

Homily for Feast of Corpus Christi

Amnesia's Antidote; Anamnesis

Homily for June 18-19 2022

In order to become proficient, be it at singing, acting, playing an instrument, playing a sport or writing an exam, repetition is the key. Without this kind of constant remembering, we will not be able to accurately and adequately sing the lines, play the game or answer the exam questions to the best of our ability.

On this day when we are celebrating the Feast of *Corpus Christi*, we are invited to think about the importance of repetition in our living out of the Christian life. Today we hear in the epistle reading from 1st Corinthians 11 how the repeated partaking of the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is at the very heart of our Catholic Faith.

Listen again to the words of the Blessed Apostle St. Paul and pay close attention to how the theme of repetition is the key to interpreting this text:

23 For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Twice in the Words of Institution St. Paul quotes our Lord's famous phrase "Do this in remembrance of me" He then concludes by stating that as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim the Lord's death.

Now hold on to these words of a minute while I speak about another word in this passage. At verse 23, Paul says "I received from the Lord what I delivered to you".

The English word "received" does not really capture the power of the original Greek word used here. A more literal translation would be: "I seized from the Lord". Paul so wants to emphasize the importance of the "Words of Institution" that he adds a prefix to the normal word used for receive, and so gives it more emphasis.

I have a little Bichon Frieze at home who loves a treat called "Greenies". Every evening, he sits by the cupboard where they are kept, and whines until I get up from my desk and give him one. Yogi does not just receive the greenies, he seizes it from me.

St. Paul is like this little 8 kilo fluff ball in that he seizes the Eucharist in a way similar to Yogi's reception of his treats. The Apostle never tires of the words of institution because of what they imply.

There is a seven year old girl at St. Peter's who received her first Communion this spring. She also attends a school where she attends Mass weekly. Soon after her First Communion she said to her mother: "Mommy, I am so happy, I get to receive Jesus on Sunday and then again on Friday. He tastes so delicious"! There is a girl who grasps the meaning of St. Paul's words from 1 Corinthians

Now notice something else about the words "I received from the Lord what I delivered to you". Observe how these words describe a priestly action. The priest receives from the Lord the authority to consecrate the bread and wine so they become the body and blood, soul and divinity of Christ. In turn he then delivers them to the people. And why does he receive and then distribute the sacred host and precious blood? It is so we can do this in remembrance of the Passion of Our Lord. It is here that we come to understand why repetition is so important.

Jesus did not give us just words to remember, he gave us an action in which to participate. This action is called the Mass. If you had been alive at the time when Paul was writing 1 Corinthians and had asked him the question: "Paul, what is the New Testament?" Do you know what his answer would be? For him, it would not be the volume comprised of the Gospels, Acts, Epistles and Revelation. No, it would be the Mass. For Jesus calls the Eucharist the New Covenant in my blood. Covenant is another word for Testament. So while the book we call the New Testament is of great importance to us as Christians and is read daily at Mass, it is the Mass that has priority of place. It is in the Mass that we remember and repeat Jesus' actions so that we in turn become like the one whose body and blood we consume.

And, this is what the Feast of Corpus Christi is all about. It is the yearly celebration when we affirm that the daily action of the Mass is the way the Lord has provided for us so as to truly remember him so that we may become like him.

The Greek word used for remembrance" is" **anamnesis.**" Let me say that word again: "**anamnesis**". Now if you take off the first two letters "an" we are left with the word "amnesis" which is the root word for the English word amnesia. So here is the point of everything I am saying this morning. When we neglect the Mass or treat the Mass with a kind of apathy and carelessness we will suffer from spiritual amnesia. However, when we understand that the Mass is given to us so that we can repeatedly partake of Christ, then in turn we will become more like him who is at the Centre of the Mass "Corpus Christi".

I have a story that illustrates this very well.

In his book, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, the famous neurologist Oliver Sacks tells the story of Jimmie, a former sailor, now a patient in a nursing home, whose severe neurological disorder had left him with a profound and permanent amnesia. He simply had no memory of anything. Having no ability to retrieve the past and no ability to construct a meaningful present, Jimmie lacked the continuity that makes for a sense of the self. He was, wrote Sacks, a person who "wore a look of infinite sadness and resignation."

However, when Sacks asked the Sisters who ran the nursing home whether Jimmie had lost his soul, the Sisters were outraged by the question. "Watch Jimmie in chapel," they said, "and judge for yourself."

So Sacks did watch Jimmie in chapel, and there he observed an astounding transformation. He saw an intensity and steadiness in Jimmie that he had not observed before. As he received the Eucharist there was "perfect alignment of his spirit with the spirit of the Mass." There in worship, Jimmie was no longer at the mercy of a faulty and fallible memory. "He was wholly held, absorbed" He whose mind was broken was given in worship, "a continuity and unity so seamless it could not permit any break."

Jimmie in his own way is like all of us. In the final analysis, none of us is able to construct a self. We must all be given a story and a continuity not of our own making. Where we have no faithful memory, God remembers, and by the grace of God, the Spirit whispers the lyrics of the saving gospel in our ears.

The place where this happens most comprehensively is at the Mass. For here Jesus truly remembers us so that we in turn can remember who we are, people with eternal souls who in the repeating of the Eucharistic action remember who we really are.

St. Gianna Molla expressed simply and beautifully who we are when she said:

Our body is a cenacle, a monstrance; through its crystal the world should see God.

It really is simple. As we eat "Corpus Christi", the Body of Christ, in turn we become more fully "Corpus Christi", the Body of Christ by how we live our lives.

To be a monstrance in which Jesus lives and so by our lives is glorified.

Yes, repetition is the key to developing and maturing be it for a musical, sport or exam. In a special way the repetition most important is the one whereby as we take and eat the body and take and drink the blood of Corpus Christi we in turn become more fully like the one we eat as we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.