

My friends in Christ, today's Solemnity of *Corpus Christi* (the Body of Christ) invites us, in a particular way, to reflect upon the Eucharist – the Sacrament of Sacraments.

Now, let us return for a moment to our sacramental preparation class when we were young, when we were preparing to receive First Communion. What *is* a Sacrament? Broadly speaking, it is a sign – in *this* instance, a sign directing us toward something holy...something *sacred*: Sacrament.

But it is not a sign like, for example, a stop sign. A stop sign tells us that we need to stop at the intersection, but it does not actually *effect* our stopping; it is a *sign*, but it does not *make* us stop at the intersection. And we know, in our own personal experience, that this is obviously true; I see all kinds of drivers all the time just blitzing right through every stop sign on God's green Earth!

And so a Sacrament is something of a sign...but also something *more* than a sign. Because a Sacrament actually *does* effect what it symbolizes. For example, the Sacrament of Baptism *symbolizes* our being cleansed of Original Sin, made into a child of God by the grace of adoption, and initiated as newest members of the family in faith that is the Catholic Christian Church. Yes, the Sacrament of Baptism *symbolizes* all of that...*and* it actually *effects* all of that; it *makes* it happen – by the grace of God, by the merits of Jesus Christ, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

A Sacrament, then, is an outward sign, instituted by Christ, that effects grace.

And the Eucharist is *the* Sacrament...the Sacrament of Sacraments...the Source and Summit of our Catholic Christian faith. And whereas the other Sacraments give us grace – that is, they grant us God's very life, the divine life of the Lord Himself...whereas the other Sacraments all give us the Lord's grace...the Eucharist, among all of the seven Sacraments, stands alone as that which gives us the Lord Himself, the *Giver* of grace.

But how does this happen? How does the Eucharist do this? How does the Eucharist even come to *be*? A simple philosophical term: transubstantiation.... Wait a minute! That term is not so simple at all!

Transubstantiation: *trans* (meaning “across”), and *substantiation* (or “substance,” meaning the actual essence of a *thing*). Consider bread. Bread, well, *looks* like bread; it *tastes* like bread; it *smells* like bread; it has the chemical composition of bread...*and* it has the essence of “bread-ness” (for lack of a more profound, scientific, philosophical term). And really, our common-sense experience actually

knows this to be true, despite how strange to our ears and minds this idea of “bread-ness.” Because a loaf of wheat is different from a loaf of rye: different looks, tastes, smells, and so on...and yet, we know that both are bread. And *how* do we know that? This nebulous “bread-ness,” *that* is how!

The essence of a thing is its substance; meanwhile, its color and shape and size and all of the rest – *that* all is a thing’s set of *accidents*, according to Aristotle, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and *me*... Did I just include myself in the midst of a group of brilliant minds? Yikes, *that* just dropped the average!

Accidents. But *not* in the sense, like Brittany Spears, of “Oops, I did it again.” But accidents, rather, in the sense that these attributes just *happen* to be observed in *this* particular thing, but they do not *define* the *essence* of that thing. And again, our common-sense experience knows this to be true; a *white man* and a *black woman* are both still persons, despite their physical appearances. And a hulking giant like myself and a newly-conceived child in the mother’s womb, likewise, are both still persons, despite our physical appearances. Doctor Seuss; a person is still a person no matter how small...or how *big*, for that matter – thanks be to God!

Back to bread...*and* the Eucharist. When, in the Mass, by the blessing of God, the merit of Jesus Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit, the priest (through his ministry at Mass) changes the *bread*...into *God*. That is, he changes the *essence*, the *substance*, of bread into God. The Eucharist still looks and smells and tastes like bread, still has the chemical composition of bread...but the essence, the “bread-ness,” is gone...*transformed*.... Transubstantiation. And what remains...is “God-ness.”

“Oh, for goodness’ sake! This is getting all so complicated!” Indeed! And so, let us leave it at that for now...pause our holy striving to understand *how* this is...and consider *why*. Because I for one am left to wonder why the Lord would have us use such a common-gutter element like *bread* to give us His very *Self* – these small, flat, tasteless bread wafers! Because this is *God* after all – Who is all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving...holy and majestic and all things utterly mind-blowing.... And so, to dare ponder *God*...in the form of mere *bread*.... That just seems a bit *insulting*, to say the least.

And so, why bread? Let us think about bread for a moment; we take bread for granted *now*, but consider the *broader* context of all human history. Right up there at the top of the list of unique, profound, and significant accomplishments of human endeavor, right at the top with the harnessing of fire, the invention of the wheel, and the forging of steel...is the baking of bread. Because – think

about it – before there was bread, we were hunter-gatherers, made to suffer the drudgery and chore, *each day*, of hunting for meat and gathering fruits and vegetables...but actually *making* nothing.

But then one day, with the help of the wheel that we just invented, we learned how to take a bunch of wheat and grind it into flour; and with the help of the fire that we just harnessed – and the mixing of flour with water when it just happened to rain that fateful day – we learned how to take a that flour and bake it into something edible.... And of course with the help of the steel that we just forged, we learned how to *slice* that bread and then *butter* it for an extra-tasty treat!

The point is: it actually took a lot of early human ingenuity to learn how to make bread. So why does God want us to use bread to make it into the Eucharist? I propose that it is because God wants to enter into our lives precisely where we are at the very *epitome* of our “human-ness,” thus to join us and celebrate with us, as it were, this crowning glory of human achievement that is bread.

At the same, why God wants us to use bread is, I think, a matter of how *common* bread now is, how readily accessible, how taken-for-granted in most cultures; and so, because of *that*, the Lord wants to be united with us, with *all* of us, no matter how rich or poor, and He accomplishes this in the Eucharist – the bread that has become God – *not* through some expensive steak dinner that the rich get to enjoy, *not* in any rare and exotic food (to the shameful exclusion of the poor), but rather, in the form of simple...humble...bread. The most common foodstuff there is!

And in consideration of the spirituality of all of this, we consider also that it is *God* Who, in the end, makes this all happen...but bread (that profound phenomenal human achievement); bread is *our* contribution to this whole enterprise of the Eucharist. It is our human *nature*, contributing to God’s *grace* – for grace *builds* on nature; it does not *replace* nature.

And so, with these few, scant reflections on the Eucharist, we continue with our celebration of *Corpus Christi* – the Body (and Blood) of Christ, given to us in the Eucharist. And we give thanks to God for this truly extraordinary gift, this most sublime grace of the Lord’s very Self...offered for us on the Cross, offered for us in the Eucharist.... O Sacrament most holy, O Sacrament divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment Thine!