

Corpus Christi Homily
St. Camillus Church
June 6, 2010

One of my favorite and most memorable religious celebrations, when I was growing up in Poland, was the Corpus Christi. On a beautiful, spring morning, thousands of people would fill the church and the large surrounding area in the center of the city where I lived. You would see a priest carrying a large gold monstrance under a large ornate canopy.

Rows of little girls in their first communion dress used to strew flowers on the ground. If one could get close enough to the canopy, and the wind blew in the right direction, it was possible to smell a sweet, exquisite scent of incense. As the procession proceeded between one church and another, along the main street of the city, people would sing traditional religious hymns, which they knew by heart.

Corpus Christi was always a beautiful day; or at least that was my impression even on days when it drizzled. You see, I and other people were happy to take the Eucharist out to the streets. In Poland, the communist ideology somehow tolerated God in a private sphere. But in the society, mass media, schools, or politics, God was not welcomed.

But God could not be kept in a closet of a “me and Jesus” religion. Our God is the God of creation, the God of history. The factory workers knew it. Their hearts desired to bring Christ into their cities, where they lived and worked.

In retrospect those beautiful processions helped me to develop a stronger intuition that the ordinary world I lived had a deeper dimension – beyond what eyes could see – that it was somehow sacred and holy. I’d get a similar inkling whenever I admire a sunset, look down from the top of a mountain, or look up at the night sky filled with stars. At those moments, the veil separating the ordinary and the sacred would seem to partially disappear. One could catch a glimpse of the world as the enchanted paradise.

The strong sense of the sacred intermingling with the ordinary was quite common among the peasants in the medieval Europe. During the Corpus Christi procession, they would decorate the little altars placed along the way with twigs.

After the procession, they would take those blessed twigs with them. They would then place them in their homes, barns and fields; a bold affirmation of the faith that Christ’s saving grace extends to all.

The great, XIII century Franciscan mystic, Angela of Foligno, while attending the Mass one day and seeing the host elevated exclaimed: “the world is pregnant with God!” If that sounds a bit strange, I want to assure you that the teaching about Christ’s ongoing presence in creation has been part and parcel of our Christian tradition.

For example, consider St. Bonaventure – XIII century Franciscan saint – who taught that God spoke to us through two books. One is – and we all know it – the Bible. The other book through which God reveals oneself is the sacred Book of Creation. In one of his writings, this most well know Franciscan theologian says: *“Any person who is not illuminated by such a great splendor in created things is blind. Anyone who is not awakened by such great outcries is deaf. Anyone who is not led by such effects to give praise to God is mute... Therefore open your eyes; alert your spiritual ears; unlock your lips; and apply your heart so that in all creatures you may see, hear, praise, love, and adore, magnify and honor your God lest the entire world rise up against you.”*

As you can see, we have a very old, rich and challenging tradition when it comes to Corpus Christi. It’s been expressed not only in popular religiosity and Christian theology, but also through the arts.

One the most striking and popular art images in the cathedrals of the medieval Europe were that of the pelican. That bird was thought to a perfect model of self-sacrifice. When no other food was available, and her young cheeks

were hungry – it was believed – that the pelican would peck her chest with her large beak to the point of bleeding, and then feed her young ones with her own blood. As a result, the pelican became a symbol of the Passion of Jesus and of the Eucharist.

Last Friday, I saw a picture of a pelican on the front page of Washington Post. Many of you must have seen it as well. It was a ghostly photo from the Louisiana coast: a pelican covered with a thick coating of oil, beyond recognition. I immediately thought of the image of pelican as the symbol of the Eucharist displayed on the altars of some of the medieval cathedrals. And my heart sunk. “What we have done,” I said to myself. It’s a sacrilege.

Could it be that God may be speaking to us through this image? What do you think God is telling us as a society? (a pause) Could God be saying: Stop! What are you doing to my creation? What are you doing to me?

The oil spill in the gulf is only a symptom of a much larger disaster in making: deforestation, the loss of biodiversity, contamination of our air and water, a near depletion of fish stock, ocean acidification, and global climate change.

As long as it doesn’t hit us in the face; as long as we delude ourselves that we can stay on the same path without facing consequences; as long as we continue to deny the overwhelming degree of consensus among the scientist regarding what is happening with our environment and why; as long as we believe that technology alone will save us – we will continue to deny that we have a problem.

Still, to go to the source of the problem and to face it in its entirety, we must look even deeper. As John Paul II said, the environmental crisis is a symptom of the spiritual and moral crisis that we face. Fundamentally, it is a crisis of vision. How do we see the world? It is for us just raw material to be utilized simply as we see fit? Or do we see it as part of God’s plan of salvation; the plan that embraces humans and the rest of the community of life?

The Eucharist ought to help us to begin to see the world and its creatures, not just as a natural resource for us, but also as something sacred, and as our close companion on the common journey toward the fullness of life in God.

This kind of radical vision, nourished by the Eucharist, was one that St. Francis came to gradually to discover. There is a story of how Francis at the beginning of his conversion was praying in front of a crucifix in a dilapidated church of San Damiano in Assisi. All of the sudden, he heard the voice speaking to him from the cross: “Francis, rebuild my house; as you see, it is being destroyed.”

Immediately, he got up, began to gather up stones and, with the help of others, rebuilt the church. Little by little, however, he realized that Christ’s words also referred to His mystical body the Church: to its wounded institution, to the poor and lepers. At last, Francis came to see that the “house of God” – that is, the mystical body of Christ - extended to the brother sun and sister moon – even to the entire cosmos. And, with his YES to God and YES to God’s way of looking at the world, St. Francis dedicated the rest of his life to ensuring that nobody gets excluded from God’s banquet of life.

In today’s Gospel, Jesus speaks to the huge crowds about God’s Kingdom. After the long day, they are all hungry. Jesus has compassion on them and wants them to be fed. The skeptical disciples protest that this simply cannot be done. But Jesus insists: they are going to do this together. The disciples gather the little food they have. Jesus offers praise and thanks to God. Then he sends out the disciples to first organize the community. Everybody eats and is satisfied. And there is plenty of food left over.

What insights can we glean from this story that could help us deal with our contemporary predicaments? How do we satisfy the hunger of multitudes for bread, for justice, for beauty and meaning in life? Do we dare to follow Jesus and look at the world through a lens of blessing rather than through a lens of scarcity? Do we allow Jesus to persuade us to put aside our unbelief, roll up our sleeves and organize the multitudes? Not only to hand out corn flower or spaghetti in a food pantry - as important as it is - but also to help organize a larger community to be more active in the political arena – to ensure that our government serves the common good of all and not the special,

corporate, short term interest of a few. Those kinds of actions – as secular and profane they appear to be – can and ought to be an expression of our religious faith – our way of being Eucharist for others.

In conclusion, I'd like to invite you to a special bilingual prayer vigil next Wednesday at 7pm focused on the oil spill in the gulf. It's co-sponsored by the Archdiocesan Environmental Outreach committee and Franciscan Action network. Together, we'll reflect on what this tragedy means for us as people of faith. We will ask God for the forgiveness for the way we're all implicated in this man-made disaster through our unquenchable thirst for crude oil. And we'll also be asking God for help to organize ourselves so that we can make a positive difference. I hope you'll join us in this effort.

As we come to receive the Body and Blood of Christ – perhaps with an image of pelican lingering in our mind – let us think for a moment to what we will say Amen. Amen, to God in whom everything lives, moves and has its being.

Amen, to God who invites us and the rest of creation to share in the banquet of life. Amen – our yes, to the task before us.

