

St Michael and All Angels

Ōtautahi / Christchurch

22 June 2025 / Corpus Christi

Homily

John 6:51-58

- 51 I am the living bread that came down from heaven.
Whoever eats of this bread will live forever,
and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”
- 52 The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying,
“How can this man give us his flesh to eat?”
- 53 So Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son
of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.
- 54 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life,
and I will raise them up on the last day,
- 55 for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.
- 56 Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.
- 57 Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father,
so whoever eats me will live because of me.
- 58 This is the bread that came down from heaven,
not like that which the ancestors ate, and they died.
But the one who eats this bread will live forever.

Opening prayer

Heavenly Father, from the very beginning, you formed humanity in your likeness. Now your work of creation is perfected in Christ, showing all people what it means to be truly human. May the Holy Spirit continue to transform our being to Christ's own.

Corpus Christi

When our children were very young, they displayed great enthusiasm for the Eucharist. It didn't matter whether they were in Sunday School or Youth Group; When Holy Communion began, they would rush forward and line up with a beautiful sense of anticipation and a look of excitement on their faces.

My children seemed to be enchanted by the mystery of Holy Communion and genuinely enjoyed the profound intimacy of the Eucharist. Even in their childlike naivety, they appeared to understand something many adults had forgotten.

And as a father who is acutely aware of his many failings, I was always profoundly touched to see my children's appreciation of Holy Communion. I understood that they were receiving something of great significance, something so deeply profound that it represented the very best of anything that could be offered to them.

This experience of watching my children engage with the mysteries of Holy Communion partly explains why I respect our tradition, as the Eucharist forms a centre in our faith. By contrast, in some churches, a stage occupies the centre; in others, it is the pulpit; in others, the centre is simply an empty space. These practical and liturgical church layouts convey what people consider to be sacred. Accordingly, at the heart and centre of our church is a Holy Altar, the Lord's Table, which wonderfully affirms our understanding of the sacred, namely, the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

Kallistos Ware likes to remind us that many organisations and religions gather regularly to worship, pray, sing, and perform rituals; some, outside of Christianity, even point to Jesus as the son of God and the Messiah.¹

Consequently, Ware maintains that the Divine Liturgy of the Eucharist is the only element distinguishing the Christian Church from every other religion or spiritual gathering. Ware writes, “The Church is a Eucharistic society. In the Eucharist, the Church becomes herself in the mystery of the Body and Blood of Christ. The Eucharistic meal maintains the Church in unity, for the unity of the Church is a unity created from within and by Holy Communion.”²

Being formed by the Body of Christ

In the Greco-Roman world at the time of Christ, sharing meals and dining together were essential for bonding groups, establishing social rankings, and forming civic identity. These gatherings were commonly referred to as Associations.³

These meals were exclusive and did not reflect a blending of different social groups. Thus, you only ever dined with individuals of the same social standing.

Furthermore, the portion size and the menu at the meal were determined by your importance. The meals primarily relied on slave labour and were heavily influenced by sociopolitical power. Moreover, it was not uncommon for these meals to take place on the ground floor of a building in full public view, allowing people passing by to see who was in attendance and who was excluded.⁴

¹ Druze: Druze emphasise Jesus's role in delivering the message of forgiveness, highlighting his role as the Messiah of all Nations and the Messiah of Sinners. Druze doctrine acknowledges Jesus's virgin birth, his miracles, and his crucifixion.

Messianic Jews: Messianic Jews, while believing in Jesus (Yeshua) as the Messiah, hold varying views on the Law of Moses. There is a spectrum of observance, with some adhering to 613 commandments and others focusing on specific aspects like holidays or dietary laws. Bahá'í: In the Bahá'í Faith, Jesus Christ is revered as a Messenger of God, or the Manifestation of God. They believe that Jesus was divinely appointed to guide humanity and that his teachings on love, compassion, and forgiveness are essential for spiritual and social progress. While acknowledging Jesus's unique role and divinity.

² <https://www.holy-trinity.org/spirituality/ware.thanksgiving.html>

³ Dennis Edwin Smith and Hal Taussig, eds., *Meals in the Early Christian World: Social Formation, Experimentation, and Conflict at the Table* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 59.

⁴ Smith and Taussig, *Meals in the Early Christian World*, 3.

By contrast, when Christ held his Last Supper, the meal was private and held in an upper room. Breaking societal norms, the disciples were from mixed social backgrounds, and everyone ate the same food and received the same portion. “For we who are many are one body, for we all share the one bread.”

Additionally, there were **no** enslaved people serving; the only person serving was Jesus, who Scripture tells us, “assuming human likeness, emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.”⁴ Furthermore, Matthews writes, “The Son of Man came **not to be served** but to serve / and to give his life a ransom for many.”⁵ Thus, as we reflect on the Body of Christ, it is helpful to acknowledge that Jesus Christ remains the true Host at the Eucharistic meal. He is the one who initiates, the one who invites, and the one who is the sustaining Bread of Life.⁵

Now, I’m sure we are all familiar with the idea that ‘you are what you eat,’ but in reality, when we consume food, nothing happens other than our bodies metabolising the nutrients provided; we are not changed.

However, the “Eucharist is the reversal of that normality, for when we eat and drink the bread and wine, we are to become what they are, that is, the Body of Christ.”⁶ As such, “Through the Eucharist, we commune with Christ and share in his body and his deity; we are also united with one another as ‘the body of Christ.’

Formation for us occurs by being drawn into the life of Jesus, by being conformed to the one who became human, was crucified, and is risen. “This change does not occur through our striving ‘to become like Jesus,’ but rather, by the Body of Christ that is received in the Eucharist, beginning to shape us, transforming our being to Christ’s own.”⁷ Remembering that Christ remains the only one who truly heals and forms our humanity into his likeness. “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.”

⁵ John 6:48

⁶ Craig Nesson, “What If the Church Really Is the Body of Christ?,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 51, no. 1 (2012): 43.

⁷ Nesson, “What If the Church Really Is the Body of Christ?” 43. / 2 Corinthians 3:18; Romans 8:29.

The Body of Christ forms the body of Christ

Over the centuries and across Christian denominations, much debate has continued regarding how Christ is present in the Eucharist. You may hold your understanding, while the major Christian traditions worldwide have theirs. You might find some common ground with them, or you may not.

Perhaps less disputed is the assertion that the Body of Christ, received through the Holy Spirit and the Divine Liturgy of the Eucharist, transforms us, both you and I, into the body of Christ. In other words, the Body of Christ, the Eucharist, forms the body of Christ, the Church. Therefore, “We become the body of Christ in worship through the word of God and sacraments.

By participating in liturgy — and embodying the attributes of worship, the body of Christ, the Church, takes on its distinctive character. Through homilies, the Holy Spirit enlivens the word of God and forms the members into the body of Christ. By means of baptism, God incorporates new members into the church community. Through the Eucharist, Christ imparts himself to the community.⁸

Consequently, as we pray ‘Kyrie Eleison, Christe Eleison,’ we express a desire to be formed into merciful people. As we share a ‘Sign of the Peace,’ we remind ourselves and one another of our calling to be a people of peace. As we participate in Holy Communion, we receive Christ’s love and his fullness of life and seek to become a community embodying those traits.⁹ Nesson observes, “Worship is not so much what we do but what God does to form the church into the image and way of Jesus.”¹⁰

⁸ Nesson, “What If the Church Really Is the Body of Christ?” 45.

⁹ Nesson, “What If the Church Really Is the Body of Christ?” 47.

¹⁰ Nesson, “What If the Church Really Is the Body of Christ?” 47.

The body of Christ, the Church, embodies the nature and faithful character of Jesus when it allows the “living bread that came down from heaven” to transform its being into Christ’s own. To become a People of the Light. To be “wise, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”¹¹

So perhaps the more significant question is not ‘how Jesus is present in the Eucharist,’ but rather, how we, as the body of Christ, are present in the world.

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Amen

¹¹ James 3:17