

Why Do People Process with the Body of Christ on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ?

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Among my childhood memories are the local parades. I have never cared for televised parades, because it was so much fun to be on the streets as the floats and bands moved by my family and me. So that we would have a good spot, my mother would gather the family together early, with lawn chairs for her and my grandfather. Of all the local civic parades, the Fourth of July was always the most lavish and festive. The parade contained local civic workers such as police officers and firefighters, as well as other organizations that gave back to the community. There was always music. Local bands played as they marched down the street. All those parading on feet or on floats were there to show their pride in the community and/or nation.

The Catholic Church has a similar ritual event called a “eucharistic procession.” In many respects, it is our custom of “parading.” Most of us are familiar with the eucharistic procession on Holy Thursday. After the communion procession, the body of Christ is processed by priest and people to a place of reservation, where the faithful gather for prayer through the evening. In a eucharistic procession, the body of Christ is placed within a monstrance (a device that holds the consecrated host in order for it to be seen and most often used for adoration). After the Communion procession, the monstrance is carried in procession through the streets of the city or town, as people pray and sing. In well-prepared processions, a canopy covers the monstrance and alongside it are candle bearers and an individual incensing from a thurible. Sometimes the streets will be decorated with flowers, banners, or other meaningful items to show the importance of this procession.

Ideally, the procession moves from one church to another. Today, with the vast distance between churches, the procession often returns to the church of origin. When the procession arrives at the ending place, the people are blessed with the body of Christ.

The most common option for a eucharistic procession outside of Holy Thursday is on the solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ. This solemnity, which was given formal and universal status in the Roman Catholic Church in 1264, celebrates the real presence of Christ under both species. In procession, however, only the consecrated host is processed in the monstrance. A eucharistic procession is fitting for this solemnity because the solemnity and the procession both celebrate the liturgical assembly’s belief in the real presence of Christ. The people give their public witness to that faith by processing through the streets praying and singing and honoring Christ Jesus. In procession are a pilgrim people processing with Christ Jesus, who is present not only in their hearts but also in the sacred host. Each time we receive Christ’s body and blood and leave the worship space, we process with Christ who transforms us more and more into his holy pilgrim people in order that we might give daily witness to Christ.

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