



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

## **Corpus Christi - Year B**

### ***Takeaway Theology***

*Readings: Exodus 24: 3-8, Ps 115, Hebrews 9: 11-15, Mark 14: 12-16, 22-26*

Americans do things differently, I long ago discovered. So, when the headline popped up on my screen, I was not entirely surprised. It said, 'Florida priest defends Blessed Sacrament by biting angry lesbian.' Further investigation revealed that the incident occurred at a well attended midday Mass in St Cloud and the film of the event is available online. The bitee, one Jetty Nique, had attended an earlier Mass with her girlfriend whose niece was being Christened, and engaged the priest in a long conversation before being given a blessing. Returning to the later Mass – such enthusiasm for the Sacrament is, in other circumstances, commendable, there developed an altercation over whether the priest would administer to her – Miss Nique said afterward that the priest tried to disrespect her by 'ramming' the 'cookie' in her mouth. (As the priest cheerfully administers in the hand to all who present themselves thus, her claim seems unlikely.) She then can be observed ramming her hand into the Ciborium, attempting to crush the 'cookies' and self-administer. With one hand holding the Ciborium and the other holding a host, the priest can be seen imprinting his teeth on the offending arm in an attempt to get her to remove her hand from the 'cookie jar'.

All of this is a long way from the beauty of the doctrine which brings us here today to celebrate the Feast of Corpus Christi. Proposed by St Thomas Aquinas and later mandated by the Pope, this 13th century feast provided an opportunity for popular piety and public processions celebrating, outside the Triduum, the miracle of the Real Presence – body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ, truly present in the Blessed Sacrament.

It is a doctrine and feast that draws a great dividing line across post-reformation Christendom.

Protestantism, in its efforts to ‘reform’ the Universal Church, divided, almost immediately on the doctrine of the Real Presence. Luther said that the ‘Hoc est enim corpus meum’ – this is my body – indicated that, in some sense, Christ was present. Zwingli and others claimed that the Mass was simply a memorial – of things which, truth to tell, they could not truly ‘remember’ in the reduced meaning of that word – and that the bread remained bread and the wine remained wine.

What was clear was that the foundational claim of the Mass was denied in Protestantism. The Mass as the re-presentation of the once, once for all, Passover sacrifice of the Calvary, where time and eternity co-inhere on the altar and where the Holy Sacrifice is, angel-borne, raised to the altar of Heaven as it says in the Roman Canon, is not part of Protestant teaching or understanding.

Miss Nique, the self-service sacramentalist, in referring to the consecrated Host as a ‘cookie’ reveals herself, in spite of her claim to

lifelong family adherence to the Catholic Faith, to be, at best, a Zwinglian Protestant.

Several things have happened, in our lifetime, that may have led Miss Nique, and many others, to this debased view of the Blessed Sacrament. (Figures in the USA suggest that over one third of Catholics now take a Protestant view.) Here it may be useful to retrace a little of our immediate history as all but the most elderly of our number are essentially 'post -conciliar babes' who grew up in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and assume that everything we do now was mandated therein.

The most dramatic shift was in the orientation of the altars. The two millennia old model of the priest facing the altar when addressing God on behalf of the people and facing the people when speaking God' word to them was replaced by a freestanding altar, priest facing the people. This changed the emphasis from the Altar of the Sacrifice to the Table of the Supper.

This was a seismic shift from the Deocentric – God centred to the Anthropocentric – Man centred. It was a change that Pope Benedict XVI publicly acknowledged as historically flawed and regrettable but felt unable to reverse. Contrary to popular belief, this change was never suggested never mind mandated by the Council.

The collapse of the practice of regular confession prior to receiving the Blessed Sacrament has also played a massive part in the reverence for and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. Again, a development that finds

no place in the conclusions of the Council and would have been deeply shocking to its members.

It may also surprise modern Catholics, even the older ones among us, to know that the Council did not conceive of people receiving the Blessed Sacrament in their hands. Indeed, Pope St Paul VI had a long and ultimately unsuccessful battle with European bishops and Cardinals who refused to obey his instructions to return to receiving on the tongue. In the end the practice was regularised by the Pope reluctantly granting indulgences to permit their flagrant disobedience.

Finally, the removal of altar rails. The ancient practice of kneeling to receive was, again, never overturned, but simply discontinued wholesale. The removal of the rails effectively denied most people the opportunity to kneel and removed the symbolic borderline between Heaven and Earth. It also removed from the worshipper those precious moments of reflection and focus prior to receiving the Host.

This development, again, was neither foreseen, never mind mandated by the Council. Indeed, it was a concession to the most militant form of Protestantism. For it was John Knox who influenced the Church of England to effect the compromise of what was called 'The Black Rubric' in the Book of Common Prayer. Knox wanted the abolition of altar rails so that no-one would kneel and think that the Bread was anything other than bread and the wine just wine. The C of E kept altar rails but added that this was so that people could thereby 'humbly and gratefully acknowledge Christ's gifts to worthy receivers' but warns against this

being misconstrued by 'ignorance, infirmity, malice or obstinacy' as thinking that the bread and wine are the real Body and Blood of Christ. Such a view it describes as 'depraved' – for which read 'Catholic'! I rehearse these matters because it is important to remember our history.

For while there is much that, as parishioners and humble curate, we cannot change, we can at least review our practice of Sacramental Confession and our devotion to and our approach to the reception of the Blessed Sacrament on this glorious Feast Day.

And, if you do that.... I promise I won't bite your hand off.