

CORPUS CHRISTI

June 10, 2012

Exodus 24:3-8

Hebrews 9:11-15

Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

Of all the saints who have written eloquently about Christ's real presence in the Eucharist, perhaps none did so more frequently or with greater fervor than St. Teresa of Avila. Here are just a couple passages from her writings, taken almost at random: In chapter 22 of her *Life* she writes:

If our nature or health doesn't allow us to think always about [our Lord's] passion, since to do so would be arduous, who will prevent us from being with Him in his risen state? We have Him so near in the Blessed Sacrament, where He is already glorified.... Behold him here without suffering, full of glory,... strengthening some, encouraging others, our companion in the most Blessed Sacrament."

And six chapters later in the same work, Teresa writes:

Sometimes [Christ] comes with such great majesty that no one could doubt but that it is the Lord Himself. Especially after we have received Communion ... He reveals Himself as so much the lord of this dwelling that it seems that the soul is completely dissolved, and it sees itself consumed in Christ."

Here, clearly, was a woman totally in love with her Savior, and yet she was honest enough and humble enough to write in another of her works that in one respect she had to be corrected about her Eucharistic piety. She had once remarked that she loved it when the Communion wafers were large, for that gave her a sense of having more fully received the sacrament. But her fellow Carmelite and sometime spiritual director John of the Cross found this attitude not only bad theology but excessively materialistic, so on one particular occasion, even though there was no shortage of hosts, he gave Teresa only half of a Communion wafer in order to draw her away from that kind of thinking.¹

Whether or not any of us would ever profit from that kind of mild rebuke, the incident does provide an occasion for us to ponder the great truth of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist as we celebrate today's feast of Corpus Christi. We may well be able to recite with considerable accuracy the Church's teaching about Christ's real sacramental presence in the elements of bread and wine, and we may well know that the this presence does not depend upon the size of the wafer, but it may be helpful—at least it is helpful to me—to consider that this sacramental kind of presence becomes another kind of presence in the very act of receiving Communion. It's no longer "sacramental" because the sacramental signs of bread and wine are no longer visible. There may be better terms, but I like to call this other kind "personal presence." What do I mean by that? Well, when in our ordinary life we are personally present to

a friend, there may arise such a feeling of oneness that a sense of distinctness somewhat fades away. This can surely happen in a religious sense as well. It was this experience of oneness that led St. Paul to write to the Galatians: “I live, no longer I, but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20). This is also what St. Aelred of Rievaulx meant in his treatise on *Spiritual Friendship* when he wrote:

Christ ... is giving himself to us as our friend for us to love, so that charm may follow upon charm, sweetness upon sweetness, and affection upon affection. And thus, friend cleaving to friend in the spirit of Christ is made with Christ but one heart and one soul, and so mounting aloft through degrees of love to friendship with Christ, he is made one spirit with him.”²

This transformation is, of course, not wrought by our own power, but we do have to be open to allowing it to take place. What I mean is similar to relationships between two human beings in our own day. If one of the two shows little or no interest in what the other says or thinks, it would be ridiculous to call their relationship one of friendship. So, too, with respect to our relationship with Christ. As we read in the Fourth Gospel, Jesus calls his followers his friends, not merely his servants, and he wants to call us to the same kind of friendship. What is thereby asked of us is a readiness to take in his words, to let them resonate in the way we live, even to the extent that other people might actually think there is something Christlike about our bearing and behavior.

However exalted such language might sound, this is the kind of *personal* presence that the *sacramental* presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine is meant to foster. I only add the very important point that this personal presence with our Lord is not to remain apart from our relationship with our fellow human beings, especially those whose lot in life has been less fortunate than ours. Many centuries ago, St. John Chrysostom made this very point about the Eucharist in one of his homilies. The section I will quote begins with some eloquent words about how eagerly we should approach the Eucharistic table, but it concludes with a very practical admonition about what the sacrament means for the conduct of our life after we have left the church. Here is what he said while still a presbyter in Antioch and not yet archbishop of Constantinople:

Through these mysteries, Christ joins himself to each one of the faithful. Those he begets [in baptism], he nourishes with his own bodily being. Since we have been counted worthy of so great an honor, we should guard against growing blasé. Have you not ever noticed how eagerly a baby seizes its mother’s breast? With the same eagerness, we ought to approach this table and ... this spiritual cup.... The mysteries set before us are not derived from any human power. The one [Christ] who acted *then*, at *that* supper, acts *now* [at ours]. The one who sanctifies and transforms [the gifts] is [Christ] himself.

This table of ours is thus the same as his, and contains nothing less. For Christ prepares *both* tables—his *and* ours. *This table is* that upper room, where [Jesus and his disciples] once gathered—and just as they left it to go to the Mount of Olives, so let us go out to [fill] the hands of the poor. (Sermon 82.4)

Yes, “let us go out to fill the hands of the poor.” There are all kinds of poverty here in our very city—material poverty, emotional poverty, educational poverty, spiritual poverty. We

cannot alleviate all of them, but each of us can do something. In the power of this sacrament, would it not be wonderful if each of us would select one particular way of doing such a deed at some point in the coming week?

Abbot James Wiseman

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¹ Victoria Lincoln, *Teresa: A Woman. A Biography of Teresa of Avila* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1984), 171.

² Aelred of Rievaulx, *Spiritual Friendship* 2:21, trans. Mary Eugenia Laker (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1977), 74-75.