

FR HUGH'S HOMILY FOR THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI

In 1263 a priest from Bohemia (Czech Republic now), known unsurprisingly as Peter of Prague, was saying Mass in a church in Bolsena in the centre of Italy (then in the Papal States.) During Mass, as the consecration took place, drops of blood fell from the consecrated host onto the corporal (the piece of cloth the host and chalice sit on during Mass,) The corporal was taken from Bolsena to Orvieto, not that far away, where the Pope Urban IV was living at the time, and placed in a special spot, now a chapel decorated with scenes from the miracle and miracles performed by the consecrated host or at the Eucharist. (Well worth looking up or visiting for its frescoes, besides which Orvieto Cathedral is one of the most beautiful in Italy.)

A year later Thomas Aquinas suggested that the Pope instigate the Feast of Corpus Christi. Whatever we may think of such miracles, what was the purpose of the fuss and then the feast?

Throughout the centuries the Church has sought to explain the consecration. How is it that the bread becomes the body of Christ and the wine his blood? How can we explain this to an increasingly rational world, as Italy was becoming then and the rest of Europe would follow? In a short time the Renaissance would take off in a big way.

St. Thomas, now armed with the refound works of Aristotle, that reached Europe via the Arab world, saw in Aristotle's description of the nature of things an argument that the Church came to accept as Transubstantiation. That the physicality of an object remained the same, what we can see, while its very essence or nature had changed and was now something different. Peter of Prague was said to have doubted that validity of this, and so he experienced the miracle.

You can now go and see the 'bloody corporal' at certain times of the year in Orvieto.

From the very early Church to today we have tried to understand how Jesus is present with us at the Eucharist. What we have always known is that it is so. His promise to us at the Last Supper. (At the Reformation the Reformed (Protestant) churches rejected this in its fullness as irrational (influenced by the new era of the Enlightenment that had come with scientific development.) But the Catholic and Orthodox Churches have always believed that the wonderful mystery of what Jesus has given us, his being really present with us, the 'with us' being so important, must never be lost. In many ways the Orthodox Church was less affected by the Enlightenment. The Eastern Church has held to the power of the Spirit much more centrally than the west, and so the need to question was less.

In the West the Catholic Church has 'fought its corner' in amongst all the changes, scientific and otherwise, and battled to preserve the heart of this mystery. Jesus in his fullness being here with us. Of course even among us as Catholics, people may approach this in different ways, as we have over the ages.

In the very early Church it was not doubted and Jesus' second coming was expected soon. Later when we realised this was not to be, we saw that Jesus had given us the miracle of the Mass to be at the heart of his body, the Church, here on earth. Later came many discussions, but as Catholics, never to doubt the miracle but to find ways to explain and discuss it and share it, with others.

Today we have the explanation of Transubstantiation and others, but we can also learn from the Eastern Church, to trust in Jesus' promise in that Upper Room, and to believe in the mystery which is beyond our knowledge, but which is so understandable in faith. He is with us always, and particularly close in the Mass.