

A SERMON FOR THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI

PREACHED BY S. THOMAS AQUINAS

BEFORE A PAPAL CONSISTORY

The glad commemoration of the feast which is kept to-day, Very Reverend Fathers, urges us to continue rejoicing in the praises of the most holy Body of Christ. For what is more sweet, what more delightful to the hearts of the elect, than to proclaim the depth of divine charity and to praise the fires of abounding love? By the hands of his priests, at the table of the New Covenant, he offers unceasingly his flesh for food and his precious blood for drink, to his sons, the heirs of the kingdom which God has promised to those who love him.

These works are thine, O Christ of immense power and overflowing goodness, who in this most sacred and supersubstantial bread hast devised a truly adorable and wonderful traffic, a memorial of former wonders; so that they who by eating of the forbidden tree fell sick and lost the unfading crown of eternal glory, may find a cure by feeding on the spotless and undefiled Lamb, Jesus Christ.

O ceaseless outpouring of divine goodness and most generous compassion, wonderful in our eyes and worthy of all praise, in which is set forth among us in this sacrament the fulfilment of all sacrifice until the end of time; by which the sons of adoption are refreshed with the bread of angels and made drunk with the charity of the sons of God!

O singular lowliness! pleasing unto God and proclaimed by him, which dreads no one's dwelling nor fears the shelter offered by any man's belly. This is purity, clear as light itself, beyond reach of all pollution or the touch of any vile uncleanness, which drives away all foulness from the soul. True food of the blessed, ever refreshing us on earth yet always undiminished in itself; not broken, not divided, not consumed but continuing whole and entire, bringing before us in this sacrament the vision of the burning bush⁽¹⁾ and the marvellously maintained supply of oil and meal!⁽²⁾

Wonderful sacrament in which God is hid, in which the new Moses conceals his face with the mantle of his works⁽³⁾, to be worshipped from age to age! In which by the power of words, supported by the divine action, the sacramental forms are changed into flesh and blood; in which the accidents subsist without a subject, and in which without breach of nature's law and by virtue of the consecration, Christ, one and entire in many places,

(1) Exodus iii. (2) 3 Kings xvii. (3) Exodus xxxiv, 29-35.

like a voice, existing in himself, unvarying and immutable, unaffected and undiminished by participation, presents himself whole and perfect in every part of the host, as a mirror reflects both in its entirety and in its parts.

Although he truly exists under each he is fittingly offered by the faithful under both species, so that he may bestow salvation upon both elements of man, body and soul, and recall to mind the bitterness of the twofold Passion.

Viaticum of our pilgrimage, leading wayfarers to the mount of holiness! O living bread born in heaven, leavened in the Virgin's womb, baked on the gallows of the Cross, set up on the altar, hidden under the species, establish my heart in good and set it in the right way! Make glad my soul, and purify my thoughts! This is indeed the true bread, eaten and not consumed, scattered yet not wasted, changing and unchanged, which restores without loss to itself, which makes perfect unto salvation, gives life, imparts grace, forgives sin and cripples evil desire. This is the food of souls, food of the faithful which enlightens the mind, kindles our affection, destroys faults and uplifts the desire of our hearts.

Cup of all sweetness, to be drained by the devout! O burning chalice, seal of the testament in Christ's blood, purge out the old leaven and fill up our souls that we may be a new paste, feasting on the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.⁽⁴⁾

This is indeed the litter of Solomon⁽⁵⁾, the supper-room of consolation, the seasoning of present tribulation, sustenance of delight and the bread which is the earnest of everlasting joy; the tinder of unity, the nourishment of virtue, food of sweetness and seal of holiness! Does not the smallness of the host signify humility, its roundness obedience, and its thinness frugality? Does not whiteness stand for purity, lack of leaven for loving kindness, its baking for patience and charity, its division for prudence, the perceiving of it for permanence, the circle for our last end?

Unleavened bread which fattens us, hiding-place of highest might! For under these visible forms and this slight matter are contained things wonderful and exceeding great. The body and soul are here and, inseparable from each, the divine substance, whose wonderful works, given faith, are made known in this singular sacrament, Good Jesus!

The accidents alone remain after consecration; the sacrament which is taken is not changed, not diminished, not increased, is received by all in its entirety, as much by one as by a thousand, as much by a thousand as by one; it is wholly present on many altars, in many communicants, and in broken particles; its con-

(4) 1 Cor. v, 7, 8. (5) Canticle iii, 9.

sumption is the true receiving of thy flesh and the true drinking of thy blood. Thou art both priest and victim, and the company of the holy angels is at hand, who praise thy great splendour and proclaim thy overwhelming majesty. This power is thine, O Lord, who alone dost wonderful things surpassing sense and understanding, intelligence, reason and imagination, who instituted this sacrament full of wonders and committed it to thy disciples.

O indescribable efficacy of the sacrament which sets our affection alight with the fire of charity, and sprinkles the blood of the immaculate Lamb upon the lintels and upon the doorposts of our house!⁽⁶⁾

This is in truth provision for our stormy exile, the support of travellers, courage of the weak, medicine of the sick, the increase of virtues; the abundance of grace and the purgation of vices, refreshment of souls, life to the feeble; a knitting together of members in the body of charity. O ineffable sacrament of faith, increase of charity, bearer of hope, strong buttress of the Church, kindling of souls, and perfection of the mystical body! Here, Lord Jesus, is the figure of the tree of life!

Thou art shepherd and pasture, priest and sacrifice, food and drink of the elect; the living bread and food of souls, cure of our daily sickness; food of sweetness and nurture of new life. This is the sacrifice of praise and righteousness, the holocaust of the new covenant, a good feast, not of fowls and bulls, but of fat things full of marrow, of wine purified from the lees⁽⁷⁾, with which friends are refreshed and the blessed are made drunk.

O table full of blessing, table of proposition⁽⁸⁾, heaped high with fatness! Table unmeasurable, full of tremendous wonders, sweet above all sweetness, more delightful than all fatness, more fragrant than any scent, more gracious than all comeliness! Most desirable of foods, which Christ served to his comrades and chosen guests, which the father showed to the son returning after the eating of the Paschal Lamb.

This is our Pasch in which Christ is immolated, and which effects the passage from vice to virtue⁽⁹⁾ and brings about the freedom of those who are Hebrews in the spirit.⁽¹⁰⁾

Food which satisfies, which is not unclean, which requires the mastication of faith, the seasoning of devotion and the union of charity, divided not with bodily teeth but with the articles of faith.

Therefore approach not this dread table without due reverence and warmth of love, or without real contrition and calling to mind of the Redemption. For the Lamb without spot, untouched and unpolluted by sin, is eaten in the unleavened bread. The

(6) Exodus xii. (7) Isaiah xxv, 6. (8) Exodus xxv, 30; 1 Kings xxi. (9) Exodus xiv. (10) Galatians iii.

washing of confession must not be lacking to him who approaches, nor the foundation-stone which is faith, nor the fire of charity, the vinegar of suffering, the testing of temptation. Draw near to the Lord's Supper, to the table full of fatness, charged with power, so that you may arrive at last at the marriage of the true lamb, at which we shall be inebriated with the plenty of God's house, and shall see the king of glory and the Lord of Hosts in his beauty, and taste bread in the kingdom of the Father, our assurance being the Lord Jesus Christ whose power and rule continue without end, for ever and ever. Amen.

Translator's Note.—There are very great differences in the texts of this sermon available in printed editions. This translation is based on an arrangement of those of P. Mandonnet (Paris, 1927), and Vives (Paris, 1879). Both P. Mandonnet and Mgr. Grabmann consider that there is no reason to deny St. Thomas's authorship. But it should be noted that there is a striking difference in style between this and other sermons attributed to St. Thomas.
A.D.

FROM S. AUGUSTINE

“ De ipsis tribulationibus murmurās, et dicis ‘ Ecce pereunt omnia christianis temporibus.’ Quid strepis? Non hoc promisit mihi Deus, quod ista non peribunt: non hoc mihi promisit Christus. Aeterna promisit aeternus: si credidero, ex mortali fiam aeternus. Quid strepis?”—*Sermo CV.* 6.

Dost thou complain?
Lament these latter years—bitterly say,
“ Our visions all are vain,
The Christian towns and temples pass away,
All our works fail, the darkness comes again.”
Dost thou complain?
But mundane permanence was promised—when?
Not this Lord Christ foretold,
God's plan not so unrolled;
Here no abiding home He gives to men:
The perishable must perish, only He
Th' Eternal lifts us to Eternity.

JOHN SEARLE.