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On the Feast of Corpus Christi (audio)

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Today, on the feast of Corpus Christi,
we come together to consider the

depths of our Lord's love for us, which has led him to stay with us, hidden under the appearances of the Blessed Sacrament. It almost seems as if we can physically hear him teaching the multitude: "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some seeds fell along the path, and the birds came and devoured them. Other seeds fell on rocky ground, where they had not much soil, and immediately they sprang up, since they had no depth of soil, but when the sun rose they were scorched; and since they had no root they withered away. Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them. Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty."[1]

It is a vivid scene. The divine sower is also sowing his seed today. The work of salvation is still going on, and our Lord wants us to share that

work. He wants Christians to open to his love all the paths of the earth. He invites us to spread the divine message, by both teaching and example, to the farthest corners of the earth. He asks us, as citizens of both ecclesial and civil society, to be other Christs by fulfilling our duties conscientiously, sanctifying our everyday work and the responsibilities of our particular walk of life.

If we look around, if we take a look at the world, which we love because it is God's handiwork, we will find that the parable holds true. The word of Jesus Christ is fruitful, it stirs many souls to dedication and fidelity. The life and conduct of those who serve God have changed history. Even many of those who do not know our Lord are motivated, perhaps unconsciously, by ideals which derive from Christianity.

We can also see that some of the seed falls on barren ground or among thorns and thistles; some hearts close themselves to the light of faith. Ideals of peace, reconciliation and brotherhood are widely accepted and proclaimed, but all too often the facts belie them. Some people are futilely bent on smothering God's voice. To drown it out they use brute force or a method which is more subtle but perhaps more cruel because it drugs the spirit, indifference.

The Bread of eternal life

When thinking about all this, I should like us to take stock of our mission as Christians. Let's turn our eyes to the holy Eucharist, toward Jesus. He is here with us. He has made us a part of himself: "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."[2] God has decided to stay in the tabernacle to nourish us, strengthen us, make us

divine and give effectiveness to our work and efforts. Jesus is at one and the same time the sower, the seed and the final result of the sowing: the bread of eternal life.

The miracle of the holy Eucharist is being continually renewed and it has all Jesus' personal traits. Perfect God and perfect man, Lord of heaven and earth, he offers himself to us as nourishment in the most natural and ordinary way. Love has been awaiting us for almost two thousand years. That's a long time and yet it's not, for when you are in love time flies.

I remember a lovely poem, one of the songs collected by Alfonso X the Wise. It's a legend about a simple monk who begged our Lady to let him see heaven, even if only for a moment. Our Lady granted him his wish and the good monk found himself in paradise. When he

returned, he could not recognize the monastery—his prayer, which he had thought very short, lasted three centuries. Three centuries are nothing to a person in love. That's how I explain Christ waiting in the Eucharist. It is God waiting for us, God who loves man, who searches us out, who loves us just as we are—limited, selfish, inconstant, but capable of discovering his infinite affection and of giving ourselves fully to him.

Motivated by his own love and by his desire to teach us to love, Jesus came on earth and has stayed with us in the Eucharist. “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end”:[3] that's how Saint John begins his account of what happened on the eve of the Passover when Jesus “took bread and after he had given thanks, broke it, and said, This is my body which is given up for you. Do this in remembrance of me.

In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying: This is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”[4]

A new life

It is the simple and solemn moment of the establishment of the new alliance. Jesus dissolves the old economy of the law and reveals to us that he himself will be the content of our prayer and life. Just look at the joy which invades today's liturgy: “Let the anthem be clear and strong and full of joy.”[5] It is a great Christian celebration which sings about a new era: “The old pasch is by the new replaced; the substance hath the shadow chased and rising day dispels the night.”[6]

This is a miracle of love. “This is truly the bread for God's children.”[7] Jesus, the first Son of the eternal Father, offers us himself as food. And

the same Jesus is waiting to receive us in heaven as “his guests, his co-heirs and his fellows,”[8] for “those who are nourished by Christ will die the earthly death of time, but they will live eternally because Christ is life everlasting.”[9]

Eternal happiness begins now for the Christian who is comforted with the definitive manna of the Eucharist. The old life has gone forever. Let us leave everything behind us so that everything will be new, “our hearts, our words and our actions.”[10]

This is the Good News. *News*, because it speaks to us of a deep love which we never could have dreamed of. *Good*, because there is nothing better than uniting ourselves to God, the greatest Good of all. It is *Good News*, because in an inexplicable way it gives us a foretaste of heaven.

Jesus hides in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar because he wants us to

dare to approach him. He wants to nourish us so we become one single thing with him. When he said, “Apart from me you can do nothing,”[11] he was not condemning Christians to ineffectiveness or obliging them to seek him by a difficult and arduous route. On the contrary. He has stayed here with us, he is totally available to us.

When we meet together around the altar to celebrate the holy Sacrifice of the Mass, when we contemplate the sacred host in the monstrance or adore it hidden in the tabernacle, our faith should be strengthened; we should reflect on this new life which we are receiving and be moved by God’s affection and tenderness.

“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers.”[12] That is how the Scriptures describe the life of the

early Christians. They were brought together by the faith of the Apostles in perfect unity, to share in the Eucharist and to pray with one mind. Faith, bread, word.

In the Eucharist Jesus gives us a sure pledge of his presence in our souls; of his power, which supports the whole world; of his promises of salvation, which will help the human family to dwell forever in the house in heaven when time comes to an end. There we shall find God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit: the Blessed Trinity, the one and only God. Our whole faith is brought into play when we believe in Jesus, really present under the appearances of bread and wine.

I cannot see how anyone could live as a Christian and not feel the need for the constant friendship of Jesus in the word and in the bread, in prayer and in the Eucharist. And I easily

understand the ways in which successive generations of faithful have expressed their love for the Eucharist, both with public devotions making profession of the faith and with silent, simple practices in the peace of a church or the intimacy of their hearts.

The important thing is that we should love the Mass and make it the centre of our day. If we attend Mass well, surely we are likely to think about our Lord during the rest of the day, wanting to be always in his presence, ready to work as he worked and love as he loved. And so we learn to thank our Lord for his kindness in not limiting his presence to the time of the sacrifice of the altar. He has decided to stay with us in the host which is reserved in the tabernacle.

For me the tabernacle has always been a Bethany, a quiet and pleasant

place where Christ resides. A place where we can tell him about our worries, our sufferings, our desires, our joys, with the same sort of simplicity and naturalness as Martha, Mary and Lazarus. That is why I rejoice when I stumble upon a church in town or in the country; it's another tabernacle, another opportunity for the soul to escape and join in intention our Lord in the Sacrament.

The richness of the Eucharist

When our Lord instituted the Eucharist during the last supper, night had already fallen. This indicated, according to Saint John Chrysostom, that “the times had run their course.”^[13] The world had fallen into darkness, for the old rites, the old signs of God's infinite mercy to mankind, were going to be brought to fulfilment. The way was opening to a new dawn—the new

Passover. The Eucharist was instituted during that night, preparing in advance for the morning of the resurrection.

We too have to prepare for this new dawn. Everything harmful, worn out or useless has to be thrown away—discouragement, suspicion, sadness, cowardice. The holy Eucharist gives the sons of God a divine newness and we must respond “in the newness of your mind,”^[14] renewing all our feelings and actions. We have been given a new principle of energy, strong new roots grafted onto our Lord. We must not return to the old leaven, for now we have the bread which lasts forever.

On this feast of Corpus Christi in cities and towns throughout the world, Christians accompany our Lord in procession. Hidden in the host he moves through the streets and squares—just as during his

earthly life—going to meet those who want to see him, making himself available to those who are not looking for him. And so, once more, he comes among his own people. How are we to respond to this call of his?

The external signs of love should come from the heart and find expression in the testimony of a Christian life. If we have been renewed by receiving our Lord's body, we should *show* it. Let us pray that our thoughts be sincere, full of peace, self-giving and service. Let us pray that we be true and clear in what we say—the right thing at the right time—so as to console and help and especially bring God's light to others. Let us pray that our actions be consistent and effective and right, so that they give off "the good fragrance of Christ,"^[15] evoking his way of doing things.

The Corpus Christi procession makes Christ present in towns and cities throughout the world. But his presence cannot be limited to just one day, a noise you hear and then forget. It should remind us that we have to discover our Lord in our ordinary everyday activity. Side by side with this solemn procession, there is the simple, silent procession of the ordinary life of each Christian. He is a man among men, who by good fortune has received the faith and the divine commission to act so that he renews the message of our Lord on earth. We are not without defects; we make mistakes and commit sins. But God is with us and we must make ourselves ready to be used by him, so that he can continue to walk among men.

Let us ask our Lord then to make us souls devoted to the Blessed Eucharist, so that our relationship with him brings forth joy and

serenity and a desire for justice. In this way we will make it easier for others to recognize Christ; we will put Christ at the centre of all human activities. And Jesus' promise will be fulfilled: "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself."[16]

Jesus, as we were saying, is the sower, and he goes about his task by means of us Christians. Christ presses the grain in his wounded hands, soaks it in his blood, cleans it, purifies it, and throws it into the furrows, into the world. He plants the seeds one by one so that each Christian in his or her own setting can bear witness to the fruitfulness of the death and resurrection of the Lord.

If we are in Christ's hands, we should absorb his saving blood and let ourselves be cast on the wind. We should accept our life as God wants

it. And we should be convinced that the seed must be buried and die^[17] if it is to be fruitful. Then the shoots start to appear, and the grain. And from the grain, bread is made which is changed by God into the body of Christ. In this way we once more become united with Jesus, our sower. “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.”^[18]

We should always remember that if there is no sowing there is no harvest. That is why we need to sow the word of God generously, to make Christ known to men so that they hunger for him. Corpus Christi—the feast of the bread of life—is a good opportunity to reflect on the hunger which people suffer: hunger for truth, for justice, for unity and for peace. To meet the hunger for peace we have to repeat what Saint Paul said: Christ is our peace, *pax nostra*.^[19] The desire for truth should

remind us that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life.[20] Those who aspire to unity should be shown Christ who prays that we will all be *consummati in unum*: “made perfectly one.”[21] Hunger for justice should lead us to the original source of harmony among mankind: the fact that we are, and know ourselves to be, sons of the Father, brothers.

Peace, truth, unity, justice. How difficult it often seems to eliminate the barriers to human harmony! And yet we Christians are called to bring about that miracle of fraternity. We must work so that everyone with God’s grace can live in a Christian way, “bearing one another’s burdens,”[22] keeping the commandment of love which is the bond of perfection and the essence of the law.[23]

We cannot deny that a great deal remains to be done. On one occasion,

when he was looking perhaps at the swaying wheatfields, Jesus said to his disciples: “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest.”[24] Now, as then, labourers are needed to bear “the burden of the day and the scorching heat.”[25] And if we, the labourers, are not faithful, there will come to pass what was described by the prophet Joel: “The fields are laid waste, the ground mourns; because the grain is destroyed, the wine fails, the oil languishes. Be confounded, o tillers of the soil, wail, o vinedressers, for the wheat and the barley, because the harvest of the field has perished.”[26]

There is no harvest if we are not ready for constant, generous work, which can be long and tiring: ploughing the land, sowing the seed, weeding the fields, reaping and

threshing... The kingdom of God is fashioned in history, in time. Our Lord has entrusted this task to us, and no one can feel exempt. Today, as we adore Christ in the Eucharist, let us remember that the time has not yet come for resting. The day's work must go on.

It is written in the book of Proverbs: "He who tills his land will have plenty of bread."[27] Let us apply this passage to our spiritual life. If we do not work God's land, are not faithful to the divine mission of giving ourselves to others, helping them recognize Christ, we will find it very difficult to understand what the Eucharistic Bread is. No one values something which does not cost an effort. In order to value and love the holy Eucharist, we must follow Jesus' way. We must be grain; we must die to ourselves and rise full of life and give an abundant yield: a hundredfold![28]

Christ's way can be summed up in one word: love. If we are to love, we must have a big heart and share the concerns of those around us. We must be able to forgive and understand; we must sacrifice ourselves, with Christ, for all souls. If we love with Christ's heart, we will learn to serve others and we will defend the truth clearly, lovingly. If we are to love in this way, we need to root out of our individual lives everything that is an obstacle to Christ's life in us: attachment to our own comfort, the temptation to selfishness, the tendency to be the centre of everything. Only by reproducing in ourselves the word of Christ can we transmit it to others. Only by experiencing the death of the grain of wheat can we work in the heart of the world, transforming it from within, making it fruitful.

Christian optimism

We may sometimes be tempted to think that this is very nice but an impossible dream. I have spoken to you about renewing your faith and your hope. Let us not get used to the miracles which are happening before our eyes, especially the wonderful fact that our Lord comes down each day into the priest's hands. Jesus wants us to remain wide awake, so that we are convinced of his power and can hear once more his promise: "Follow me and I will make you become fishers of men";[29] you will be effective and attract souls to God. We should therefore trust our Lord's words: get into the boat, take the oars, hoist the sails and launch out into this sea of the world which Christ gives us as an inheritance. "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch."[30]

The apostolic zeal which Christ has put in our hearts must not be diminished or extinguished by a false

humility. Maybe we experience the dead weight of our personal failings, but our Lord takes into account our mistakes. In his merciful gaze he realizes that we are creatures with limitations, weaknesses and imperfections, that we are inclined to sin. But he tells us to fight, to acknowledge our weaknesses, not to be afraid, but to repent and foster a desire to improve.

We must also remember that we are only instruments. “What is Apollo? What is Paul? They are servants who brought the faith to you. Even the different ways in which they brought it were assigned to them by the Lord. I did the planting, Apollo the watering, but God gave the growth.”^[31] The teaching, the message which we have to communicate, has in its own right an infinite effectiveness which comes not from us, but from Christ. It is God himself who is bent on bringing

about salvation, on redeeming the world.

We must, then, have faith and not be dispirited. We must not be stopped by any kind of human calculation. To overcome the obstacles we have to throw ourselves into the task so that the very effort we make will open up new paths. Personal holiness, giving oneself to God, is the one cure that overcomes any difficulty.

Being holy means living exactly as our Father in heaven wants us to live. You will say that it is difficult. It is. The ideal is a very high one. And yet it is also easy. It is within our reach. When a person becomes ill, there may be no appropriate medicine. But in supernatural affairs, it is not like that. The medicine is always at hand. It is Jesus, present in the holy Eucharist, and he also gives us his grace in the

other sacraments which he established.

Let us say again, in word and in action: “Lord, I trust in you; your ordinary providence, your help each day, is all I need.” We do not have to ask God to perform great miracles. Rather, we have to beg him to increase our faith, to enlighten our intellect and strengthen our will. Jesus always stays by our side and is always himself.

Ever since I began to preach, I have warned people against a certain mistaken sense of holiness. Don't be afraid to know your real self. That's right, you are made of clay. Don't be worried. For you and I are children of God—and that is the right way of being made divine. We are chosen by a divine calling from all eternity: “The Father chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before

him.”[32] We belong especially to God; we are his instruments in spite of our great personal shortcomings. And we will be effective if we do not lose this awareness of our own weakness. Our temptations give us the measure of our own weakness.

If you feel depressed when you experience, perhaps in a very vivid way, your own pettiness, then is the time to abandon yourself completely and obediently into God’s hands. There is a story about a beggar meeting Alexander the Great and asking him for alms. Alexander stopped and instructed that the man be given the government of five cities. The beggar, totally confused and taken aback, exclaimed: “I didn’t ask for that much.” And Alexander replied: “You asked like the man you are: I give like the man I am.”

Even in moments when we see our limitations clearly, we can and

should look at God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and realize that we share in God's own life. There is never reason to look back.[33] God is at our side. We have to be faithful and loyal; we have to face up to our obligations and we will find in Jesus the love and the stimulus we need to understand other people's faults and overcome our own. In this way even depression—yours, mine, anyone's—can also be a pillar for the kingdom of Christ.

Let us recognize our infirmity but confess the power of God. The Christian life has to be imbued with optimism, joy and the strong conviction that our Lord wishes to make use of us. If we feel part of the Church, if we see ourselves sustained by the rock of Peter and by the action of the Holy Spirit, we will decide to fulfil the little duty of every moment. We will sow a little each day, and the granaries will overflow.

We must finish these minutes of prayer. Savouring in the intimacy of your soul the infinite goodness of God, realize that Christ is going to make himself really present in the host, with his Body, his Blood, his Soul and his Divinity. Adore him reverently, devoutly; renew in his presence the sincere offerings of your love. Don't be afraid to tell him that you love him. Thank him for giving you this daily proof of his tender mercy, and encourage yourself to go to communion in a spirit of trust. I am awed by this mystery of Love. Here is the Lord seeking to use my heart as a throne, committed never to leave me, provided I don't run away.

Comforted by Christ's presence and nourished by his Body, we will be faithful during our life on earth and then we will be victors with Jesus and his Mother in heaven. "O death, where is your victory? O death,

where is your sting?... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”[34]

[1] Mt 13:3-8

[2] 1 Cor 12:27: *Vos estis corpus Christi et membra de membro*

[3] John 13:1

[4] 1 Cor 11:23-25

[5] Sequence *Lauda Sion*

[6] *ibid*

[7] *ibid*

[8] *ibid*

[9] St Augustine, *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus*, 26,20 (PL 35,1616)

[10] Hymn *Sacris solemnibus*

[11] John 15:5

[12] Acts 2:42

[13] *In Matthaeum homiliae*, 82,1 (PG 58,700)

[14] Rom 12:2: *in novitate sensus*

[15] 2 Cor 2:15: *bonus odor Christi*

[16] John 12:32

[17] Cf John 12:24

[18] 1 Cor 10:17

[19] Eph 2:14

[20] Cf John 14:6

[21] John 17:23

[22] Gal 6:2

[23] Cf Col 3:14; Rom 13:10

[24] Mt 9:38

[25] Mt 20:12

[26] Joel 1:10-11

[27] Prov 12:11

[28] Cf Mark 4:8

[29] Mark 1:17

[30] Luke 5:4: *Duc in altum et laxate retia vestra in capturam*

[31] 1 Cor 3:4-6

[32] Eph 1:4

[33] Cf Luke 9:62

[34] 1 Cor 15:55.57

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