

Today is the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ.

Those who for whatever reason cannot accept the Real Presence, usually misunderstand the use of the terms 'flesh' and 'blood'; many of Jesus' earliest followers misunderstood them, they took them literally, and the Gospel of John tells us that they said to one another: "This is intolerable language. Who can accept such a doctrine?" If we literally meant actual, physical flesh and blood as we know it, it *would* be intolerable – but we don't. We do not mean literal, biological flesh with skin, muscles and sinews and fatty tissue; we do not mean literal, biological blood with corpuscles and haemoglobin and anti-bodies; we do not mean biological but *sacramental* Body and Blood – sacramental in the outward form of bread and wine. We mean that Jesus is so truly and substantially present, that bread has become the sacramental *form* of his flesh and wine has become the sacramental *form* of his blood. So much so, there is no bread or wine left except to human senses; which is why in his great hymn *Adoro Te Devote*, Thomas Aquinas said the only sense we can trust when it comes to the Real Presence, the only sense that is not deceived, is our hearing. We mean Christ's *real presence*, not his 'biological' presence.

There is nothing outlandish in this, nothing outrageous or over-the-top – because anything less than the real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist would not be enough: a sacramental 'symbol' would not be enough; bread and wine which were special but remained bread and

wine would not be enough; a sign would not be enough; a representation would not be enough; a 'shared meal' – God forbid – would not be enough. All of these things put together would not be enough. If we did not possess the real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, God would be telling a lie – which is impossible.

Christianity is an incarnational religion: we believe that the divine Logos, the Word, took flesh and was born as a human being and, therefore, assumed all the joys and the ills that flesh is heir to. The Word became flesh and lived among us. Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy in particular are highly incarnational, stressing the material and the sensual with liturgical vestments, incense, statues, icons, gold and silver vessels, bells, and so on. There is a feast for the senses... and there is *meant* to be. The root and centre of this incarnational sensuality is the Real Presence: that the Lord is sacramentally present in the form of the physical matter of bread and wine.

The Real Presence of Christ overflows the physical containment of the bread and wine, because there isn't a single moment of a single hour of a single day or night where Mass is not being celebrated somewhere. There are 223,128 Catholic parishes in the world and 1.4 billion Catholics. Mass is being *perpetually* offered. In the Eucharist, the divine and the human are conjoined; the truth, light and love of God enters the world through the sacramental presence of Christ. This continuous inpouring of the divine, like a drip-feed on

a sick patient, is probably what keeps the world alive. Look at the news on television, hear it on the radio, read it in the papers: how could such a world as ours survive if it wasn't for the drip-feed of the Eucharist?

In one particular episode of *Downton Abbey*, the Earl of Grantham remarks: "There's always been something of the Johnny-Foreigner about Catholics."

This can sometimes seem to be the case with the Real Presence. To the Mediterranean peoples and southern Europeans generally, the doctrine of Christ's Body and Blood seems so obvious, so marvellous, so inevitable, that they cast rose petals before it, they bear it under cloth-of-gold canopies, they burn endless incense in its honour. In the military church in Naples, they kneel and fire a six-gun salute at the elevation of the consecrated Host. They relish the sacramental sensuality of bread and wine and they ask themselves: How can this *not* be so?

It is the cooler, more reserved, less demonstrative, folk of northern Europe – including the English – who question how a sacrament can be quite so... flamboyant. This is a lack of spiritual imagination – how can it *not* be so? Many of you have shared yourself soul *and* body with another person. In the Eucharist, Christ the Lord does exactly this and the love you have for that other person is a reflection of the love that God in Christ has for us.