such evolves more slowly than theology. The latter is constantly pushed onward by man's desire to know, while liturgy is sedentary, conservative. Not that liturgy never reflects the changes in theological thinking. Just as theology has developed, so liturgy has gradually evolved. The really primitive residues in the mass, for instance, are few and short. In fact, liturgy can at times even seem to outrun theology. The unpreparedness on the part of a few professional theologians and bookish bishops at Vatican II for changes demanded by missionaries and pastors is ample proof of it. Nevertheless, liturgy ordinarily prefers calm repetitiveness, while theology at its best continually longs for new discovery and readjustment. The liturgical changes initiated by Vatican II, drastic though they may seem to some, are mild indeed compared with the requirements of the ever-accelerating pace of the new theology.

Contemporary theology can, I think, justly criticize some features of the observance of one feast, Corpus Christi. Before coming to that, however, we should understand more clearly the theological strategy which makes the critical position possible.

The evolution or development of theology, if it is to remain true to its driving principle, 'faith seeking understanding,' must never, in its seeking, overturn the truths of the faith revealed by Christ and proclaimed in the teaching of the Church. We are not to think that theological development allows that propositions once formally declared true by the Church can thereafter ever be considered false. Besides being true or false, however, theological propositions may at the same time be either important or trivial. Propositions are classi-

fiable under both categories simultaneously. In the first case, we speak of 'truth-value'; in the second, of 'value.' For example, the great Christological doctrines arrived at in the early history of the Church are not more 'true' than later Marian doctrines, but they are certainly more fundamental, more valuable. Again, values are to some extent relative. A doctrine which is both true and important in one historical, cultural, or doctrinal context may be true, but no longer important, in another. Of any doctrinal truth it can always be asked, in what situation is this truth worth stressing?

One of the operative factors in doctrinal development is its readjustment of truths: that is, the way theological understanding relates the truths to each other and to natural truths. For instance, theological evolution has brought it about that the teaching of the Church relating to indulgences has been pushed into limbo (and Limbo into – where?). Few theologians today would hold that the doctrine of indulgences deserves space in a children's catechism or in the uppermost consciousness of the praying, learning faithful. Indulgences are 'useful,' as Trent says, but their usefulness is severely limited for Christians who know how to draw spiritual profit from the sacraments, prayer, and Holy Scripture. For the majority of Catholics, I suspect that interest in indulgences has quite rightly receded into the background.

Yet what about the *capitula* and canons of Trent? Are these to be waved away with an air of distaste? There they are, 'in the way.' While for modern theologians it may be easier and neater to shunt the Tridentine fathers aside, can a theologian really think that he has no obligation to produce specific reasons why the old truths require re-valuation? May he dodge the effort of providing a consistent rational framework by which to account methodologically for his programme of revision? The reflections on 'importance' and 'readjustment' offered in this essay represent just such an attempt.

The notion that theological truths differ in importance is not to be confused with an idea popular in liberal Protestantism, namely, that adherence to the dogmatic minutiae of the centuries is irrelevant to the Christian's salvation – that the 'essential core' of the ancient creeds is all we are called upon to believe. Newman, the founder of the theology of doctrinal development, rejected that position; and so must we. But there remains among theological truths a hierarchy of value. This position has been explicitly expressed by Vatican II, though only in passing, in the *Decree on Ecumenism* (Section 11).

Now we can see a vantage point from which theology can speak to liturgy. One of the functions of the liturgy is to present to the faithful all the important Christian truths in turn. The doctrines proclaimed in the feasts of the Church year unfold before the Christian the entire content of his faith. And the Christian out of contact with the liturgical cycle is subject to the danger of accentuating his own preferred truths to the detriment of the others. If he upsets the liturgy's careful balance, the pet devotions which he may use as a substitute can lead

him into narrow, inane, and even perverted interpretations of the Christian life. However, it is not impossible for the liturgy itself to exhibit imbalance. The fact that today the sanctoral cycle is somewhat deemphasized, and the Holy Week services given greater prominence, can only mean that contemporary theology and research have revised our outlook on some of the views which supported past liturgical practice. Our dislike for a calendar cluttered with half-legendary medieval figures, and our enthusiastic response to the riches of the Easter liturgy, are one indication of the progress of theology toward a more just estimation of the relations between various Christian truths.

Corpus Christi is surely a good example of an imbalanced feast in need of liturgical realignment. The objection to elaborate Corpus Christi processions – the only point I am taking issue with – can be put into the terms of the theory of gradations of importance among interconnected theological truths. The teaching of Trent and *Mysterium Fidei* on the laetitic (divine) worship proper to the Eucharist is an excellent example of a ‘true’ doctrine. The objection to the way the feast is celebrated does not involve any denial of this true doctrine. It contends instead that some of these true Eucharistic doctrines, and the customs they appear to justify, tend to detract from other Eucharistic truths which, in the sacramental context especially, but also from other points of view, are more valuable.

The feast of Corpus Christi first appeared locally about 1246, and, with the Bull ‘Transiturus’ of 1264, received official status in the universal Church. The much admired office, as all know, was composed by St Thomas Aquinas. The Eucharistic procession in churches, streets, and cloisters, however, was a subsequently approved popular feature, due neither to St Thomas nor to the earliest legislation. Nowadays it is precisely this popular addition to the feast that nettles people. The theological reasons behind the modern change of mood require serious attention.

The decrees of Vatican II on ecumenism allude to a ‘hierarchy’ of Christian truths. Let us say, then, that innumerable true propositions of unequal importance may occur in Eucharistic doctrine. Some of these are found in the New Testament, some in the definitions of the Church, some in the writings of theologians, and some in the thoughts of the faithful. Surely the most important of these are the sayings of Christ and the theologoumena of the inspired authors. If we agree that all or part of *John 6* was intended to have a Eucharistic bearing, then one such important New Testament proposition is, ‘This Eucharist is the Bread of Life.’ Later in the evolving thought of the Church will come the equally true belief, ‘This Eucharist happens to be God.’

I wish to make a judgement about the relative importance of these two true statements. My standard of value is not temporal priority (which came earlier?), nor conceptual content (is ‘God’ more important than ‘Bread of Life’?), but *sacramentality*. I maintain that the most important statements that can be made about a sacrament are those

that have reference to it considered as sacrament. Here I echo an opinion widespread among theologians today: the 'sacramental mode' of thinking has a certain autonomy, within limits, of its own. Ontology and sacramental theology simply do not refer to the same aspect of things. What takes place naturally in an Aristotelian, Kantian, or Einsteinian world can never be identified completely with what 'happens' when the Lord acts in his sacraments.

The most prominent fact about the Eucharist is that it is a sacrament. Being a sacrament, its chief characteristic is its signifying. As bread, it signifies that it is to be eaten for its lifegiving properties. The bread is Christ's body, and its vivifying power is his. The main truths about the Eucharist are, therefore, those concerning the earthly and heavenly meal: it is food, it is to be eaten, it gives life. Religious acts falling within this ambit are likewise the most important Eucharistic acts. The communal meal, then, comes first, and communal or private adoration second.

According to Catholic belief, the Eucharist is the Body of the Lord. Hence, the Eucharist may be adored as God. The religious act of adoration follows logically and psychologically from conscious attention to the true statement, 'This is God.' But the question now being raised is, to what degree are this statement and the derivative religious act (adoration) *relevant* to the feast of the sacramental 'Body of Christ'?

Karl Rahner, in his guarded way and with the support of his Heideggerian principles, has already delivered the correct answer. The slant I am taking (sort of Whiteheadian) yields the same result: the Eucharist is primarily a food to be eaten, and only secondarily the object of veneration.

In Corpus Christi as now celebrated, a true dogma of a sacramental nature has lent its tone to the whole feast. The Eucharist is presented as a mysterious object to be adored rather than as a pleasing familiar food to be eaten. Of course, in the Mass joined to the procession, the Eucharist is eaten; and, too, at that time an element of adoration is properly, if peripherally, present. What we are doing, though, is ignoring the shifting relationships of value and importance that obtain within the hierarchy of theological truths. We need to ask in all earnestness whether in this feast the major truths have not been crowded to the side. Misplaced emphasis is the door to error.

Corpus Christi was originally introduced to reiterate the Eucharistic worship of Holy Thursday, which had gradually become obscured by the accumulation of various passiontide activities. Today Holy Thursday is once more predominantly Eucharistic, and so we are left with a reduplication of feasts. Paradoxically, the medieval celebration designed to put Eucharistic devotion in proper light is now throwing it somewhat out of focus again.

I have pointed out the failure of the Corpus Christi procession to promote the truth, 'The Eucharist is the Bread of Life.' Another central point it fails to reflect is, 'In the Eucharist all Christians are

one.' The theophoric procession is not calculated to communicate anything explicit about the corporate 'Body of Christ' as understood by contemporary Scripture scholars and theologians. Doesn't the total world situation today clamour for a feast of the 'Body of Christ' in the genuine Pauline sense, for a Joannine Agape? At present we are taught to adore Christ in the monstrance; might not the emphasis profitably be shifted to remind us more forcibly of that same sacramental Christ in our brother? We are to love Christ by loving our brother, on pain of finding ourselves among the goats. The full doctrine of the Eucharist, as found in the New Testament and the Church fathers, abundantly manifests this truth. The Corpus Christi procession neglects it.

The truths of Christian faiths are hard timeless jewels, but they are contained in a kaleidoscope that never stops turning, never finds completion in any one pattern, no matter how fascinating. Liturgy must not lag behind theology. It is time for liturgists to give the tube a shake, and show us a fresh array of Eucharistic truths.

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