

Introduction

On the Thursday or Sunday after Trinity Sunday, the Church celebrates The Feast of Corpus Christi, also known as The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ.

The festival of Corpus Christi celebrates the **Eucharist** as the body of **Christ**. The name 'Corpus Christi' is Latin for 'the body of Christ'.

This jubilant festival is celebrated by **Roman Catholics** and other Christians to proclaim the truth of the transubstantiation of bread and wine into the actual body of Christ during Mass.

In some countries in the world, Catholic churches still celebrate the festival, not only with a Mass, but also with a procession that carries the consecrated wafer through the streets as a public statement that the sacrifice of Christ was for the salvation of the whole world.

Corpus Christi falls between late May and the middle of June, on the first Thursday after Trinity Sunday (60 days after **Easter**).

It's worth noting that Christians already mark the Last Supper, when Christ instituted the Eucharist, on Maundy Thursday (the day before Good Friday). Because Maundy Thursday falls during the solemn period of Holy Week, it was thought necessary to have a separate festival of the Eucharist that would allow the celebration not to be muted by sadness.

The celebration

The main feature of Corpus Christi celebrations is the triumphant liturgical procession in which the sacred host (the wafer that has been consecrated during the Mass) is carried out of the Church in the monstrance "for the Christian faithful to make public profession of faith and worship of the Most Blessed Sacrament".

The practice is no longer common in the UK, where traditional processions started to wane in the 1970s after the Second Vatican Council. Attempts have been made to revive the tradition in some UK towns and villages in recent years.

During his papacy, **Pope John Paul II** led an annual Corpus Christi procession from St Peter's Square in the Vatican to the streets of Rome. Many traditional Catholics are keen for such processions to be promoted everywhere in the world in the light of the late Pope's example.

Since, for Catholics, the host contains the real presence of Christ, it is treated as Christ in human form would be treated, with reverence, ceremony and adoration.

The host is displayed on a 'monstrance' and protected from the sun by a canopy.

The procession moves through local streets, either to another church, or back to the church where it started.

History

The festival was inspired by the religious experience of St Juliana (1193-1258), a Belgian nun, who dreamed repeatedly of the Church under a full moon with a black spot.

According to legend, the dream was interpreted to her in a vision by Christ. The moon, she said, was **the Church's calendar** of festivals and the black spot was the lack of a festival to celebrate the holiest element of the Church - the Eucharist.

Juliana shared this with her local bishop, who in 1246 issued a decree for such a festival to be celebrated in his territory.

The festival was instituted throughout the Church by Pope Urban IV in 1264. Before that there had been no universal festival to mark the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Corpus Christi was made an obligatory feast for Roman Catholics by Pope Clement V in 1311 at the Council of Vienne.

Corpus Christi was celebrated in England from 1318 onwards.

From the Middle Ages onwards, special Corpus Christi plays were staged to mark the occasion.

Geography

The festival has a particular resonance for Spain and Portugal, and countries in Latin America. In Seville the festival was known as 'the Thursday that shines greater than the sun'.

In such countries the festival is popular and elaborate. The triumphal nature of the celebration is acted out by treating the sacred host almost as if it were a military hero returning in victory from the wars - the host may be carried on a cart (representing a chariot) through crowds and beneath triumphal arches erected for the event.

Historically, the festival was accompanied by music, dancing and fireworks.

There are Corpus Christi colleges at the universities of Oxford and Cambridge, and a major city of that name in Texas.