



Jesus: Focus of Devotion

Over the centuries, the increasing understanding of the empathetic connection of all humanity to Jesus in his own humanness has seen the rise of very particular expressions of devotion to Jesus. One such devotion is the Feast of Corpus Christi. Pope Urban IV published the bull, *Transiturus*, approving Corpus Christi as a feast of the Church on 8th September, 1264¹ but this official sanction was the end product of a process that had been begun by the Augustinian nun, Juliana of Cornillon.

Juliana was born at Retines near Liège in 1193. As a child and young woman she had a particular devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and it is reported that when she received a vision of the Church as a glowing full moon with one dark spot on it, she interpreted it as a sign that a special feast in honour of the Blessed Sacrament was missing from the liturgical calendar. Of course, the reality of the institution of any feast is always far more complex. In this case, the early thirteenth century was witnessing the final breakdown of the feudal system and the move towards a more mercantile-based economy with the social consequence that the towns – especially those well-situated for trade purposes – experienced an influx of landless peasants and unskilled and unemployed people seeking work. This increased urban population was ready “fodder” for a range of new religious movements that were taking a strong antisacramental stance and denying the actuality of Jesus’ humanity. These factors no doubt influenced Robert de Thorete, the Bishop of Liège, to readily sanction a Corpus Christi feast in his diocese as a clear statement in support of Jesus’ human and divine nature, and of his real presence in the Blessed Sacrament. Under the bishop’s direction, then, the feast was celebrated for the first time in 1246 in Liège. From this beginning, enthusiasm for the feast spread rapidly to other dioceses and, after Rome’s adoption of it in 1317, the religious orders followed suit with the Franciscans, Augustinians and Dominicans all taking it up by 1326.

In medieval England, the Feast of Corpus Christi became a day on which the great pageants and mystery plays were presented by the various trade guilds. The cycle of plays maintained the religious element by focussing on biblically-themed presentations such as the Creation, Noah and his Ark, and Jesus’ birth, young life, ministry, crucifixion and resurrection. In some ways, these themes enabled the guilds to display their wares and skills in the elaborate

¹ In fact *Transiturus* was not fully enacted until over fifty years later when Rome formally adopted the feast on 1st November, 1317.

stage and costume designs. More importantly, however, they served not only to entertain but also to impart moral and spiritual lessons to a largely illiterate audience. The feast fell on the Thursday after Trinity Day which, under the medieval calendar, usually resulted in its date being around the beginning of June. It was a “feast” day in every sense of the word, celebrated as a holiday in the long, warm days of the (northern) summer. More importantly, the pairing of a joyous and entertaining spectacle with a solemn feast day helped to remind the people of Jesus’ humanity and divinity.

Today, Corpus Christi is usually referred to as “The Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ” and its celebration date still follows Trinity Sunday. In Australia, then, the feast generally falls as we move into winter; and the practice of really treating a feast day as a “feast” is long gone. There is cause for quiet celebration within our hearts, however, as we acknowledge the humanity of Jesus Christ and his presence in the Eucharist.

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