Today we celebrate the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, one of the highest ranking feast days in our liturgical calendar. I think it’s fitting then to take you on a journey thru time breaking open this solemnity and our Catholic understanding of the Eucharist.

The first stop on our journey is the Feeding of the 5000. We’ve been listening and watching Jesus so intently that the day’s almost over and we’ve never even thought about eating. Where are we to find any food out here in the wilderness?

Rumors start circulating that the apostles want us to leave and fend for ourselves! Are they serious? Thankfully new rumors say that Jesus told the Apostles to help and give us some food!

So instead of 5000 men – plus uncounted women and children - eating 5000 separate meals, Jesus joins all of us together in one meal. I’m quite satisfied now, are you? Where did all the bread and fish come from anyway? More rumors speak of twelve baskets full of leftovers.

We set off again on our journey. Looking back, on the meal of fellowship, we see the beginnings of Eucharistic celebration. More than 5,000 people from as many as 50 villages, all with different experiences of life, all united by Jesus Christ in the teaching of the Word; prayers of forgiveness and hope; bread broken and shared.

It’s now the year 325. The Alexandrian presbyter Arius has been stirring up a hornet’s nest, affirming that Christ is not truly divine but a created being. We stop in on the Council of Nicea. We hear Jesus declared as consubstantial, of one essence, with God the Father. All is well again.

We leave Nicea to drop in now and then on western Europe, the core of Christianity. There’s a rapidly growing appreciation for the divinity of Jesus, and with it, a greater association of the Eucharist with the divine. We’re seeing a definite shift in focus from meals of fellowship to meals centered on the Eucharist and Jesus’ Real Presence in the bread and wine.
In place of a horizontal covenant of believers united in communion, a vertical covenant of adoring believers is taking on a life of its own that senses unworthiness to come into contact with the divine.

Recluses are boring holes into church walls so they can see Mass being celebrated on the altar.

Those in Church receiving Communion are no longer permitted to use their hands but instead must receive the Eucharist in their mouths directly from the priest.

And we see participation in the Eucharist radically declining.

Our journey now fast forwards to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Celebration of the Eucharist has reached such a low that the Council mandates reception of the Eucharist at least once a year.

What’s happening to the 1000’s who used to join in Communal celebration? Well they seem to be lining up in streets adorned with impressive draperies and banners, waiting for a dramatic procession of the monstrance to come by. Some are lucky enough to sing a hymn and receive a blessing with the monstrance as it stops now and then. Eventually this celebration of adoration for the Body of Christ becomes part of the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, the predecessor of today’s feast day.

It’s now the dawn of the 2nd Vatican Council. The world surrounding the 700 year old Corpus Christi tradition has changed. Our monocultural western European church has grown into a global Church. Where there were once 29 bishops participating in the opening of the Council of Trent, we witness a procession of more than 2,500 bishops on opening day of the 2nd Vatican Council! Can you hear the rumors about major reforms to the liturgy for the more active participation of the community?

Over a period of 3 years, these bishops renew the call to experience ourselves as persons relating to God, others in the community, and the world as a whole. One of the actions the bishops take is to increase the breath of the Corpus Christi feast day to more fully capture a universal understanding of Eucharistic “real presence,” an understanding that allows for more than just the Corpus Christi processional. Isn’t it fitting then that Pope Frances has called, for the first time in Church history, a global hour of Eucharistic adoration beginning today at 11am?

Pope Frances, and the bishops of Vatican II who have gone before him, are calling us to empty ourselves of our sinfulness, be transformed by “the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ,” and reach out in agapic outpouring to the life-giving Spirit.
Pope Frances stresses the need for communal Eucharistic fellowship even further: “Jesus speaks in the silence of the mystery of the Eucharist and reminds us each time that following him means going out of ourselves and making our lives not something we ‘possess,’ but a gift to him and to others.”

So let’s wrap up our journey then realizing, that when we come before this table, a profound set of relationships, both spiritual and temporal, bind us to God and to each other. Make no mistake about it - through the celebration of the Eucharist, the Church community is brought about.

We unite in Christ and his sacrifice, and we unite together under the commandment of love by the greatest love ever shown, when Jesus Christ died for us, to unite us once again to God.

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