

St. Thomas' Spirituality: Seventh Talk: Poetry: Corpus Christi Liturgy

The Pange Lingua, or the hymn for vespers, opens the celebration on the evening before the feast day, and closes that feast day with the second vespers. Thomas composed that hymn, which we examined last night, and provided the following prayers. His other hymns we shall consider in turn.

St. Thomas composed these verses that people recited at the beginning of the psalm of praise for the Blessed Sacrament. When that psalm was ended, people recited these verses again. So each verse is like a book end that precedes and follows the psalm of praise. Each psalm comes from the Old Testament, tracing its origin back to King David or other ancient singers. So this vespers combines prayers from God's people before and after Jesus Christ. Synthesis is the basis for all that Thomas does. He shows how things fit together.

His first verse, or antiphon, is "A merciful Lord has given food to those who fear him, as a memorial of his wondrous deeds." This prayer bridges the Old and New Testaments, and focuses our minds for the psalm. If we remember it as we recite the psalm, then everything blends. Manna in the desert foreshadows the Bread of Life. Many such references back and forth unify the experiences of God's people from the wondrous deeds of God creating, to liberating His people from pharaoh's slavery in Egypt, to making way for the people in Canan, to Christ dying to set them free, and finally to the Eucharistic banquet where all these events synthesize.

Thomas clarifies this process in the second antiphon: "Christ the Lord, Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek, offered bread and wine." Melchizedek prefigured Christ, and reminds us of all those faithful people who went before us, who join with us in this act of worship and praise.

In the same way, Thomas chose the third antiphon: "The cup of salvation I will take up; I will offer the sacrifice of praise." Profound unity with all of salvation history jumps to mind as we recite this verse. All the past important covenants, communities, and great efforts to be faithful to God coalesce in this prayer. As we see with Phillip explaining the prophet Isaiah to the royal treasurer, Jesus is the point of the Old Testament, the Messiah foretold in shadowy outline. All revelation comes clear in His life, death, and resurrection. Liturgy is our celebration of that clarity, and our opportunity to expand into the fullness of Revelation Himself.

After these verses surrounding psalms, we enjoy a short reading from 1 Corinthians, 11:23-25. Thomas selected this set of verses because they clearly express our common experience of Eucharistic life. "I received from the Lord what I handed on to you, namely, that the Lord Jesus on the night in which he was betrayed took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said: 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying: 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.'"

What a powerful reminder of celebrating the Lord's Supper, or the Mass! After some reflection upon this continuing miracle among us, the liturgy leader intones the response verse: "The Bread of heaven he gave to them, alleluia, alleluia. The people repeat this verse. Then the leader says: "Men eat the Bread of angels, alleluia, alleluia". The people recite: "Glory be to the Father, to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, it is now and ever shall be, amen." This states the Trinitarian mystery that Jesus reveals to His followers, and sums up the restoration that Christ achieved by His sacrifice on the Cross. Jesus makes all things one again, as they were before Adam ate that apple. So shall it be forever. Amen is our way to say: so be it.

We remember that God sent the angel Gabriel to ask Mary whether she would freely cooperate in salvation by mothering God Himself. The Magnificat summarizes her response, the great results, and why we honor her. For the first vespers of Corpus Christi, Thomas composed this antiphon: "O how loving is your spirit, Lord! To show sweet kindness to your children, you provide the most delicious heavenly Bread! You fill the hungry with good things, and send away empty the haughty rich." This verse reminds us that Mary bore the Bread of Heaven, Who provides that very body and blood to us in the Eucharistic way. It honors the most exalted human besides Jesus Himself. His mother is clean of original sin. As such, she was ready to mother God. This God-man, Jesus, is the first completely unified human since Adam split himself by sin. He is the one who unites us by salvation, redemption, and in the Mass, by providing Himself to us, body, blood, soul and divinity.

You recall that we come from God and go to Him. So union with Him is our purpose. Receiving the Eucharistic Christ unites us intimately. He reached out to us by taking human nature on, so that He won't frighten us away. He appears as one of us, instead of in His infinite glory. In our present defective condition, we can't observe His full glory, so we observe His humanity. Then He prolongs His presence among us by hiding even His human nature under the humbler appearance of bread and wine. We can approach Him in this form without fear, to increase our love. He makes Himself perfectly approachable, perfectly acceptable, so great is His love.

That's why St. Thomas in his Magnificat antiphon for second vespers says: "O holy Banquet, in which Christ is received, in which the memory of his Passion is renewed, in which the soul is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given us, alleluia!" Here Thomas reminds us that the Mass reenacts Jesus coming to us, or incarnating as a human, so that He could offer his human life for us. "Greater love than this no one has, that he give his life for his beloved." The Mass also reenacts Jesus resurrecting, and thereby transcending all the limits of his body. That escape from bodily limits enables Him to present Himself to us under the veil of bread and wine. That's the way that we receive Him, in a holy banquet. This part of the Mass reenacts the Last Supper where Jesus first gave Himself to his disciples in bread, which is His body, and wine, which is His blood.

So Thomas writes petitions for us to ask Jesus for continued blessings. "At the supper to which all are invited, Christ Jesus gives His Body and Blood for the life of the world. In His presence we beg: *Give us eternal life, O Bread of heaven!*" The people respond: "And wine to gladden men's hearts. Alleluia, alleluia. The leader recites the glory be, and the people respond with the verse: "At the supper..." This dialog says in human terms what Jesus did with His Eucharistic presence. As usual, we humans can say only a bit of what we know, and we know only a bit of what happens in this great mystery. But as we repeat our celebration of Corpus Christi year after year, the reality of what we speak deepens. We come to know, step by step, more about this Love, Who is God, and Who invites us to love Him in return. He initiates the loving process, and we respond.

Back in the Middle Ages, monks prayed together every three hours, so the community praised God enough that the group prayed almost always. Individuals could pray always, as Scripture says. The community woke up after every three hours to pray at night. This maintained the glory and praise that will be perfected in heaven, where we can pray constantly, without distraction. Today, we skip the night prayers. So I will provide only the offices said for evening prayer (Vespers), early morning prayer (Prime), mid-morning (Terce), noon (Sext), and mid-afternoon (None). Those of you with some Latin will notice that *prime* is Latin for first, *terce* for third, *sext* for sixth, and *none* for ninth. Vespers is the twelfth hour, but uses the Latin word for evening.

The psalms said for each recited office are tuned to the Bread of Life, but we will not go into them. In the morning, we say the Benedictus, or Simeon's words when he sees Mary, Joseph and the Child in the temple. They were there to dedicate Him to the Lord. Jews dedicated their first-borns to the Lord in memory of salvation history, especially the death of Egyptian first-borns in Exodus times. Simeon praises God, Who has let him live to see the Messiah. The antiphon that Thomas chose to book-end this canticle is: "I am the living Bread come down from heaven. If anyone eats this Bread, he shall live forever, alleluia."

Thomas wrote the following petitions, to which we answer: "Blessed is he who will eat bread from the tables of your heavenly kingdom!" "Christ Jesus, Priest of the new and eternal covenant, on the altar of the Cross you offered a perfect sacrifice to your Father, teach us to offer it with you. Great King of peace and justice, you consecrated bread and wine as a sign of your sacrifice, make us victims with yourself. True Adorer of the Father, your spotless sacrifice is offered by your holy Catholic Church to the ends of the earth, unite in your Body those whom you fill with the one Bread. Manna from heaven, you nourish the Church with your Body and Blood, make us walk in the strength of this food. Invisible Host at our banquet, you stand at the door and knock, come to us, sup with us, and let us sup with you." This dialog invites us to the mystery that goes on infinitely.

The close of Prime is this prayer: "Lord Jesus, in this wonderful Sacrament you have left us the memorial of your Passion. Grant us the grace to adore the hidden presence of your Body and Blood with such faith that we may always feel within ourselves the effects of your redemption. This we ask of you, Lord Jesus, en-

throned with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God forever. Amen.” Together with related psalms, this prayer reminds us of what God has done for us, first in the Old Testament of love, and then in the New. Like Manna, the Eucharist nourishes us as we plod through life’s desert.

Terce is a shorter prayer, for which Thomas chose this antiphon: “I have greatly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer, alleluia.” The short reading he selected is from Wisdom 16:20: “You nourished your people with food of angels, and furnished them bread from heaven, ready to hand, untoiled for, endowed with all delights and conforming to every taste.” This more full description of manna foreshadows the actual bread of heaven, Christ our Lord, in the Eucharist. The verse after this reading is: “I will go in to the altar of God, alleluia.” The response is: “I will receive Christ, and he will bless me with youthfulness again, alleluia.”

Sext is also short, using the antiphon: “During the meal Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, alleluia”. The reading is from Proverbs 9:1-2: “Wisdom has built her house, she has set up her seven columns, she has dressed her meat, mixed her wine, yes, she has spread her table.” The verse is: “You furnished them bread from heaven, alleluia”. The response is: “Endowed with all delights, alleluia.

None rounds out the liturgy. Thomas selected the antiphon: “They came to know the Lord Jesus in the breaking of the bread, alleluia”. The reading, from Acts 2:42, 47: “The brethren devoted themselves to the apostles’ instruction, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, praising God and winning the approval of all the people.” Verse: “Stay with us, Lord, alleluia. Response: “It is nearly evening, alleluia.” In this set of prayers and psalms, Thomas reminds us of the experience at Emmaus. On the way there, two disciples were complaining about Christ’s death. They had expected that He would conquer the Romans, free the Jews, and establish His Messianic kingdom. It was not yet clear that Jesus had done much more. He had redeemed all mankind from all sin by being the sacrificial lamb, dying to cleans all. He had set the stage for followers to form a Church that would reenact His salvific sacrifice, and be the heavenly Messianic kingdom. Most of all, He had established the Eucharist, so that they recognized Him in the breaking of the bread.

Altogether, this liturgy celebrates in magnificent prayers and songs the great work of Jesus in making His resurrected self available to all who follow. I have studied it often, and still find new insights every time I review it. Repeating it is even better, for it dawns upon us gradually what a mystery Jesus revealed to us. That is great for the mind. But the love He pours forth upon us in the Eucharist is even more available to the heart. His followers bask in this love, and enjoy it with maximum benefit. Thomas’ poem, a hymn, helps celebrate.

Verbum Supernum Prodiens	Hymn for the Blessed Sacrament	Literal Translation
Verbum supernum prodiens, Nec Patris linquens dexteram Ad opus suum exiens, Venit ad vitae vesperam.	The word at God's right hand came forth, And shining still as God on high, Descended to the gloom of earth, For man's redemption doomed to die.	The celestial Word advanced Only going from Father's right hand To do His work He came to the evening of his life.
In mortem a discipulo Suis tradendus aemulis, Prius in vitae ferculo Se tradidit discipulis.	Betrayed by one he loved, and led To cruel death at treason's hand, Upon that latest eve, he fed With his own flesh the chosen band.	To death by a disciple Treasonous turning against Him First in life He served a dish Giving Himself to his disciples.
Quibus sub bina specie Carnem dedit et Sanguinem: Ut duplicis substantiae Totum cibaret hominem.	He giveth in its twofold kind The saving flesh, the cleansing blood, That every man his love may find, And fill his soul with heavenly food.	What under two kinds Flesh and blood he gives As two substances, is Complete nourishment for men.
Se nascens dedit socium,	Born man, he makes himself our kin,	Born to give us kinship

Convalescens in edulium,
Se moriens in pretium,
Se regnans dat in praemium.

O salutaris hostia,
Quae caeli pandis ostium:
Bella premunt hostilia,
Da robur, fer auxilium.

Uni trinoque Domino
Sit sempiterna gloria:
Qui vitam sine termino
Nobis donet in patria. Amen

He gives his body at the board,
He dies and is the price of sin,
He reigns, and is our sweet reward.

O Fount of Life! O Saving Host,
That heaven's high door hast open laid,
War presses hard, our hope is lost
Without thy strength and powerful aid.

Omnipotent Triunity,
To thee be endless glory given;
Grant us eternal life with thee
In our sweet fatherland of heaven. Amen.

Converting Himself to edibles,
Dying as the ransom
He reigns, given for the price.

O saving host,
Which opens heaven's door
Enemies press war upon us,
Give strength, be our help.

One and three Lord
Glory be to the eternally;
Life with out end
Grant us in fatherland. Amen