

# JUNE 11, 2023: CORPUS CHRISTI



Today we celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi—a feast where we give special honor to the Body and Blood of Christ. As we enter into this celebration it might be helpful to put into perspective why such a celebration is even necessary. What insight can we gain as we focus on the great gift of himself that Christ gives us in the Eucharist.

In the early Church there was never any doubt as to whether or not one would receive the Eucharist on a weekly basis. In fact, people actually put their lives in jeopardy by doing so. In the Roman Empire, until the fourth century, it was illegal to be a Christian.

If you were caught and would not renounce Christ and sacrifice to the Roman gods, you could be tortured and put to death. A group of martyrs were asked why they gathered when they knew there was a good chance they would be caught. They said that they had no choice for they were Christians and must receive the Eucharist. Essentially they were saying that the Eucharist was who they were. This determination to receive, against all the opposition they faced, tells us how important receiving the Eucharist should be to us.

A change did begin to occur in the life of the Church around the seventh and eighth centuries; people stopped receiving the Eucharist on a regular basis. They continued going to Mass but did not come forth to receive. Within a century or two it became the norm to receive only a few times a year. The reasons this change occurred were numerous, but I believe the top two had to do with their sense of mortality and unworthiness. The average life expectancy was about half of what it is today. This means that people looked on death as a daily reality and as something quite normal. But, at the same time it made people realize how quickly they could come face to face with God. They took very seriously what Paul wrote to the Corinthians about improperly receiving the Eucharist: “A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.” (1 Cor 11:28-29)

The people of this time recognized their sinfulness—their brokenness—and determined that it was not proper for them to receive on a regular basis: they were not worthy to do so. The Church strove at this time to try and convince people that they needed to receive, and so the Easter duty was imposed—the obligation to receive at least once a year. But the people still chose to partake of the Eucharist on rare occasions. In many ways they had the same understanding of the importance of the Eucharist as the early Christians who put their lives on the line to receive the Eucharist. The Christians of this time could not bring themselves to dishonor the Eucharist by not living out the faith. They did not want to be judged by God in this way.

So, why do people now receive more regularly? The transformation began with St. Pius X who in 1910 modified the age that a person could receive first communion. Before 1910, the normal age to receive first communion was 14. Saint Pius believed that if people began receiving earlier, they would get in the habit of receiving more often—and he was correct. He also changed the age of receiving first penance, to go along with this new practice, to ensure that the person was properly disposed to receive the Eucharist.

As we examine this history, it does prompt us to think about *why* we receive and if we are properly disposed to do so. From the earliest times of our Church's history until today, the reception of holy communion was never intended to be taken lightly or for granted. We really are called to examine ourselves each time we receive. We must remember always that we do not receive the Eucharist by right, but as a gift. And equally important we must contemplate *who* it is that we receive. Paul's warning to the Corinthians is still as valid today as when he wrote it: “I write this not to dissuade people from receiving but really the exact opposite. Rather, I hope we might each sit and contemplate our lives and see if they truly conform with Christ's teachings and, if not, to recognize what needs to change and be open to God's grace to bring about that change.”

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at [fr.brian@theholyrood.org](mailto:fr.brian@theholyrood.org), or if easier please call or text me at (978) 254-0560.

Please keep me in your prayers.