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A Vision and a Miracle

St. Juliana of Liège (1193-1258), also known as "of Cornillon," had a vision. Orphaned at age five, she was entrusted to the care of Augustinian nuns at the Convent of Mont Cornillon, just outside of Liège in what is now Belgium. There she developed a special devotion to the Blessed Sacrament while working in the monastery's leprosarium (a hospital for souls suffering from leprosy). At 16, she saw a vision of a bright, full moon, but with a very dark spot in the center. While staring perplexed at the spot, she heard a voice explain to her that the moon symbolized the Church and the dark spot represented the lack of a feast in honor of the Blessed Sacrament. She was convinced that the voice was that of Christ Himself. Wishing for the establishment of such a feast, but knowing she was powerless to do anything about it, she kept the visions to herself.

The vision was repeated over a 20-year period, and after being elected prioress, only then did she tell her confessor, who related it both to the Bishop of Liège, Robert de Thorete, and to his archdeacon, Jacques Pantaléon, who later became Pope Urban IV (r. 1261-1264). They, too, were devoted to the Blessed Sacrament, a devotion that had become popular in the northern countries of Europe, particularly in Belgium and most notably in Liège, likely in response to the Albigensians of southern France, who denied that the Eucharist was a sacrament.[1]

Peter of Prague, meanwhile, was, by all accounts, a good and holy priest — but one having doubts. Doubts about transubstantiation — whether the words of Consecration do, in fact, change the bread and wine into the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ. While on a pilgrimage to Rome, he stopped in the small Umbrian town of Bolsena, 90 miles south of Florence, and celebrated Mass there above the tomb of St. Christina, located in the church named for her. As soon as had he spoken the words of Consecration — *Hoc est enim Corpus Meum* ("For this is My Body") — Blood from the consecrated Host began to drip over his hands onto the altar and the corporal (the cloth on which the Host and Chalice are placed during the Canon of the Mass). Instinctively, he tried to hide the Blood; then, realizing Its significance, he wrapped the bleeding Host within the Corporal, and as he lifted It, some Blood dripped onto the marble floor in front of the altar. Those bloodstains remain to this day.

Peter went immediately to the city of Orvieto, ten miles away. On his way, he passed a large boulder on the side of a cliff which miraculously split in two as the Host passed by. That

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rock is now known as the *Sasso Tagliato*: "cut stone." Staying at Orvieto at the time was the former Jacques Pantaléon, now Pope Urban IV.

Peter told the Pope of all that had occurred, and on hearing the account Urban immediately sent emissaries to perform a full investigation. Convinced of the veracity of the miracle, and recalling the visions of St. Juliana and the devotions in Liège, Urban established a universal feast in honor of the Blessed Sacrament.[2] He charged St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), lector in the Dominican Priory of San Domenico in Orvieto at the time, with composing the liturgies for the feast and its octave, as well as an Office honoring the Holy Eucharist as the Body of Christ.[3] Tolomeo of Lucca, in his history published between 1312 and 1317, states:

> "By order of the same pope [Urban IV], Friar Thomas also composed the Office for Corpus Christi … This Corpus Christi Office Thomas composed in full, including the lessons and all the parts to be recited by day or night; the Mass, too, and whatever has to be sung on that day. At attentive reader will see that it comprises nearly all the symbolic figures from the Old Testament, clearly and appropriately relating them to the sacrament of the Eucharist."[4]

Instituting the Feast

One year later, in August 1264, the Pope introduced St. Thomas' work and by means of the papal bull *Transiturus de Hoc Mundo* established the Feast of Corpus Christi, which is believed to be the first papally approved Universal Feast for the Latin Church.[5] While Holy Thursday commemorates the institution of the Eucharist, the washing of the Apostles' feet, the institution of the priesthood, and the agony in the Garden, the Feast of Corpus Christi focuses solely on the Holy Eucharist. Traditionally, the feast is celebrated on the Thursday after Trinity Sunday, Thursday having been chosen to associate it with Holy Thursday.

Urban wrote, possibly in reference to St. Juliana:

> "On one occasion we also hear…that God had revealed to some Catholic that this feast needed to be celebrated throughout the Church; We therefore thought it appropriate to establish it so that, in a dignified and reasonable manner, the Catholic faith may be vitalized and exalted…May every year, therefore, a special and solemn feast of such a great sacrament be celebrated, in addition to the daily commemoration of the Church, and we establish a fixed day for it, the first

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> Thursday after the eighth of Pentecost.
>
> Although this sacred sacrament is celebrated every day in the solemn rite of Mass, We believe it is useful and dignified that a more solemn feast should be celebrated, at least once in the year, especially to confuse and refute the hostility of heretics."[6]

After establishing the feast, and under Urban IV's orders, the small town of Orvieto built a newduomo (cathedral) in honor of the miracle and to commemorate and house the Corporal, which is kept in a golden shrine and is still exhibited. On the Feast of Corpus Christi, the Corporal is taken in procession throughout the town. Some have observed that the Blood spots on the cloth represent Christ's profile.

For the feast, St. Thomas composed the Office, liturgy, and hymns. For the Office, Thomas wrote two versions, *Sapientia aedificavit* and *Sacerdos in aeternum*. Given how much they mirror each other, scholars have now concluded that they most likely represent first and final drafts (see here).

Hymns to Our Eucharistic King

The liturgy included a sequence (a great hymn chanted or recited before the reading of the Gospel). Throughout the centuries, the Roman Rite gradually came to include numerous sequences for various feasts, but with the reforms of Pope St. Pius V (r. 1566-1572) only four were retained, one of which was St. Thomas's *Lauda Sion Salvatorem* for Corpus Christi, the last two stanzas of which comprise the hymn *Ecce Panis Angelorum*:

> Sion, lift thy voice, and sing / Praise thy Savior and thy King / Praise with hymns thy Shepherd true / Strive thy best to praise Him well / Yet doth He all praise excel / None can ever reach His due.
>
> See today before us laid / The living and life-giving Bread! / Theme for praise and joy profound! / The same which at the sacred board / Was, by our Incarnate Lord / Given to His Apostles round.
>
> Let the praise be loud and high / Sweet and tranquil be the joy / Felt today in every breast / On this festival divine / Which records the origin / Of the glorious Eucharist.
>
> On this Table of the King / Our new Paschal offering / Brings to end the olden rite

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> / Here, for empty shadows fled / Is Reality instead / Here, instead of darkness, Light.
>
> His own act, at supper seated / Christ ordain'd to be repeated / In His Memory divine / Wherefore now, with adoration / We the Host of our salvation / Consecrate from bread and wine.
>
> Hear what holy Church maintaineth / That the bread its substance changeth / Into Flesh, the wine to Blood / Doth it pass thy comprehending? / Faith, the law of sight transcending / Leaps to things not understood.
>
> Here, beneath these signs, are hidden / Priceless things, to sense forbidden / Signs, not things, are all we see / Flesh from bread, and Blood from wine / Yet is Christ, in either sign / All entire, confessed to be.
>
> They too, who of Him partake / Sever not, nor rend, nor break / But entire, their Lord receive. Whether one or thousands eat / All receive the self-same meat / Nor the less for others leave. Both the wicked and the good / Eat of this celestial Food / But with ends how opposite! Here 'tis life; and there 'tis death / The same, yet issuing to each / In a difference infinite.
>
> Nor a single doubt retain / When they break the Host in twain / But that in each part remains / What was in the whole before / Since the simple sign alone / Suffers change in state or form / The Signified remaining One / And the Same for evermore.

(Here begins the hymn *Ecce Panis Angelorum*):

> Lo! Upon the Altar lies / Hidden deep from human eyes / Bread of Angels from the skies / Made the food of mortal man / Children's meat to dogs denied / In old type foresignified / In the manna Heaven-supplied / Isaac, and the Paschal Lamb.
>
> Jesu! Shepherd of the sheep! / Thou thy flock in safety keep / Living Bread! thy life supply / Strengthen us, or else we die / Fill us with celestial grace / Thou, who feedest us below! / Source of all we have or know! / Grant that with thy Saints above / Sitting at the feast of love / We may see Thee face to face.

The long hymns which St. Thomas composed for the Feast include shorter portions still

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commonly used during Benediction: the *Panis Angelicus*, the *Tantum Ergo*, and *O Salutaris Hostia*.

The *Panis Angelicus* is included in the *Sacris Solemniis*, which St. Thomas wrote for Matins:

> At this our solemn feast / Let holy joys abound / And from the inmost breast / Let songs of praise resound / Let ancient rites depart / And all be new around / In every act, and voice, and heart.
>
> Remember we that eve / When, the Last Supper spread / Christ, as we all believe / The Lamb, with leavenless bread / Among His brethren shared / And thus the Law obeyed / Of all unto their sire declared.
>
> The typic Lamb consumed / The legal Feast complete / The Lord unto the Twelve / His Body gave to eat / The whole to all, no less / The whole to each did mete / With His own hands, as we confess.
>
> He gave them, weak and frail / His Flesh, their Food to be / On them, downcast and sad / His Blood bestowed He / And thus to them He spake / "Receive this Cup from Me / And all of you of this partake."
>
> So, He this Sacrifice / To institute did will / And charged His priests alone / That office to fulfill / To them He did confide / To whom it pertains still / To take, and the rest divide.

(Here begins the *Panis Angelicus*):

> Thus, Angels' Bread is made / The bread of man today / The Living Bread from heaven / With figures dost away / O miraculous gift indeed! / The poor and lowly may / Upon their Lord and Master feed.
>
> Thee, therefore, we implore / O Godhead, One in Three / So may Thou visit us / As we now worship Thee / And lead us on Thy way / That we at last may see / The light wherein Thou dwellest aye.

The *Tantum Ergo* is from the last two verses of the *Pange Lingua*, which Thomas wrote for Vespers:

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> Sing, my tongue, the Savior's glory / Of His Flesh, the mystery sing / Of the Blood, all price exceeding / Shed by our Immortal King / Destined, for the world's redemption / From a noble Womb to spring.
>
> Of a pure and spotless Virgin / Born for us on earth below / He, as Man, with man conversing / Stayed, the seeds of truth to sow / Then He closed in solemn order / Wondrously His Life of woe.
>
> On the night of that Last Supper / Seated with His chosen band / He, the Paschal Victim eating / First fulfils the Law's command / Then as Food to all His brethren / Gives Himself with His own Hand.
>
> Word-made-Flesh, the bread of nature / By His word to Flesh He turns / Wine into His Blood He changes / What though sense no change discerns / Only be the heart in earnest / Faith her lesson quickly learns.

(Here begins the *Tantum Ergo*):

> Down in adoration falling / Lo, the sacred Host we hail / Lo, o'er ancient forms departing / Newer rites of grace prevail / Faith for all defects supplying / When the feeble senses fail.
>
> To the Everlasting Father / And the Son Who comes on high / With the Holy Ghost proceeding / Forth from each eternally / Be salvation, honor, blessing / Might and endless majesty. Amen. Alleluia.

And *O Salutaris Hostia* comes from *Verbum Supernum Prodiens*, which he wrote for Lauds:

> The Word descending from above / Without leaving the right hand of His Father / And going forth to do His work / Reached the evening of His life.
>
> When about to be given over / To His enemies by one of His disciples / To suffer death, he first gave Himself / To His disciples as the Bread of Life.
>
> Under a twofold appearance / He gave them His Flesh and His Blood / That He might thus wholly feed us / Made up of a twofold substance.

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> By His birth He gave Himself as our companion / At the Last Supper He gave Himself as our food / Dying on the cross He gave Himself as our ransom / Reigning in heaven he gives Himself as our reward.

(Here begins the *O Salutaris Hostia*):

> O saving Victim, opening wide / The gate of heaven to man below! / Our foes press on from every side / Thine aid supply, Thy strength bestow.
>
> To Thy great name by endless praise / Immortal Godhead, One in Three / Oh, grant us endless length of days / In our true native land with Thee. Amen.

Lastly, St. Thomas wrote a hymn of thanksgiving, *Adoro Te Devote*:

> I devoutly adore Thee, hidden deity / Who art truly hidden beneath these appearances / My whole heart submits to Thee / Because in contemplating Thee, it is fully deficient.
>
> Sight, touch, taste all fail in their judgment of Thee / But hearing suffices firmly to believe. / I believe all that the Son of God has spoken / There is nothing truer than this word of Truth.
>
> On the cross only the divinity was hidden / But here the humanity is also hidden. / Yet believing and confessing both / I ask for what the penitent thief asked.
>
> I do not see wounds as Thomas did / But I confess that Thou art my God. / Make me believe much more in Thee / Hope in Thee, and love Thee.
>
> O memorial of our Lord's death / Living Bread that gives life to man / Grant my soul to live on Thee / And always to savor Thy sweetness.
>
> Lord Jesus, Good Pelican / Clean me, the unclean, with Thy Blood / One drop of which can heal / The entire world of all its sins.
>
> Jesus, Whom now I see hidden / I ask Thee to fulfill what I so desire / That the sight of Thy Face being unveiled / I may have the happiness of seeing Your glory. Amen.

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Theological Poetry

What is so striking about these works of St. Thomas is not only their beautiful poetry but how each forms a sequential exposition of his Eucharistic theology. They mirror his teachings as found in the third part of his *Summa Theologiae*, but in a way less oriented toward instruction and more oriented toward contemplation and adoration. As Pope John Paul II said in his 2003 encyclical on the Holy Eucharist, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*:

> "Let us make our own the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, an eminent theologian and an impassioned poet of Christ in the Eucharist, and turn in hope to the contemplation of that goal to which our hearts aspire in their thirst for joy and peace." (n. 62)

Despite his obvious eloquence, however, St. Thomas himself was quick to admit, in reference to his own Corpus Christi compositions:

> "No words suffice to describe the sweetness of this Sacrament, in which spiritual delights are tasted at their very source and the exceeding charity of Christ in His Passion is called to mind."[7]

As circumstances in the temporal sphere continue to trend in a concerning direction, and the Passion of Christ is renewed ever more in His Mystical Body the Church, let us stay close to Our Lord and His Most Sacred Heart, truly present in the Most Blessed Sacrament.

O Sacrament most holy, O Sacrament divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment Thine!

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[1] James A. Weisheipl, O.P., *Friar Thomas D'Aquino: His Life, Thought, and Works* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press, 1974), p. 178.

[2] The Miracle of Bolsena is formally recognized by the Church and thus included in the

Vatican International Exhibition of Eucharistic miracles, which is available online here. The miracle is also included by Joan Carrol Cruz in her book, *Eucharistic Miracles* (TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 1987; see here).

[3] Urban sought out St. Thomas Aquinas, at least according to the most common version of the account. Another version says that the miracle actually came to the attention of St. Thomas first, who then approached Urban IV to create a feast solely dedicated to the Holy Eucharist, and it was at Aquinas' urging that Urban IV recognized the miracle at Bolsena and established the feast.

[4] Tolomeo of Lucca, *Historia. Ecclesiastica.*, lib 22, c. 24, col. 1154; quoted in Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino*, p. 177.

[5] Geoffrey Wainwright, *Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 248.

[6] Pope Urban IV, Bull *Transiturus de hoc mundo* (Aug. 11, 1264). Latin text available here.

[7] St. Thomas Aquinas, *Opusculum 57, in festo Corporis Christi,* lect. 1-4.

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