



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
in the City of New York  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)

**June 6, 2021**  
*The Feast of Corpus Christi*

*Solemn Eucharist*  
*11am*

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A Sermon by  
The Rev. Alison Turner, *Associate for Children and Family Ministry*  
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### **Sermon for the Feast of Corpus Christi**

I wonder what brings you here today to this Feast of Corpus Christi? Your faith? Your story? A hope? A memory? On Maundy Thursday the priest adds extra words to the Eucharistic Prayer – “on the same night that he was betrayed, **that is *this night***” - and on this feast of Corpus Christi the beauty, joy, and wonder surrounding that night of remembrance is at the heart of our celebration.

*“I remember when...”*

From time to time, we use that phrase to look back wistfully on special moments; perhaps on meals shared with those whom we loved but who are now gone from sight. I wonder exactly what the disciples recalled as they looked back on that particular night with Jesus. That last night, that last supper where words would forever be amplified in their memories and become all the more meaningful with the passing of time. The memories that entwined the loving acts of washing of feet, serving, breaking of bread, and pouring of wine. From this pivotal supper, charged with memories, everything changed - for the one who would betray him; for the ones who would fall asleep; for those who would flee; for the one who would deny even knowing him; and for those who would keep vigil at the Cross. Ultimately, that bitter-sweet meal was not their *last* with Jesus – but a *first* and the start of something new, for they too would feast with him after his Resurrection. Nevertheless, coming as it did the night before his death on the cross, it has forever been charged with powerful memory.

Each year at the end of Lent, we move so swiftly from this supper scene to the solemnity of Good Friday that we barely have time to think about that miracle leading into wholeness that we were given as Jesus said “*Take eat, this is my body broken for you; do this in remembrance of me.*” And so, since 1264, the Church has celebrated this feast of Corpus Christi to reflect more deeply on, and give thanks for, the mystery of the Eucharist.

From the earliest of days, so many theologians have honored this mystery, but not merely through a lens of nostalgia, remembrance, or reminiscence, but rather emphasizing a different element of grace according to their time.

For the great Doctor of the Church, Thomas Aquinas: *“It was to impress the vastness of his love more firmly on the hearts of the faithful that our Lord instituted this sacrament at the last supper.”*<sup>1</sup>

700 years later, Henri Nouwen, described the Eucharist as *‘A transcendent physical presence.’* He says, *“This transcendent physical presence is what characterizes the Eucharist. It is already the other world present in this one...God in Christ is really here, and yet his physical presence is not characterized by the same limitations of space and time that we know.”*<sup>2</sup>

We may all have glimpsed this *transcendent physical presence*, perhaps at a first mass, a requiem, a gathering of pilgrims outside of a shrine, in an incense-filled basilica, or a simple home communion, where Christ’s body and blood are medicine for the body and soul, as well as in the daily bread of a quiet said mass in the Chantry Chapel when only 2 or 3 are gathered together.

And for many, during the pandemic, in acts of *spiritual communion*, when it has been impossible to eat the bread and drink the cup. In a poignant way, those who are returning again to church after a long absence are, as it were, experiencing once again their first communion - back in church after months of isolation, as together we gather; young and old, black and white, weary, worked, pampered, but united in those outstretched hands to receive the host.

This precious sight of home-coming, of inner trembling, as together we each approach the altar cautiously with freshly sanitized empty and open hands, is a sight of beauty for those of us who have the privilege to administer the Sacrament. This is certainly one of the most moving moments I have witnessed in this whole pandemic.

Perhaps our enforced physical separation during the past 14 months means that, perhaps, we approach this feast day with fresh eyes as we ponder what the Eucharist means to each one of us. What does it mean, this ‘vastness of love’ that transcends time and space?

Fr. Andrew of the Society of the Divine Compassion, one of the restorers of the Franciscan Life in the Church of England, describes the gift of communion as primarily a *Godward Offering*, *“an act of Christ our Brother, offering himself as the Son of Man for us all; the perfect Sacrifice, which is our pure worship and our atoning peace.”*<sup>3</sup> Our primary task as Christians is to worship God and to offer ourselves to him in adoration and service. And yet, experience shows us that in this kind of offering, we will also receive God’s immeasurable love whether kneeling before the Blessed Sacrament or welcoming the body of Christ as we make for him a throne as we offer up our hands to receive him. In these timeless and intimate moments when we receive Jesus, we are reminded that they are not to remain simply personal or even parochial, for in them we are mysteriously united with the church which is his body here and with those who have gone before, and now enjoy the worship of heaven.

Saint Paul told the emerging Church that *“Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”* (1 Corinthians 10:17) Therefore, *my* story is lived out in communion with God and with others. It is not ‘my mass’ but a sign of the community of the Church one for whom we are inextricably linked.

Reflecting on the Eucharist as a sign of the Church as the mystical body of Christ, the great Anglican mystic Evelyn Underhill said these beautiful words, *“In you and through you the method and work of the incarnation must go forward. You are meant to incarnate in your lives the theme of your adoration. You are to be taken, consecrated, broken and made means of grace; vehicles of the Eternal Charity.”*<sup>4</sup>

Being a Eucharistic community is, therefore, not simply about remembrance, an act of personal piety, or someone else's theory of this sacred mystery. Neither is it a passive encounter, for partaking in the Mass requires active engagement because of the relationship that God has with his people. Thus, the Eucharist transcends language and brings people together as one just as it transcends time and space. As one of the contemporary Eucharistic Prayers puts it – 'Christ *has* died. Christ *is* risen. Christ *will* come again.'

Today, in our celebration and worship, as we are fed by Jesus in his sacrificial gift of his Body and Blood, we assert our hope in eternity and affirm our faith in Christ's body, the Church. We hear, see, and feel again through words and music, liturgy and praise, word and sacrament, our calling heavenward. And, at the same time, God reaches out to us so that we can become the same living and loving Body of Christ in the world. What is given is to be taken, blessed, broken and shared. A community that believes in the mystery of the Eucharist, brings to our broken world these fragments of our lives and faithfulness.

Once again, we enter a wonderful mystery of receiving Jesus and one not to be taken lightly but with reverence and preparation; we gather as the body of Christ and consecrate the bread to become the body of Christ consecrated to him, so that we can consume the Body of Christ and become truly the Body of Christ. This cycle does not end in Church, for once blessed and united in him, we are then sent out to be the Body of Christ in the world.

*Blessed, praised, hallowed, and adored be Jesus Christ on his Throne of Glory in Heaven, in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar, and in the hearts of all His faithful people. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup> 'Opusculum 57, on the Feast of Corpus Christi, 1-4

<sup>2</sup> 'The Genesee Diary,' page 36

<sup>3</sup> 'Christ the Companion,' page 149

<sup>4</sup> 'Lent with Evelyn Underhill,' page 100