

# The Real Presence: Life for the New Evangelization

To the priests, deacons, religious and all the faithful:



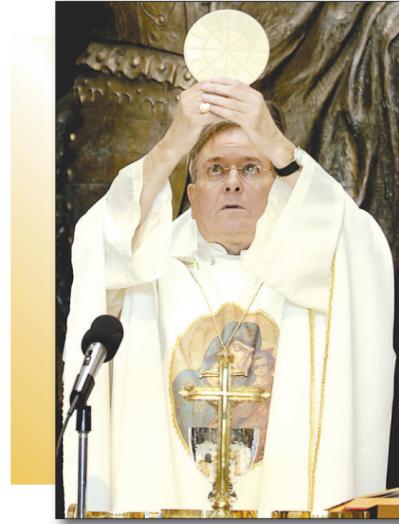
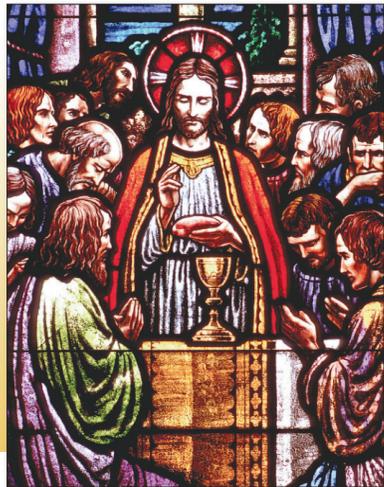
In the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, I wish to offer you some theological, historical and practical reflections on the Eucharist. The Eucharist is “the culmination of the spiritual life and the goal of all the sacraments” (*Summa Theol.*, III, q. 66, a. 6). Our rediscovery of this mystery opens us to the rich and inexhaustible gift of divine life. When we come to the Eucharist reverently and worthily, “we draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation (Is 12:3). In this mystery of the Eucharist, we are renewed and the Church herself grows. For this purpose, I offer the following pastoral instruction.

## I. History of the Feast of Corpus Christi

[1] One of the most famous churches in Italy is the Cathedral of Orvieto. The cathedral’s Gothic façade boasts of bas-reliefs and mosaic works of bright blues and gleaming golds. The Duomo (cathedral) rivals the cathedrals of both Siena and Florence. It is the earliest Italian architectural masterpiece for which a master plan is available. But its claim to fame lies elsewhere.

[2] In 1263, a priest by the name of Peter of Prague was on his way to Rome. He was a pious priest, but was experiencing some intellectual doubts about the faith. He decided to make a pilgrimage to strengthen his own vocation and to renew his belief in the mystery of the Eucharist. He stopped at Bolsena, a town 14 miles from Orvieto. While saying Mass in the Church of St. Christina, he witnessed the host which he had just consecrated bleed over his hands and onto the corporal.

[3] Somewhat taken back, he tried to hide what was happening. But, when this was



no longer possible, he stopped the Mass and went to Orvieto where Pope Urban IV was living at the time. After investigating the priest’s story, the Pope had the corporal and consecrated host brought in solemn procession from Bolsena to Orvieto and placed in the cathedral. The blood-stained corporal can still be seen there today in a large reliquary made of silver and varicolored translucent enamel.

[4] Before his election as Pope Urban IV, Jacques Pantaléon had been the Archbishop of Liege. St. Juliana, a nun of Liege, had urged him to institute a solemnity to honor the Eucharist. After approving the miracle of the host that bled at Bolsena, the Pope honored that request. He instituted the feast of Corpus Christi. He commissioned St. Thomas Aquinas to write the Mass for this feast celebrating the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

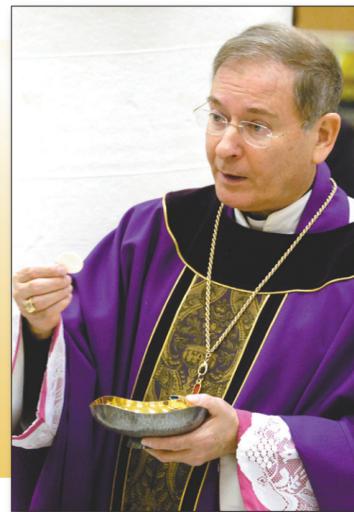
## II. Theology of the Real Presence

[5] The Church’s teaching on the Real Presence was no medieval innovation. It is firmly rooted in Sacred Scripture (cf. John 6:32 — 71; 1 Cor. 10:16 — 17; 11:23 — 29). Jesus’ words at the Last Supper, “This is my body” and “This is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed for many,” are to be taken literally (Mk 14: 22-24; cf. Mt 26: 26-28; Lk 22: 19-20). The Eucharist is Jesus, body and blood, soul and divinity. When the priest repeats those words at the consecration during Mass, Christ becomes present to us in the Eucharist. The appearances of bread and wine remain after the words of consecration at Mass. But there is no longer bread, no longer wine. It is “the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1374).

[6] From the earliest times, the Eucharist held a special place in the life of the Church. St. Ignatius, who, as a boy, had heard St. John preach and knew St. Polycarp, a disciple of St. John, said, “I have no taste for the food that perishes nor for the pleasures of this life. I want the Bread of God which is the Flesh of Christ... and for drink I desire His Blood which is love that cannot be destroyed” (*Letter to the Romans*, 7). Two centuries later, St. Ephrem the Syrian taught that even crumbs from the Eucharistic host could sanctify thousands (cf. *Homilies* 4,4).

[7] For the first 1500 years of the Church, the belief in the Eucharist as the Body and Blood of Christ was held consistently and firmly. Berengarius of Tours in the 11th century was the exception. Berengarius asserted that the Eucharist is simply a symbol of Christ’s presence among us. He said that the only change that occurs after the priest speaks the words of institution takes place in the mind of the believer. Faced with the faith of the universal Church, he eventually recanted his false teaching. For more than a millennium and a half, therefore, belief in the Real Presence was universally accepted. Only with the Protestant Reformation did there occur a loss of understanding in the Real Presence.

[8] In every Catholic Church, the central position of the altar bears witness today to the Church’s constant faith that the Eucharist is “the summit and source of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). The celebration of the Eucharist is the sacrifice of the Cross made present in our midst. It is the same sacrifice that Jesus made present proleptically at the Last Supper. So strong is the Church’s belief in the Real Presence that the Eucharist, reserved in the tabernacle, is worshipped and adored. In fact, the very positioning of the tabernacle in a place of prominence and honor gives witness to our faith that the Eucharist is Jesus truly present among us.



## III. Practical Reflections

[9] This faith in the Real Presence moves us to a certain awe and reverence when we come to church. We do not gather as at a civic assembly or social event. We are coming into the Presence of our Lord God and Savior. The silence, the choice of the proper attire (i.e. not wearing clothes suited for the gym, for sports, for the beach and not wearing clothes of an abbreviated style), even the putting aside of chewing gum: all these gestures express our deep faith in the Real Presence.

[10] Just as our exterior dress and behavior reflect our reverence for the Real Presence, so also does our interior disposition. In the liturgy of the ancient Church, before the faithful approached Holy Communion, they heard the words “*Sancta sanctis*” (i.e. holy gifts for those who have been made holy). This means that those who humbly receive Holy Communion should not be in the state of



serious sin. As St. Paul teaches, “A man should examine himself first; only then should he eat of the bread and drink of the cup...” (1 Cor 11: 28). In those cases where there is serious sin, we should first be reconciled to God and the Church through the Sacrament of Penance before receiving Holy Communion.

[11] In commenting on Holy Communion, St. John Chrysostom says, “For what is the bread? It is the body of Christ. And what do those who receive it become? The Body of Christ — not many bodies but one body. For as bread is completely one, though made up of many grains of wheat, and these, albeit unseen, remain nonetheless present, in such a way that their difference is not apparent since they have been made a perfect whole, so too are we mutually joined to one another and together united with Christ” (*In Epistolam I ad Corinthios Homiliae*, 24, 2).



[12] Thus, the reception of Holy Communion is always more than a personal act. It is a statement of one’s communion with the whole Church. This profound truth has practical consequences. Any Catholic who, in his or her personal or professional life, knowingly and obstinately rejects the Church’s defined doctrines or her definitive teaching on moral issues seriously diminishes communion with the Church and should refrain from the reception of Holy Communion (cf. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Happy are Those Who Are Called to His Supper*, pg.11). To receive Holy Communion while distancing oneself at the same time in one’s personal or professional life from defined or definitive Church teaching would be dishonest.

[13] Finally, a sure way of increasing our proper reverence for the Real Presence and a help in preparing to receive Holy Communion worthily is adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament. Adoration prolongs the Eucharistic celebration. It intensifies our union with the Lord. “And it is precisely this personal encounter with the Lord that then strengthens the social mission contained in the Eucharist, which seeks to break down not only the walls that separate the Lord and ourselves, but also and especially the walls that separate us from

one another” (Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia*, December 22, 2005).

[14] Adoration of Christ truly present among us in the Eucharist is not something peripheral to Catholic devotion. It touches the very heart of our faith. Where the Eucharist is treated with respect and deep reverence both by clergy and laity, where the Eucharist is adored and worshipped, the community grows in love; many are brought to faith; marriages become stronger; families grow closer and vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life increase. The Eucharist is truly the gift of life for the Church and the world.

[15] May the Church of Paterson, “renewed in the rediscovery of the gift and mystery of the Eucharist, extend this inexhaustible richness of life to those near and far, in the urgent work of the new evangelization” (John Paul II, November 16, 2004).

Given at the Pastoral Center of the Church of Paterson.

On the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ.

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Bishop Serratelli’s pastoral letter, “The Real Presence: Life for the New Evangelization,” is available in both English and Spanish on the diocesan Web site — [www.patersondiocese.org](http://www.patersondiocese.org).