

# Reflection on the Feast of Corpus Christi 2021

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A well respected Australian Jesuit and theologian Fr. Gerald O'Collins has given a fairly straight forward answer to the question of how to understand the Eucharist: he states “*As the greatest of the sacraments and the central act of worship in the life of the church the Eucharist can never be neatly summed up.*”

The preeminent sacrament, the heart of the Church, eludes an all-encompassing definition largely because it straddles this world and the mysteriousness of the transcendent dimension.

The Catholic Church holds that God *transcends*, (that is, extends beyond the limits of ordinary experience) all creation. The sense of transcendence and therefore, an awareness of the sacred, is an important component of the liturgy. However just as God is recognised as transcendent, God is also recognised as *immanent* (i.e, God exists in and throughout the created existence). God the Father, who cannot be approached or seen in essence or being, becomes immanent primarily in Jesus the Christ and the Holy Spirit. We can say that;

*God's immanence is revealed in his word*

*God's immanence is revealed in his Son*

*God's immanence is revealed in his Spirit*

*God's immanence is revealed in his world*

The feast of *Corpus Christi* celebrates the Eucharist as the body of Christ, but in doing so it proclaims the truth of the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the actual body of

Christ during Mass. Just think a moment about the enormity of this truth. After a priest consecrates them, the bread and wine at the Mass become *the body and blood of Jesus the Son of God*. Although the appearance, smell, and taste of bread and wine remain, the substances of bread and wine have really changed into the body and blood of Jesus.

The Catholic Church has traditionally expressed its understanding of the Eucharist using the terms of Thomistic theology, (a legacy of the work and thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas, philosopher, theologian, and Doctor of the Church) which of itself is further derived from the ancient philosophical ideas of Plato and Aristotle. There is a lot to take in for the average person. The Eucharist is a rich reality. It is rightly called a mystery, not because it cannot be understood, but because its meaning can never be exhausted. It holds together heaven and earth, time and eternity, humanity and divinity, life and death, past and future, failure and forgiveness. It draws believers into communion with one another and with the God who is Father, Son and Spirit. Our worldview and indeed our faith understanding can be influenced by our understanding, or acceptance even, of this fine balance between immanent and transcendent and the emphasis that is given towards each. According to the philosopher Eric Voegelin, human existence is always and everywhere “existence-in-tension, existence in the in-between reality..., by a tension toward both mundane existence and the transcendent divine”.

Whilst all of this may well be the *‘de rigueur’* of your average theologian and/or philosopher, and in no way wanting to downplay the complexity or importance of our theological and doctrinal understandings, I wonder if in fact the reality of what

happens on the altar is perhaps less understood by many than the found faith in the sacrament, and that sense of sharing in the community of faith, that prayerful communion with the divine, and the sense of peace that can come from this experience. Is it not true that all of this is experienced as thanksgiving? The theology of the Eucharist is a bit like what O'Collins and some of the Church's greatest thinkers have said... it is at its essence, a great mystery.

I think a mature understanding of God's immanence can and does provide great comfort and support to our daily lives. I believe that when we approach the Eucharist, to those rightly disposed, God meets us where we are in our life, with all our humanness, and our need for healing, and instils within us his reality, his real presence, his power of love taking up residence again within our souls. Let me share a simple story of everyday life to illustrate what I mean.

Tara Brelinsky is an ordinary everyday woman who lives in North Carolina in the U.S.A. As a young woman she trained as a journalist, but is now a part time writer and a full time mum and wife to her husband who was her childhood sweetheart. Tara writes about life and spirituality, occasionally she shares a bit about her own life. On one occasion she wrote;

*"I struggle from time to time with depression. Sometimes there are triggers like lack of good sleep or other life changes that stir-up those feelings of sadness and malaise. At other times it seems to strike me out of nowhere. Difficult to fully describe, it feels as if I have a heavy weight upon my shoulders which I just cannot shake off. Having been months since my last bout, depression was completely off of my radar when the kids and I enjoyed some holiday time with family. Then, a combination of triggers and circumstances left me again vulnerable*

*and depression seized its opportunity. So it was this past Saturday, I found myself talking myself through the day. Get up out of bed, take a shower, vacuum the family room, dust the furniture," I told myself... keep myself focused and push through the desire sit down and cry.*

*In the early evening, we readied ourselves for going to Mass as a family, sliding in the pew between two of my little ones, I began to breathe a little easier knowing that I could at least find a little rest while in my Father's house. Then the Lord began to speak to me, through the readings and the gospel, and I listened intently to all He had to say. I heard Jesus say He was the Bread of Life, Who had the power to raise me up. Approaching the minister of the Eucharist, I could think of nothing else, nothing but Christ. I recognized that I needed food for my journey. Walking to the chalice, I repeated, "Let there be more of You, less of me, more of You, less of me." And I prayed for healing, again.*

*There weren't any claps of thunder nor lightning bolts, but I became aware that my depressive feelings were lifted. Realizing that God knew all along that I would need to hear those words of empathy and encouragement this Saturday evening, astounds me. In truth, He speaks to me every day, but perhaps I'm not always a good listener. Perhaps, I will be allowed to bear this cross of suffering again some other day, but today He raised me up... and I am thankful.*

Throughout history numerous individuals have echoed this sense of great thankfulness! One was a man who loved words and he has left us a rich legacy of storytelling and faith. J.R.R. Tolkien was a devout Catholic, he was a professor in Cambridge University in England, a long-time friend of C.S. Lewis, and the famous author of 'The Lord of the Rings,' 'The Hobbit,' and many other books. I wanted to conclude today with an excerpt from a letter that he wrote to his son Michael, I quote.

*"Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament... There*

*you will find romance, glory, honour, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves on earth, and more than that: Death. By the divine paradox, that which ends life, and demands the surrender of all;*

Later he says:

*...the only cure for sagging or fainting faith is Communion. Though always itself, perfect and complete and inviolate, the Blessed Sacrament does not operate completely and once for all in any of us. Like the act of Faith it must be continuous and grow by exercise.*

By his Real Presence in the Eucharist Christ is with us always, until the end of the age. As St. Thomas Aquinas wrote;

*"It is the law of friendship that friends should live together. . . . Christ has not left us without his bodily presence in this our pilgrimage, but he joins us to himself in this sacrament in the reality of his body and blood" (Summa Theologiae, III q. 75, a. 1).*

One of the mission challenges in this age is that the majority of Catholics in Australia, and in fact the rest of the developed world do not give thanks for the Eucharist, struggle to believe, or do not comprehend this real presence of God in the Eucharist, or reject the institutional Church. It naturally follows that if they really did believe in God's Real Presence, then of course, all our churches would be overflowing for every mass.

With this gift of Christ's presence in our midst, the Church is truly blessed, however our challenge is to extend this blessing always and everywhere to the ends of the earth. This must be offered, it cannot be forced, and for many today we need to remain cognisant that the place we know and love... the Church, is for many a strange land, speaking a foreign language. I speak from my own experience, I myself originally first walked into a Catholic Church, took my few hesitant and tentative and

somewhat fearful steps, as an adult, and only on an invitation from someone who quietly witnessed faithfully to me and stood alongside me. The task is great, but we are never alone, reliant only upon our own limited resources, an important characteristic of God's immanence is that God seeks us! God want's us, God never gives up on us!

Let us today pray for Gods help that we might strive always to be that witness to another pilgrim along the way and bring them to receive God's body as food for their journey back home!