

Celebrating the Feast of Corpus Christi

The feast of Corpus Christi and its Relationship to the Eucharist

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the whole Christian life. The feast of Corpus Christi is a celebration of Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist. It parallels the celebration on Holy Thursday in commemoration of the institution of this sacrament. When the Eucharist is carried through the streets in a solemn procession, the Christian people give public witness of their faith and devotion toward the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is a sign and cause of the unity of Christ's Mystical Body, because it stirs up an active "ecclesial" spirit in those who are more fervent in their Eucharistic devotion. Eucharistic adoration cannot be detached from the liturgical and communal celebration of the sacrament or from the commitment to the poor and to justice. One draws strength and justification from the other.

Planning a Corpus Christi Procession

In a European parish where a Corpus Christi procession is held every year, it seems to the outside observer that everything happens without much planning, as if by magic. All of a sudden, on the morning of the feast, all the outside altars are elaborately decorated, the canopy and the monstrance are readily available and everyone seems to know exactly what he or she is supposed to be doing. Much of this is the case because the procession is an annual event, but also because there are parishioners who take charge of the preparations behind the scenes. Generations of altar servers have trained younger ones so they know the route and their tasks, and the canopy bearers already know how to navigate any obstacles along the route.

In an American parish, however, preparation for the first Corpus Christi procession will take a substantial amount of time. Planning the event should start at least six months in advance. Even in subsequent years, preparation will most likely take a month or two until, over time, a tradition develops that will make many of the tasks easier, after the parish develops a group of people who just "make it happen".



Route

One of the first decisions is the route of the procession. At least in the first years, it is prudent to keep the route short to encourage all parishioners to participate in the procession. However, the route should at least be long enough that the procession can fully develop.

If the procession leads through public streets, outside church property, it has to be authorized by the diocesan bishop, and it is the bishop's responsibility to establish regulations to ensure processions are carried out in a dignified manner.

When the procession is first introduced to a parish, a single outside altar is usually sufficient. In our parish, we have used the school yard of the nearby parish school for that purpose, which worked quite well. In other years, we set up an outside altar at the back of the church. In that case, the procession led through the front doors and around the block, back to the church, which worked equally well. One detail to be conscious of when planning the route is how easy it will be to repose the host after the celebration concludes with Benediction.

Canopy

Any outdoor Eucharistic procession should use a canopy. The canopy serves a dual purpose. On one hand, it protects the Blessed Sacrament during the procession. It creates a "sacred space" that is reserved for the priest carrying the monstrance. As a practical matter, it protects the monstrance against anything that might fall on it, including light rain. Secondly, the faithful at the back of the procession can locate the Blessed Sacrament at the head of the procession more easily.



Procuring a canopy will require some lead time, since most likely it will have to be made to order. Plan on spending about \$3500 - \$5000, including the poles. The canopy typically is about 5 feet wide and 7 feet in length. The top piece can be either simple cloth or elaborately decorated on the downward facing side, depending on taste and budget. On the edges, there should be a vertical border, 8 to 12 inches wide, that gives the canopy some substance and visibility from a distance. The sides of the canopy are stabilized with poles running front to back. The canopy is carried on poles that are about 8 feet long. This length allows it to be

carried comfortably and the poles can be rested on the ground when the procession stops at an altar.

Canopy Bearers

The canopy is carried by four persons. In some parishes, the same four men perform this task each year, which certainly has the advantage of experience. Other parishes ask four new canopy bearers every year, with the idea of drawing more people into active participation.

Selection of the canopy bearers can be a great opportunity to get people involved. For example, by asking fathers of young children, one would give them a chance to get more involved, and the children could be inspired by seeing see their parents at the head of the procession. Those asked generally consider it an honor, so it is usually not difficult to find canopy bearers. There is no particular reason to restrict this task to men only. The only requirement is that the canopy bearers have the strength to carry it the whole route.

It is highly advisable to hold a brief training session with the canopy bearers at least a day before the procession. They need to know when to bring the canopy, where to set it up initially, how to process out of the church and navigate through the doors, and how the procession itself will take place once they are outside. This is also a good time to ask questions, and for introductions if the men don't already know each other.

Station Altars

There is typically either one outside altar or four. They are usually set up and decorated the day before the procession. The decoration can be as simple or elaborate as practical. At a minimum, there should be a white altar cloth, a crucifix, candles, and a slightly elevated place for the monstrance. Flowers on or next to the altar are very desirable. We also place a large rug and a kneeler in front of the altar to reserve a dedicated space for the priest and the altar servers who assist him.



It may seem obvious, but care should be taken to ensure that the space around the altar is large enough to comfortably accommodate all participants. The location of the altar should

be such that it does not obstruct traffic and that it provides a reasonably quiet and dignified space for prayer.

Sound

It is advisable to have an amplified sound system set up at the outdoor altar to make sure everyone can hear the gospel reading, homily and blessing. This is very important to keep things focused and to ensure everyone's full participation.

It is also advisable to bring a portable speaker system to the procession, which helps if there is a large number of participants who would otherwise not hear the leader of the prayers. Microphone and speaker are connected wirelessly.

Announcements

At least one month before the feast, announcements should be made in the parish bulletin. This is also a good opportunity to start a short series of theological and liturgical explanations to prepare parishioners for the celebration.

The parish school and religious education program should send notices to the parents of all First Communicants to invite them to participate in the procession, wearing their festive First Communion dresses and suits. Similar invitations should be extended to any special groups, such as the Knights of Columbus and religious organizations.

Collation

After the procession, people often want to share their experience of the event. This is a great opportunity to plan for a period of time during which everyone to get together. A simple "coffee and donuts" type reception serves this purpose quite well. This is not just a purely social event; it is an important time in which we experience the parish community in light of the Eucharistic experience we just shared.

Master of Ceremonies

It is essential to have a master of ceremonies who coordinates the various aspects of the preparation and ensures that the celebration progresses smoothly. During the procession, the MC directs the canopy bearers and altar servers, and he is at the disposal of the celebrant to receive and execute instructions as needed.

As a practical matter, the MC may not be able to join the procession as a participant. Rather, he keeps an eye on the procession, for example, to see how it develops as people leave the church. Usually, the cross bearer, who sets the pace, needs to be reminded to slow down every so often during the procession. The MC will also communicate with the police detail to let them know when the procession is ready and the road should be closed, and he will go ahead of the procession to verify that everything is ready for arrival at each station altar. The MC keeps himself available to the celebrant and stays in eye contact with him to take care of the practical matters of the procession and to allow the celebrant to focus on his solemn task.

Potential Obstacles

Most obstacles can be overcome with good planning. However, surprises do occur and require good common sense to resolve them. I just want to give a couple examples here.

The most obvious problem that can derail a procession is the weather. If it is not possible to hold an outdoor procession, the monstrance should be set up at the end of the Mass for a period of adoration, after which the celebration concludes with Benediction. It is important to keep the devotional character of the feast, especially in a parish where parishioners have already become accustomed to having the procession. If the weather is questionable, it is a good idea for the celebrant and MC to agree beforehand at which point the procession should be called off.

One year, we had the problem that the police detail did not arrive as planned. We decided to hold the procession anyway. We asked a couple parishioners ad hoc to help direct traffic, and then the procession went right down the middle of Main Street as planned.

The Liturgy of Corpus Christi

The following gives only the highlights of the liturgy. Details can be found in the Roman Missal and in the lectionary and are not repeated here.

Mass

Prior to the procession, the principal Mass of the solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ is celebrated, following the liturgy of the day. The Mass remains the most important

aspect of the Corpus Christi celebration. The three-year liturgical cycle provides three different gospel readings for this feast:

Year A: John 6:51-58, known as the Bread of Life discourse

Year B: Mark 14:12-16, 22-26, the last supper and first Eucharist

Year C: Luke 9:11b-17, the miracle of the loaves and fishes

The *Lauda Sion* should be sung prior to the Alleluia. The homily may be a reflection on the proper reading for the year, or an explanation of the theological and spiritual significance of the procession. Directions for participation in the procession can be part of the homily or set out in a printed program.

At the fraction, the host for the procession is set apart or placed in the lunette, as needed. Immediately after Communion, the monstrance is set up on the altar and the deacon or the celebrant places the host in the monstrance. All other items are removed from the altar. The celebrant, after leading the prayer after communion, then approaches the altar and incenses the Holy Eucharist while an appropriate hymn, for example the *Adoro Te Devote*, is sung. The concluding rites of the Mass are omitted and the celebration continues with the procession.

Procession

The Corpus Christi procession is not a walking *to* the Lord, to the Eucharistic celebration; it is a walking *with* the Lord; it is itself an element of the Eucharistic celebration, one dimension of the Eucharistic event. The Lord who has become our bread is thus showing us the way, is in fact our way, He leads us.



Strictly speaking, the procession is not part of the liturgy for Corpus Christi, but is a pious act (*pium exercitium*) that falls into the jurisdiction of the local bishop. The order of the procession is described in detail in *Ceremonies of the Modern Roman Rite* and other sources. Deviations from the prescribed order may be necessary to accommodate specific pastoral concerns, local traditions, and limitations due to the location where the procession is held.

After exposition, the canopy bearers bring the canopy and set it up at the front of the center aisle. After a brief period of adoration, the MC directs the altar servers to the front of the procession, in the prescribed order. Concelebrants and other clergy join the front of the

procession, immediately ahead of the canopy. Then, the priest, assisted by the deacon, picks up the monstrance and steps under the canopy, at which point the cross bearer begins to lead the procession out of the church.

Only the celebrant should walk under the canopy, carrying the monstrance at eye level, except for one or two deacons who may assist him. The canopy bearers should be arranged so that they remain outside the canopy.

It is fitting that the First Communicants immediately follow the canopy, leading the people. If present, youth groups or other organizations, such as police or armed forces, may be given places of honor. Much of this is up to local custom and pastoral needs.

A typical order of the procession is:

- Cross bearer and candle bearers
- Religious associations, if any
- Religious in their habits, if any
- Clergy and concelebrants of the Mass
- Thurifers(s) and boat bearer
- Celebrant, carrying the monstrance, under the canopy
- Deacon(s) assisting the celebrant
- Torch bearers (if any), beside canopy
- Parishioners, led by First Communicants

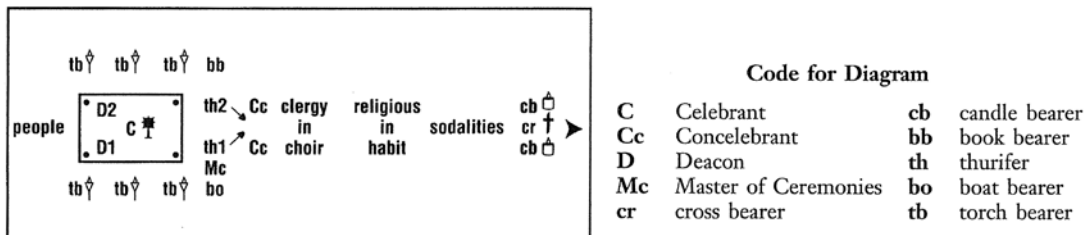


Figure 1: Eucharistic Procession

During the procession, appropriate hymns should be sung and prayers recited. We found that the recitation of litanies works well because the responses are simple and do not require much reference to a prayer sheet.

Embedded in the parishioners is someone who leads the prayers. As a practical matter, the person leading the prayers should not be at the very front because his or her voice will project forward. We found that it is useful to have second person carrying a portable speaker about half way into the group of parishioners to assist in participation.

An alternative to using a loudspeaker is praying antiphonically, with the left and right sides of the procession responding to each other. However, most American parishioners are not used to this, which makes it somewhat difficult to establish a good rhythm. On occasion, it may happen that the prepared prayers and hymns end before the procession arrives at its destination. In that case, the procession can simply continue in silence.

When the procession arrives at the station altar, the celebrant places the monstrance on the altar. The MC or another helper should place a corporal on the altar just before the procession arrives. The priest then removes the humeral veil, incenses the Eucharist and kneels in Adoration until everyone has gathered around the altar. If possible, a hymn should be sung while waiting for the procession to reach the



altar, or participants should kneel or stand in silence. Experience shows that there is no need to announce this; most people recognize the opportunity for silent adoration on their own.

At each station altar, a gospel reading that relates to the sacrament of the Eucharist will be proclaimed and a short homily given. If there are several altars, the procession continues to the next station after a brief blessing. At the last altar, after the homily, the *Tantum Ergo* is sung and the priest will give Benediction. The celebration concludes, in the usual manner of Eucharistic Adoration, with the Divine Praises and a closing hymn, preferably the *Te Deum*, after which the Blessed Sacrament is reposed as usual.

At the end of the celebration, participants are invited to join in a collation or reception at a nearby location. We want to share the experience of the feast in the parish community to recognize that the celebration is the beginning of a journey with Christ and a source of evangelization, not just an end in itself.

Outlook for the Future

Pope Benedict XVI urges parishes and other church groups to set aside times for collective adoration. He encourages processions with the Blessed Sacrament, especially the traditional procession on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, Forty Hours devotion, local, national and international Eucharistic Congresses, and similar initiatives.

Over time, processions may grow in size and distance. In our parish, for example, the procession could eventually lead from the church to an altar on a nearby beach and back, which would be very appropriate since our patroness is Saint Mary, Star of the Sea. It will take some time for our parish to build up this tradition, which is still new for us.

Our public display of faith and the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist may attract people who see the procession and invite them to join into closer communion with Christ. We pray that this year's spectators may become next year's participants.

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