

ON THE HISTORY OF THE SOLEMNITY OF THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

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The solemnity of The Body and Blood of Christ is an important liturgical solemnity and manifestation of public reverence for the sacramental Saviour. On this day adorations are held, believers are being invited to deepen their Eucharistic devotion by the means of theoforical processions. Often the Eucharistic congress is held in the week in which this solemnity is celebrated on and so on. From the part of several priest there arose the request to clarify the history and the liturgical development of this feast in the concise form. This is the goal of this short study.

In the medieval temporales this feast did not have its own specific name. In the bull of the Pope Urban IV from 1264 it was described as *memorials sacramentum in cotidianis missarum sollemnior, festum sanctissimi Corporis Domini nostri Jesu Christi*¹ The Tridentine Missal of the Pope Pius V from 1570 used the name *in festo corporis Christi*² Missale Romanum from 1970 as well as its editio typica tertia use the name *Sollemnitas Sanctissimi corporis et sanguinis Christi*. How did this liturgical solemnity come into existence? Its roots can be seen in the early medieval devotion to the Eucharist but the closer specification of the feast came after the visions of the religious nun Juliana from Luttych in 1209. In one of her visions when she saw half-circle of moon in the full moon whereas one dark place in it meant the missing of a special feast for the devotion to the Eucharist. In 1247 bishop Robert of Luttych established a special feast of the Eucharist in his diocese. Later in Germany it was also promoted by

¹ Cf. the letter of the Pope Urban IV dated on September 8th, 1264 to Eve from Luttych where it was described in the similar way. To this theme: Hansjörg Auf der Maur, *Feiern im Rhythmus der Zeit I.*, Regensburg 1983, pp. 200–205.

² In some living European languages there remained the Latin name of this feast or it was slightly modified, for example *Corpus Domini* (Italy), *Corpus Christi* (England); in German: *Fronleichnam* (*Fron* or *Vron* = Lord, *Licham* or *Lichnam* = body); in French: *Fete – Dieu*; similarly in the Schwab and Allemande area: *Herrgottstag* (The Lord's Day, *Users Hergottstag* (Our Lord's Day), *der liebe Herrgottstag* (Nice day of our Lord), in Dutch: *Sacramentsdag* (The Day of the Sacrament). In Swiss cantons Nidwalden and Obwalden it is called *Appllistag* or in Bavaria and Tyrol *Entlasstag* (The Day of Indulgences).

Hugo from St. Cher in 1252 and Peter Capocius. In 1265 the Pope Urban IV by the bull *Transiturus de hoc mundo* established (pressured by the hermit Eve from Luttych and on the basis of Eucharistic miracle in Bolzano) the feast of the Christ' body with its proper officium and formulary for the whole Church³ The date of this solemnity was fixed on Thursday after the feast of the Most Holy Trinity. In the decision making which day of the week should be taken for the feast, the Holy Thursday, the day of the establishing of the Eucharist was taken into account⁴ After the publication of the collection of papal decisions in the period of the Pope John XXII in 1317 this solemnity was rapidly spread into the dioceses and monasteries of the Christian West.

On the development of the theoforical procession With the Sacrament

A typical element of the solemnity of The Body and Blood of Christ is the theoforical procession with the Most Holy Sacrament even though it is not mentioned neither in the old documents of Luttych, nor in the bull of Urban IV Its existence can be proved in Cologne (St. Geren, 1277) and in Benediktbeuren (in 1286). During the 14th century this procession spread rapidly into almost all the cities of Europe and it was implemented according to the local customs. Only in *Caeremoniale episcoporum* from 1600 and in *Rituale Romanum* from 1614 the procession was integrated in the official Roman books and it became the typical element. During history various forms of processions for this solemnity developed. The simplest one was the procession in the form of pious walking with singing during which the Most Holy Sacrament was carried and at the end there was a sacramental blessing. From the 15th century on the rogation processions into the fields were merging with this procession in which the crowd

³ As a whole this formulary was found in the sources from the 14th century (for example *Ordo of Strassburg*, 1315–1318), from the 13th century there were preserved only its fragements. It is not sure whether all the texts were compiled by St. Thomas Aquinas (but it was mentioned at one chapter of the Dominicans in Barcelona by *Bartolomeo of Lucca* in *Historia ecclesiastica nova* from 1312/17) but it is very probable. The original officium in the diocese of Luttych that was compiled by *Johannes of Comillon* (13th century) was replaced by the officium of St. Thomas. The mass formulary uses the readings from 1 Co 11:23-20 and John 6:56-59, the prayers were compiled by St. Thomas Aquinas, the preface was taken from the Christmas period. The texts of the Mass songs came from other feasts (introit from the Pentecostal Monday, graduals from the Thursday of the 3rd week in Lenten period); alleluia and communió were compiled according to the Gospel of St. John 6:56 ff. *The Sequence Lauda Sion Salvatorem* was written by St. Thomas Aquinas and it was preserved in various versions. Its unified text is found in *Missale Romanum* from 1570.

⁴ The Pope Urban IV ordered to celebrate the octave of this feast as well. This octave was abolished after the reform of the calendar in 1965.

stopped in four world sites (*statio*) and then a priest gave blessing, pleading for good weather and harvest. Closely related is the custom of reading the beginning of each of the four gospels at each of these stops which is preserved nowadays as well when the beginnings of the four gospels are read at each stop and then the sacramental blessing follows. Theoforical processions quickly took their form thanks to their solemnity and various additions⁵ Besides the monstrance with the Sacrament there were carried also relics, pictures of saints, flags and so on⁶ After the Council of Trent (1545–1563) these processions got even more solemn, triumphalistic character of the public Eucharistic cult that reached its climax in Baroque. We can mention some special forms of procession such as the custom of the indulgence horse drive in the valley of Brixen in Austria known since 1648, the procession on the lake in Hallstatt and Traunkirchen with the blessing, the procession on ships⁷, 12-hour procession with the Sacrament since 1590 and so on. We can mention such peculiarities during the procession of The Body and Blood of Christ as the custom to fire salutary salvos at the elevation of the Sacrament, “piercing of a dragon” in the city of Furth in Germany, searching for “Angelic Mary” in St. Englmar.

Richness of the mass texts of the solemnity

The Mass liturgical texts of the solemnity of The Body and Blood of Christ under the influence of St. Thomas Aquinas draw from the theologically deep thoughts. In their centre there is the aspect of the Eucharistic bread (introit, alleluia, gospel, prayer after communion), the character of memory (opening prayer and the communion song) and the message on the establishing of the Sacrament of Eucharist (second reading – epistle). The preface is a Christmas one in its appearance; it perceives the Eucharist as

⁵ Out of these processions emerged the plays for the feast of Corpus Christi as well. These living scenes stood at various stops and showed a short dramatisation with Bible motives. So during the procession the viewers saw the whole series of short stories, sometimes they were occasionally connected to one theme. The oldest preserved play on the feast of Corpus Christi is *Ludus de corpore Christi* from Innsbruck (1391), in English speaking world it is *Corpus Dominis Playes* from the 14th century. Most plays came into existence since the half of the 15th century. In the second half of the 16th century these plays became autonomous and they were presented independently on the processions on other days. The most famous plays on the feast of Corpus Christi are *Autos sacramentales* from Pietro Calderon de la Barca that arose in 1634–1681 and 74 of them are preserved.

⁶ In the 14th century there appeared so called living pictures, i.e. the whole groups of actors presenting excerpts from the Passion or from the life of Christ or from the Old Testament.

⁷ The procession on ships is documented since 1623.

a new incarnation. The sequence in its middle part (verse 10–20) presents a doctrinal poem where the dogmatic fact of the transformation and the presence of Christ under both Eucharistic species is expressed. The period after the Council of Trent further strengthened and highlighted the theology of this feast. The solemnity of The Body and Blood of Christ which is ranked among the so-called *purpose-made feasts* nowadays became the demonstration of the Tridentine teaching on the Eucharist (sometimes targeted against the Protestants) and the solemnity of the manifestation of the Catholic faith. It must be observed that this solemnity was accepted by ordinary believers more on the basis of popularity of processions than on the basis of published decrees. On the other hand we must not overlook that this solemnity had a strong importance right in the period of the Middle Ages and the Baroque because it placed the Eucharist properly into the centre of liturgical and general celebrations⁸

The contemporary development

At present we must be careful that this solemnity would not become some folklore event, because the solemnity understood in that way would transfer the liturgy of the celebration into the area of protection of historical monuments and folklore traditions.

It is praiseworthy that there are held theoforical processions, Eucharistic congresses and liturgically valuable celebrations of this solemnity that has its own deep spiritual symbolism.

It expressed the greatest mystery and truth of faith – Christ comes into the bread and wine which after the transubstantiation became his body and blood. Let always sound in us the solid faith in strength of the Eucharist which can do impossible things, changes apparently unsolvable things and gives true meaning to Christian life.

⁸ Hansjörg Auf der Maur, *Feiern im Rhythmus der Zeit I.*, Regensburg 1983, pp. 199–207.