

The Congregation of Saint Athanasius
A sermon preached by Father Bradford on The Solemnity of Corpus Christi
June 23, 2019

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It never crossed Saint Paul's mind his letters would be included one day in the Bible! He did not write a systematic theology or a catechism as a textbook of Christian belief. Paul's letters reveal his busy missionary activity. He was always a man on the go. Chapter Eleven of 1st Corinthians is a case in point. It was written to correct some abusive practices of new Christian converts in Corinth, Greece. Corinth was a very pagan and bustling seaport. The missionary was putting out fires! But what St Paul wrote to the Corinthians was so basic to what we know and believe about the Blessed Sacrament it could not help but find its way into what became the New Testament. Many other early Christians wrote letters. But St Paul's epistles give fresh association to the phrase "the cream rises to the top."

Chapter Eleven contains Paul's description of the Last Supper. His account probably predates the writing of any of the gospels. That alone makes his account important. But St Paul also gives us the actual words Our Lord Jesus used at the Last Supper. You know those words! The Church carefully remembered them over the intervening twenty-year period before Paul wrote them down. These words of Christ are remembered because from the very beginning the Church used them in the Mass. All this connects St Paul's account of the Last Supper to the very earliest Christian teaching and part of the indispensable title deeds of the Church.

For those reasons we should know what Saint Paul meant when he told the Corinthians that in receiving the Blessed Sacrament they were proclaiming the Lord's *death*. In the Eucharist we do not receive the dead body of Christ. *There is no dead body of Christ*. Fifty days and perhaps no more than one mile away from the tomb owned by Joseph of Arimathea, St Peter dared the Jewish Sanhedrin to produce the dead body of Christ. It is the *Risen Body of Christ* Which passes into us in Holy Communion. We receive the supernatural power of the Living Lord. It was always that way. On the very first Easter Day it was the Risen Lord hidden under a form not yet recognized which burned in the hearts of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

St Paul teaches that we proclaim the Lord's death because the Mass is a *sacrifice*. And a sacrifice involves the death of a victim and the application of the benefits of that death to others. In the Christian mystery we do not benefit from a dead Christ

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but *Christ dying for our sake* and pleading for our salvation to the Eternal Father. He cannot do that if He is a dead Christ. *Dead men cannot do anything!* But Christ is the Living Lord of Heaven.

Our Lord Jesus does not die again every time Mass is offered. *He died once.* But by Divine provision His once-for-all death is *made present* for our benefit. From the moment of his conversion St Paul understood this truth. On the Damascus Road the Lord Jesus said, “Saul, Saul, why dost thou persecute Me?” The Risen and Ascended Lord in Heaven could not be affected by the cruelty Saul of Tarsus was inflicting on Christians. That is *unless the Lord Jesus was also still intimately connected with believers* in His Mystical Body the Church on earth. When the convert Paul began to hear the gospel proclaimed he learned the Lord’s declaration “If you do it unto the least of these ye have done it unto Me.” And for St Paul it all fit. Christ Who once received a physical body from the Blessed Virgin Mary continues to undergo His life cycle in the Mystical Body of believers. That is why we know *when we suffer He suffers.* Christ’s dying and rising historically once-for all are by God’s provision made present for our benefit.

The Body and Blood of Christ, given and shed for you and me, still come to us in a Willing Victim. That is why St Paul says we proclaim this dying in every Holy Communion. The One we worship and adore is both Priest and Victim. He *offers* the sacrifice and He *is* the Sacrifice. And we are glad! *Eucharist* means **to give thanks**. And by feeding upon Him, taking His life into ours and being taken up into His, until he comes in glory, we proclaim the death of the Lord Who lives for ever and ever.