



Walking in the Light of the Resurrection: The Corpus Christi Procession

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While the origins of many of our feasts and solemnities have been obscured, or even lost, in the passing of many centuries, Corpus Christi is different. The origins of this feast can be traced to the year 1209, when St. Juliana of Liège, a nun in a quiet Augustinian convent in France, had a vision of a full moon, with one dark spot. The full moon represented the Church's liturgical year; the dark spot, a missing feast honoring the sacrament of Christ's Body.

At about the same time, there was a groundswell of Eucharistic devotion all over Europe, including the first recorded instance of the priest elevating the consecrated host during the Mass, which happened in Paris in 1220. It took time, but Church leaders listened to Juliana: in 1246, the Bishop of Liège introduced a local feast in honor of the Blessed Sacrament, and in 1261, a former archdeacon of Liège became Pope Urban IV and brought St. Juliana's vision to the universal Church. He enlisted the help of St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest theologians of the Eucharist, who composed prayers and splendid hymns for the feast. By the fourteenth century, the Eucharistic procession had become an important part of the observance of Corpus Christi.

But why a procession? What does it mean? In recent years, Pope Benedict XVI has spoken eloquently about the meaning of the procession for contemporary Catholics in his homilies for the feast. The procession is a profession of faith: the Solemnity of Corpus Christi developed at a time when Catholics were both affirming and defining their faith "in Jesus Christ, alive and truly present in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist,"¹ and the procession is a public statement of that belief. But there is more. Benedict's statements emphasize the link with another Eucharistic procession—that of the Holy Thursday Evening Mass of the Lord's Supper, when the Blessed Sacrament is borne from the main altar to the altar of repose. On Corpus Christi, "the church relives the mystery of Holy Thursday in the light of the Resurrection."² No longer walking with Jesus to the garden of Gethsemane, now we are following the risen Lord who "goes ahead . . . to Galilee" (Matthew 28:7). Thus the procession with the Blessed Sacrament has an evangelizing movement, taking the Gospel to the world in obedience to Christ's great commission.

At the same time, though, the procession is not just for Catholics: the mystery of the Eucharist is for everyone. The sacrament of the Lord's Body and Blood always "goes above and beyond the walls of our churches."³ Christ gives himself for us, but not *just* for us. The procession is a tangible realization of this, for as we go beyond our church walls, "we walk with the Risen One in his journey to meet the entire world."⁴ The procession blurs the separation between what we do inside the church,

A crossbearer leads the procession. At St. James Cathedral, Seattle, Washington, the thurifer and candleholders, who immediately precede the priest or celebrant carrying the Blessed Sacrament, are placed in the middle of the procession.



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and what we do outside: we "immerse [Christ], so to speak, in the daily routine of our lives, so that he may walk where we walk and live where we live."⁵

As we move from inside to outside, we must also move from an "insider mentality" to an awareness that Christ is for everyone. "The procession represents an immense and public blessing for our city."⁶ To process is to go forward, and thus the procession speaks of the possibility of change, of transformation in Christ, for ourselves, our Church, our world: "with the gift of himself in the Eucharist the Lord Jesus sets us free from our 'paralyses,' he helps us up and enables us to 'proceed,' that is, he makes us take a step ahead and then another step."⁷

The Eucharistic procession helps us recognize who we are as a Catholic community, and points us toward solidarity with others: "Those who recognize Jesus in the sacred Host, recognize him in their suffering brother or sister."⁸ Walking with Jesus in this procession, we can see ourselves as members of his Body, but we can also look at the world through the loving eyes of Jesus Christ.

PREPARING THE PROCESSION

The liturgical books offer surprisingly little guidance on how the procession should be carried out. *The Roman Missal* speaks of the importance of the procession, but offers few details: "It is desirable that a procession take place after the Mass in which the Host to be carried in the procession is consecrated. . . . If a procession takes place after Mass, when the Communion of the faithful is over, the monstrance in which the consecrated host has been placed is set on the altar. When the Prayer after Communion has been said, the Concluding Rites are omitted and the procession forms." This is useful information, of course, but a few things are missing: how to organize the procession, where to go, and what to do when you get there! As Adolf Adam observes, "Rome does not regard the Corpus Christi procession as a liturgical act falling under Roman law and its sole supervision, but as

one of the *pia exercitia* (exercises of devotion) that come under the bishop's supervision."⁹

Fortunately, the *Ceremonial of Bishops* (CB) fills in a few of the blanks. If the procession follows immediately upon the end of Mass, the celebrant can wear the chasuble or a cope—if a lengthy period of adoration has intervened, then the cope is the proper vesture (see 390). Following the Prayer after Communion, the celebrant adds incense to the thurible, then goes to the altar, kneels, and incenses the Blessed Sacrament. Then he receives the humeral veil and picks up the monstrance. The *Ceremonial* indicates the order for the procession—the cross-bearer, accompanied by candlebearers, leads the way, but the thurifer does not walk in front of the cross as usual; rather, as on Holy Thursday, two thurifers come immediately before the bishop (or priest) carrying the Blessed Sacrament. A baldachin (canopy) may be carried over the priest if desired. The *Ceremonial* also notes that “all carry candles, and torchbearers escort the blessed sacrament” (CB, 391).

One significant element is missing from this description of the procession: the faithful! The *Ceremonial* simply states, “the procession should be arranged in accordance with local custom in regard to the decoration of the streets and the order to be followed by the faithful who take part” (392). Thus, there is room for—in fact, need for—a fair amount of creativity in arranging the procession. The makeup of your parish community, the location of your church, and even the layout of the sanctuary will all have an impact on how the procession happens in your community. One thing is certain—the procession can happen in just about any community, large or small, urban or rural.

ADVANCE PREPARATIONS

Begin with catechesis. Even if you have done the procession for years—perhaps especially if you have “always” done it—provide some background on the origin and meaning of the solemnity in the bulletin or in homilies in the weeks preceding the Corpus Christi celebration. We cannot reiterate too many times what the procession is about, because, as the passages quoted above from Pope Benedict's homilies reflect, it has many dimensions. It is about faith in the Real Presence; it is about service of others; it is about who we are as Catholics; it is about Christ meeting the whole world. Provide clear communication on practical matters as well. Tell people in advance when the procession will occur, where it will go, and (for some the most important detail of all) how long it will take. Help people to know that their presence and participation matter.

Encourage parish councils and ministries to participate as groups. In the Middle Ages, the various guilds—from shipwrights and bookbinders to butchers, bakers, and candlestick makers—all took part, often wearing their distinctive garb. Our society is obviously quite different, but we can echo this aspect of the procession by thinking about the groups in the parish who could be encouraged to participate together: for instance, the children who have made their first Holy Communion (wearing



Multiple music groups, including children's choirs, spaced throughout the procession help to carry the singing.

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their finery again), candidates for Confirmation (perhaps wearing red), neophytes baptized at the Easter Vigil or catechumens and candidates in the ongoing process of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, social outreach volunteers, Catholic school children in uniform, Knights of Columbus, Catholic Daughters of America, catechists, liturgical ministers—the list can go on. The procession is, of course, for the entire assembly, and should not be thought of as a series of special groups—but inviting such groups to join in can foster participation in the procession. Space these groups throughout the procession, not all in one place. In this way, their presence can help to give shape to the procession.

LOGISTICS

Where does the procession go? How long should it be? Here again, the *Ceremonial of Bishops* offers some recommendations but no hard-and-fast guidelines: “There may be stations where eucharistic benediction is given, if there is such a custom and some pastoral advantage recommends it. . . . It is fitting that the procession go from one church to another. But, when local circumstances require, the procession may return to the church where it began” (392–393). The *Ceremonial* specifies only that “At the end of the procession, eucharistic benediction is given in the church where the procession ends or in some other suitable place” (CB, 394). The Corpus Christi procession is definitely not a “one-size-fits-all” devotion. Inner-city parishes may be able to walk to another nearby church or chapel. In more suburban settings, the route might make a loop, moving around the block or around several blocks, and ending back at the church or in an outdoor gathering area.

If you have not done the procession before, keep it short and simple. The procession does not need to be miles long (or even many blocks) to be profoundly meaningful. Evaluate the route each year. Does it speak to the full meaning of this public statement of faith? Or does it “play it safe,” perhaps staying too close to home? We might consider the words of Pope Francis:

“Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. . . . I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security.”¹⁰ These words should encourage us to be adventurous as we bring the blessing of Christ’s Eucharistic presence out onto the streets where we live. Before you decide, be sure to investigate and follow the requirements for public gatherings in your area. Your local police precinct should be able to point you in the right direction.

ORDER AND MOVEMENT

As we have seen, the ritual books provide no specifics when it comes to the place of the faithful in the procession. In my parish, we place the Blessed Sacrament group—thurifers, candlebearers, canopybearers, priest with Blessed Sacrament, and concelebrants—at the center of the procession, with about half of the assembly going out ahead of the Blessed Sacrament, and about half following. Ministry groups lead each section of the assembly.

Pacing the procession can be a challenge. With very long processions, a sharp turn, a step down or up, or any small distraction can create gaps which can make a procession not feel like a procession. Make sure the route is fairly level and accessible to all. The leaders (the cross and candlebearers, perhaps escorted by someone specifically designated to know the route and set the pace) should walk very slowly. A slow, steady pace will help the rest of the procession to stay tight and together, which in turn encourages participation in the spoken and sung responses along the way—people are less likely to participate if they are strung out in ones and twos. Another help in keeping the procession together is to have leaders with walkie-talkies or cell phones spaced through the procession, and able to communicate discreetly if problems arise. If large gaps form, the head of the procession can slow down or even stop for a few moments until the gap closes. Of course, the Corpus Christi procession cannot (and should not) proceed with the same order as the entrance procession for Christmas Midnight Mass at St. Peter’s Basilica! But careful organization helps.

SPOKEN AND SUNG PRAYER

The *Ceremonial of Bishops* recommends music and prayer during the procession: “Songs and prayers should be planned for the purpose of expressing the faith of the participants and keeping their attention centered on the Lord alone” (392). Music outdoors is a challenge at any time, and if the procession is lengthy, the distance can make it even more difficult for all to sing together. In our parish, we have certainly not mastered this art, but we have learned from experience that it works well to have multiple musical groups spaced throughout the procession. Each of these groups has the same repertoire of two or three chants which they sing confidently, not trying to stay in time with every other group in the procession, but simply encouraging the faithful who are walking nearest them to join in.

The best music for the procession is simple refrains that the community knows well. The Litany of Saints, the Litany of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, or the Litany of the Most Holy Eucharist are simple to sing and can be extended or repeated as



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Inviting members of the parish council, liturgical ministers, and others to participate as groups promotes parish participation.

needed, making them ideal for a procession. Some contemporary music can also work well, especially the chants of the Taizé community, which can be repeated over and over—“*Ubi caritas*,” “Jesus your light,” “Jesus, remember me.” You might “rehearse” one or two of these chants by using them during Communion at Mass in the weeks leading up to Corpus Christi, so that they can be sung with ease during the procession.

Certainly an option as well are spoken prayers that can be used in addition to or in alternation with singing. The Rosary or the Divine Mercy chaplet can easily be prayed from memory. If you involve different ministry groups, each group might be encouraged to designate a prayer leader, to select a prayer, and to lead those near them in prayer whenever the group is not singing. The end result will be a glad mix of song and spoken prayer.

In addition to the procession itself, and the sung and spoken prayers, there are other ways to participate. Children will be delighted to carry baskets of flower petals that they can scatter on the way, creating a “carpet” for the Blessed Sacrament when it passes. Alternately, bells or colored streamers can be used, and adults can carry flowers or banners.

Depending on the length of the procession, you may stop once or several times for Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. The order is simple: the monstrance is set down on a temporary altar; a period of adoration follows; then Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament is given, following the order laid out in the Order for the Solemn Exposition of the Holy Eucharist. Then the procession continues to the next station, where Benediction is given again, or back to the church.

The procession with the Blessed Sacrament on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ is truly a feast of faith: the procession expresses faith in the Real Presence of Christ, and shows forth his presence in the Body of Christ which is the Church. The procession does not simply reflect our faith; it also nourishes it, and gives witness to it in the world. In a wonderful way, Corpus Christi turns the liturgy inside out; instead of locking the host in the tabernacle at the end of Mass,

it is exposed in a monstrance for all to see and carried outside, bringing a blessing to us and to our world. ♦

Notes

1. Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Thursday, 7 June 2007.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070607_corpus-christi_en.html
2. Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Thursday, 26 May 2005.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050526_corpus-domini_en.html
3. Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Thursday, 26 May 2005.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050526_corpus-domini_en.html
4. Ibid.
5. Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Thursday, June 7, 2007.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20070607_corpus-christi_en.html
6. Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Thursday, May 26, 2005.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2005/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20050526_corpus-domini_en.html
7. Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Thursday, May 22, 2008.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20080522_corpus-domini_en.html
8. Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Thursday, June 23, 2011.
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20110623_corpus-domini_en.html
9. Adolf Adam, *The Liturgical Year: Its History and Its Meaning after the Reform of the Liturgy*, trans. by Matthew J. O'Connell. (New York: Pueblo, 1981), 173.
10. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 49.

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At www.PastoralLiturgy.org

Find and share this article with parish staff and the liturgy committee at the following URL:
<http://www.pastoralliturgy.org/resources/WalkingintheLightoftheResurrection.pdf>

A sample order of procession

The ritual books provide no specific instructions about the place of the faithful in the Corpus Christi procession. Here is how we at St. James Cathedral organize our procession, alternating musical groups, ministry groups, and sections of the assembly:

Cross
Candles
Young women's choir
Extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion
Outreach volunteers
Assembly
Lectors
Men of the adult choir
Assembly
Children of the faith formation programs with families
First communicants with families
Children's choirs
Bagpipes
Thurifers
Candles
Canopy bearers and priest carrying Blessed Sacrament
Candles
Women of the adult choir
Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults participants
Assembly
Confirmation candidates
Assembly
Women's chant choir
More extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion
Assembly

