

Reflection for the Solemnity of Corpus Christi

There is an interesting story behind creating the Solemnity of Corpus Christi in the thirteenth century. It starts with a talented Belgium orphan called Juliana who was brought up and educated by Augustinian nuns. She felt called to religious life and so joined the Order, in time becoming its superior. She was a bit of a mystic and had a vision of the church as a full moon with one dark spot – the lack of a feast dedicated to the Body and Blood of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament. She shared her vision with the local Bishop of Liege, Robert de Thorete, and the Archdeacon, Jacques Panteleon, who were well disposed to her thoughts and the Bishop ordered the first celebration of Corpus Christi for the following year and invited a local monk named John to prepare the liturgical office and texts for the celebration. Corpus Christi might have remained a local feast kept in Belgium alone except Archdeacon Jacques Panteleon was destined for great things. In short order he became the Bishop of Verdun, the Patriarch of Jerusalem, and on 29th August 1261 was elected Pope taking the name Urban IV. It was he who spread the vision of Juliana to the whole world and established the Solemnity of Corpus Christi as a feast day for the universal church inviting St Thomas Aquinas, one of the great Christian scholars of his day, indeed of Christian history, to prepare liturgical texts and reflections which are still in use today. The opening prayer of today's Mass was originally penned by St Thomas Aquinas. The four verses of the sequence we read together are but the end of the twenty-four verses he wrote for this feast.

Thomas Aquinas also wrote the hymn 'Godhead here in hiding, whom I do adore.' The fifth verse of this hymn resonates with today's scripture readings. We sing:

'O thou our reminder of Christ crucified,
Living Bread, the life of us for whom he died,
Lend this life to me then: feed and feast my mind,
There be thou the sweetness man was meant to find.'

Our first reading speaks of God feeding the people of Israel with "*manna*" from heaven and our Gospel speaks of Jesus as "*the living bread that came down from heaven.*" "*If anyone eats of this bread*", says Jesus, "*he will live for ever.*" Jesus identifies this "*living bread*" with his very own "*flesh.*" Not to eat "*of this living bread that has come down from heaven*" is to deny oneself of life itself. "*Truly, truly, I say to you*", says Jesus, "*unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.*" He also describes the gift of his own body and blood as far surpassing in importance the "*manna*" fed to the people of Israel when God brought them out of the land of Egypt. He describes his body and blood as "*the bread which came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live for ever.*"

From a small corner of Belgium, the desire of the orphan Juliana to have a feast dedicated to the Body and Blood of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament has led to this important feast which celebrates the Mass itself and the sacrament of the Eucharist.