

## St. Thomas' Spirituality: Fourth Talk: Poetry: Pange Lingua

Thomas expressed his lifelong devotion to Jesus present in the Blessed Sacrament in the liturgy of the new feast Corpus Christi. This Latin phrase translates to “body of Christ”. It celebrates the great gift that Jesus gave us when he proclaimed: “This is my body”, Matt 26:26. He followed that statement with “This is my blood, for the forgiveness of your sins”, Matt 26:27. His followers have kept this memory going (Lk 22:19) for 2000 years precisely by reenacting his coming to us, dying for us, and resurrecting to show us our destiny. The Eucharistic celebration of the Mass emphasizes that God the Son took on human nature, so that He became incarnate. This enabled Him to die for us. By taking on humanity, Jesus could be among us in a non-threatening way. His being with us as a fellow human enabled Him to teach us the love of God. As a human, He could also suffer the pain of sin, namely death. So His Incarnation enabled three important effects that Thomas alerts us to in the *Summa Theologiae*. First, he came among us as the ultimate revelation of God. We can see this human, we can relate to Him. He can reveal God in Himself. Thomas even notes that He is the sacrament of God because He is the tangible sign that effects what it signifies: He is God among us. Second, His humanity enabled His divine person to take our sins upon Himself, to redeem us from that infinite debt. Third, by resurrecting, He showed us that we too will rise, and overcome death's victorious sting by His gift of eternal life.

As we participate ever more profoundly in the reenactment of this Christ-event, we celebrate the existence of Jesus, body, blood, soul and divinity. These realities inspired Thomas to do the liturgy for Corpus Christi in poetic Latin. We shall examine his poems first to review their beauty, then to probe their meaning.

These poems were written to be recited, and chanted. The melody was Gregorian Chant, which fits tones to the mood and meaning of the words. Chant blends melody with text so perfectly that the integration itself emphasizes the message. This unity disappears when we translate from Latin to English. Those of you who have heard the tune sung in Latin can appreciate how the sound of the words fits the melody. Since we can't expect everyone to learn Latin, we have to listen for the Latin sounds without understanding them well. Our best approach is to listen to the sung Latin versions, and get as much as possible out of them. Then we can work with the English words to find the meanings expressed. For Thomas and the people who heard these sung poems, there was no language problem. Everything harmonized wonderfully.

Latin	English	Literal translation
Pange lingua gloriosi Corporis mysterium, Sanguisque pretiosi, Quem in mundi pretium Fructus ventris generosi Rex effudit gentium	Sing my tongue! Acclaim Christ present, Veiled within this sacred sign. Precious blood and risen body, Under forms of bread and wine. Blood once shed for man's redemption, By this king of David's line.	My tongue compose the glories In divine worship of the body And precious blood That paid the price of the world Fruit of the noble birth womb King poured forth for all people.
Nobis datus, nobis natus Ex intacta virgine, Et in mundo conversatus, Sparso verbi semine, Sui moras incolatus, Miro clausit ordine	Heaven's promised gift to mankind, Born to virgin full of grace, Plants the seed of faith securely While he dwells with Adam's race. Ends his mission, leaves a symbol Of the death he will embrace.	Given to us, born to us From an intact virgin, And interacts with the world Sows the seed of His word, His delay among us (dwell) Amazing us by ordering his end (death).
In supreme nocte coena Recumbens cum fratribus,	Dining with his twelve apostles On the night before he died,	In the highest night's supper Reclining with his brothers,

Observata lege plene Cibis in legalibus, Cibum turbae duodenae Se dat suis manibus. Verbum caro, panem verum Verbo carnem efficit, Fitque sanguis Christi merum; Et si sensus deficit, Ad firmandum cor sincerus Sola fides sufficit.	Taking for the Pascal supper Foods the law had specified. Lo he sets new bread before them Handing each Christ crucified. Word-made-flesh makes bread his body Consecrates it by his word. Wine becomes the blood of Jesus; He it is whose voice is heard. Minds in doubt need faith's assurance; God who spoke could not have erred.	Observing the full law By lawful foods Food to the twelve-group He gave with His own hands. Word-flesh, true bread By His word makes flesh And makes pure blood of Christ. And if senses fail, To firm up a sincere heart, Only faith suffices.
Tantum ergo Sacramentum Veneremur cernui, Et antiquum documentum Novo cedat ritui. Praestet fides supplementum Sensuum defectui.	Bowing low then offer homage To a sacrament so great! Here is new and perfect worship; All the old must terminate. Senses cannot grasp this marvel; Faith must serve to compensate.	Therefore so great a sacrament We must venerate face down And the ancient pattern Cedes to new rituals. It must be that faith supports Defective senses.
Genitori Genitoque Laus et jubilatio, Salus, honor, virtus quoque Sit et benedictio. Procedenti ab utroque Compar sit laudatio.	Praise and glorify the Father, Bless his son's life-giving name, Singing their eternal godhead, Power, majesty and fame, Offering their Holy Spirit Equal worship and acclaim.	To the Father and the Son, Praise and jubilation, Saving, honor, also power Be with blessing. To the Proceeding from both Equal worship and praise.

Many of you are familiar with both the words and music. Others know only the music, and others of you hear each for the first time. Your handout has Latin words and music. Gregorian chant used different markings for notes, but this melody remains as people have sung it for centuries. Notice that it does not have a set number of beats to the bar, or a precise rhythm. This enables the music to flow more completely, and removes a set of restrictions that can come between the music and the message.

Perhaps the most important thing we could do is to provide another English translation that is not tied to the music. This translation is for message alone, not to fit the melody. You can see how it smoothes out the literal translation. Latin combines many meanings in a single word. As many as six English words can be required to translate one Latin word. Latin verbs express in the inflection the person acting, which we usually express by pronouns like I, you (singular), he, she, it, we, you (plural) and they. The inflection also includes tense: present, past, perfect, past-perfect, conditional, future, and future-perfect.. Nouns have number, syntax and gender built into the ending. This inflection is very rich, and hard to translate into English, which is only partially inflected. Here is the message of the Pange Lingua translated into flowing English.

“Sing, my tongue, the mystery of the glorious body and of the precious blood, which, fruit of the blessed womb, he the King of nations gave to ransom the world.

“Given to us, born for us of a spotless virgin, he dwelt on earth, sowing the seed of his work, till with a wonderful rite he closed his life.

“In the night of the last supper, seated with the brethren, having fulfilled all the law required, to the twelve with his own hands as food he gives himself.

“Word made flesh, by his word he changes bread into his body and wine becomes the blood of Christ. If our senses fail us, faith alone will make a true heart firm.

“Bowing low then let us worship so great a sacrament. The old law gives place to a new rite, faith supplies the light of sight.

“To the Father and to the Son be praise and glory, salvation, honor, power and blessing; to him who from both proceeds be the same worship.”

Thomas composed this hymn for vespers, or evening prayer celebrating the feast of the Holy Eucharist. It was a new feast at the time (1260's). This translation still does not provide all the information that Thomas put into it. “Pange” is the imperative form of create a hymn. It is a command, evident in the Latin inflection. Thomas noted that the great gift that Jesus gave us demands honor and praise. The gift of His presence would be enough to demand glory from us, but the Eucharist also nourishes us. This presence and nourishment becomes possible because Jesus' body and blood exist in a perfected way. Prior to the resurrection, Christ's body and blood were much more perfect than ours, since He was the New Adam, without Original Sin. Incidentally, that's why He could absorb so much punishment, depicted in the Passion of the Christ. None of us could have survived that beating. None of us would have lived as long, or shed our last drop of blood, as He did. Instead, we would probably have died of shock during the trial. But after His resurrection, Jesus was so spiritualized that he could enter the locked Cenacle, Jn 20:19-31. The many manifestations of his body, solid to the touch, digesting food, and capable of broiling fish, show that material functions continued normally, but He also transcended those limitations in time and space. His body was spiritualized in a resurrected way.

In that glorified body He ascended to heaven long ago, but shows His transcendence of space and time by being with us in Eucharistic Communion. Between Thomas writing this hymn and Jesus ascending, 1230 years had passed. During that time, people faithful to Jesus had grown in Christ-life precisely because of the visible bread and wine which is the invisible body and blood of Jesus. Fed by this heavenly food, we are able to adapt Christ's message to the details of our times, and to pass on the food that he promised in John 6:31-71.

In this event, Jesus showed us that the manna that nourished Israel in the desert was a shadowy foretelling of the multiplication of bread that the people had experienced yesterday. This miracle foretold the eating of Christ's body, and the drinking of His blood that reenact His salvific death on the cross. Thomas pondered this passage so thoroughly that he gave a marvelous account of it in his commentary on John. What Jesus taught them then, and us now, is that He transcends human limits, and provides His resurrected, perfected, body and blood for our growth in faith. When we exercise our weak faith by believing what Jesus said, we take the next step of celebrating the Eucharist, and thus we develop deeper faith. Many steps in this direction get us to full faith-life in Christ. Thomas took these steps to arrive at profound faith in what Jesus did.

So Thomas knew that when Jesus said; “I myself am the bread of life”, Jn 6:35, He was not joking. Much less was he referring to a symbol. In the great discourse at the Last Supper, Jesus developed the meaning of this bread of life, Jn 13 through 17. Thomas expresses how God acts in the Second Person, or the Son, in Jesus, to give us divine life. As Jesus expressed divinity in the flesh, so He maintains this direct bodily contact through bread. His blood is direct contact with His dying for us on the cross by shedding every drop of His blood. When the soldier pierced Christ's side, blood and water flowed out, Jn 19:34. Our senses fail by seeing, touching, and tasting only bread and wine. But Jesus, the Word of God, asks us to extend our faith.

With this background, we can see how well Thomas expressed the core of Eucharistic celebration. No wonder that we have used his poems for 750 years, and will probably continue this tradition as long as we celebrate the Lord's feast. There is no end to the expression of this profound truth that Jesus gave Himself as our food. As visible bread and wine, we can focus upon His transcendent self.

You say that you don't understand all this. Neither do I, if you mean that to understand is to finish all there is to know about the Eucharist. That's why we call this truth a mystery. It remains just as fresh and full after we have learned lots about it as it was before. Its infinite richness can't be exhausted. Thomas knew much more about the Eucharist than I do, but he was no closer to finishing comprehending it than I am. Our great gift is to explore this infinite wealth. We will work on it every day of our lives, and derive magnificent parts of its

truth every moment. These partial truths integrate into a fuller view of the complete truth. But it is an eternal truth because we can spend eternity admiring and adoring it. Thomas called this perfect worship.

Incidentally, this perfect worship terminated the old rituals of worship. The ancient rites had served their purpose to prepare people for Christ's coming. Former worship focused upon keeping Torah (law), and upon preparing for the Messiah. Now that He had come, older rituals were outdated. The chosen people who had done all that focusing had missed Him. Only a few people actually recognized Him. Mary was the first, followed by Joseph, then John the Baptist, who as an infant leapt in the womb in recognition of the Messiah whose way he was to make straight, Lk 1:41. Several thousand eventually praised and glorified Jesus for His entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, Jn 12:12. But most of these fell away from Him during the Passion, and many of them mocked Him as He hung on the cross for their salvation, Lk 24:35. Though we don't know their individual stories, we can hope that thousands of them returned to Him through the Apostle's preaching at Pentecost.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit inspired 3 thousand upon that very occasion to declare themselves for the Lord who had given everything for them, Acts 2:41. Though we are not very familiar with the Holy Spirit, He is the spirit of Christ who consoles us in our struggles. He is the spirit of Jesus who shows us what to do when troubles strike. Thomas refers to this Holy Spirit in the final stanza, where he offers equal worship and acclaim to all three persons of the One Trinity. As Thomas shows in his work on the Trinity, it is necessary that a perfect being know Himself perfectly. Perfect knowledge of Himself will be another self. If we view this mystery from that approach, then the First Person would be the Father, and the known self which would duplicate the divinity of the Father would be the Son. The begetting would be analogical, in the perfect sense, to the imperfect begetting that humans perform. Spirits who know good love it immediately, so these two perfect spirit persons would love the unified being as well. Since they would love it perfectly, they would duplicate the being, thereby establishing a third person, the Holy Spirit.

At first, this seems to produce three gods. But there is only one being, doing infinite things. Just as I experience me, myself and I, so the perfect being experiences these three aspects of the one being. But, experiencing them perfectly, this being is three persons. Thomas accounts for this much more clearly in his work on the Trinity. For us, in this poem, the references are relatively clear, and start us on the great pursuit of the One God Who integrates three persons. Without Jesus teaching us this mystery, we would never know about it. We shall look more closely into this Trinitarian doctrine tomorrow night. For now, we close with this version of the Pange Lingua by John Mason Neale, an Anglican, and Edward Caswall, a Catholic. It fits the melody.

1. Now my tongue the myst'ry telling,  
Of the glorious Body sing,  
And the Blood, all price excelling,  
Which the Gentiles' Lord and King  
Once on earth among us dwelling,  
Shed for this world's ransoming.

3. That last night at supper lying.  
Mid the twelve, his chosen band,  
Jesus, with the Low complying,  
Keeps the feast its rites demand;  
Then, more precious food supplying,  
Gives himself with his own hand.

5. Therefore we, before him bending,  
This great Sacrament revere;

2. Given for us, and condescending  
To be born for us below,  
He with men in converse blending  
Dwelt, the seed of truth to sow,  
Till he closed with wondrous ending  
His most patient life of woe.

4. Word-made-flesh, true bread he maketh  
By his word his Flesh to be.  
Wine his Blood; when man partaketh,  
Though his senses fail to see,  
Faith alone, when sight forsaketh,  
Shows true hearts the mystery.

6. Glory let us give and blessing  
To the Father and the Son,

Types and shadows have their ending,  
For the newer rite is here;  
Faith, our outward sense befriending.  
Makes our inward vision clear.

Honor, thanks, and praise addressing,  
While eternal ages run;  
Ever too his love confessing  
Who from both with both is One.

You can see that this version is more stately, more reverent, using old words that remind us of the ancient devotion which we continue. Fr. George Rutler provided this translation in his book *Brightest and Best: Stories of Hymns*; Ignatius Press; 1998. Fr. George was an Anglican priest for years, then became a Catholic, and serves as priest in the New York Archdiocese.