

2019 CORPUS CHRISTI

Last Sunday afternoon I went with great excitement to the theatre in our Museum to watch the Gisborne Choral Society act out and sing Gilbert and Sullivan's 'Yeomen of the Guard'. As a young man I had Chorus parts in two Gilbert and Sullivan operettas- 'The Mikado' and 'The Pirates of Penzance' and just loved it. I frequently play melodies from various Gilbert and Sullivan shows on my CD player and enjoy singing along with them. But the difference between Gilbert and Sullivan on my CD and a live performance like last Sunday is like the difference between a hamburger and a T-bone steak. For 2 glorious hours I was transported into another dimension as Gilbert's crazy lyrics and Sullivan's jolly music enveloped me. At the end I clapped and clapped until my hands ached.

I returned home singing out loud the final marvellous song 'I Have a song to sing O!'. I felt so happy.

But I know that as much as I love Gilbert and Sullivan, it falls infinitely behind my delight in the Mass- the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we have something far greater than any Gilbert and Sullivan show.

Nobody would risk their life to come and watch 'The Yeomen of the Guard'. But throughout the centuries millions of people have taken extraordinary risks to come to be at Mass. In Rome during the long years of persecution, hundreds of kilometres of underground caverns- we now call them Catacombs- were dug in order for Christians to have a safe place to attend Mass. Christians risked being thrown to wild animals in the Coliseum or being crucified along the Appian Way if they were caught at Mass. They came anyway- so great was their hunger for the Body and Blood of Christ.

During the days of persecution in England in the 16th Century, priests like St. Edmund Campion- the patron Saint of our wonderful College- would slip into England from France and be hidden in the homes of courageous Catholics in order to bring the Mass to the Catholic faithful. Many of the priests were caught and like St Edmund Campion were hanged, drawn and quartered at Tyburn.

My Grandparents walked an hour both ways to attend Sunday Mass year in, year out.

Why the sacrifice? Why the risk?

It wasn't to be entertained as at a Gilbert and Sullivan show. It was to encounter and commune with God.

When we receive Holy Communion at Mass, we receive Jesus Christ, Who is the 2nd Person of the Holy Trinity. We receive God.

When those sacred words- given to us by St Paul in our 2nd Reading- are spoken by the priest, acting in the Person of Christ: "This is My Body, which is for you", "This cup is the New Covenant in My Blood" -the very essence of the bread and wine are changed. They are no longer bread and wine. They are the living, real presence of the Resurrected Christ... Christ as He is now. It is Christ as He is now; not as He was before His Resurrection.

What a privilege it is to receive Him.

And the marvellous thing is that He yearns to come to us. He loves us passionately and wants to be united with us in Holy Communion. He implores each one of us to come and be bonded in love with Him during those sacred minutes.

The spirit of Gilbert and Sullivan was evoked during the Concert last Sunday afternoon. But we know that they were not physically present.

At every Mass, Jesus' spirit is evoked in the Readings, the Homily, and the community love between all the people. But in the consecrated Host and Precious Blood it is not just Christ's spirit that is present. In the Eucharist, Jesus Himself is really, substantially present. It is Him that we are receiving when we consume the Host and the Precious Blood.

No wonder faith-filled Christians throughout the centuries have taken outrageous risks for the privilege of receiving the Eucharist.

Perish the thought- but last Sunday afternoon if I had day-dreamed my way through the concert, I would have left unfulfilled. And so it is at Mass. While Jesus' presence is guaranteed, we must be switched on if we are to be touched by His presence. This requires effort.

We must join in the hymns with gusto.

We must call out the responses in voices louder than a strangled mutter.

We must listen with our hearts during the Eucharistic Prayer so that our 'Amen' after the Doxology is faith-filled and profound.

When we hear the bells rung as the Host and Precious Blood are elevated let our heartfelt prayer be "My Lord and My God."

When we receive Holy Communion let our response to the words “The Body of Christ” and “The Blood of Christ” be a profound ‘Amen’ spoken from the depths of our being.

The Eucharist must never be a thing we do by rote. Our presence must be full and active. Every sense, every fibre of our beings must be open and responsive as we lift up our hearts to the Lord, truly and substantially present.