

## Last Sunday after Pentecost, 25<sup>th</sup> November 2018

In the Gospel for last Sunday, the (slightly confusingly named) Sixth Sunday remaining after Epiphany, Our Lord spoke of the proverbial mustard seed which “becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come, and dwell in the branches thereof” (Mt 13:32). In the Gospel for this Sunday, which is actually *the* ‘Last Sunday’ (last in the Church’s year, that is), he again talks of “birds of the air” gathering together: “Wheresoever the body shall be, there shall the eagles also be gathered together” (Mt 24:28). Again, he is talking about the coming of the kingdom of heaven, though in the more apocalyptic sense of “the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven” (Mt 24:30).

The image of “eagles”, and in this context behaving more like vultures, gleefully tearing into a carcass, is not a particularly pleasant image to contemplate, but nevertheless is one consonant with the whole devastating vision of Christ’s apocalyptic discourse. The fact that this image is somewhat unpleasant, made something I read a number of years ago which referred to it quite startlingly, and in that sense quite memorable: “the Flesh of Jesus has drawn not only His Divine Person into a miraculous mystic state, but also the Father and the Holy Ghost by real and true concomitance. What celestial attraction! So that of God, as well as of angels and of men, are those great words true, that where the Body is, there will the Eagles be gathered together!”

These words, that I have just quoted, come from Fr Frederick William Faber’s book, *The Blessed Sacrament*, and “Body” and “Eagles”, for obvious reasons, each begin with a capital letter. The “Body” is the Body of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament and the “Eagles” the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity. This identification of the “body” with the Eucharist is confirmed by the fact that the same Greek word for “body”, σῶμα, is replicated just two chapters further on in St Matthew’s Gospel, during the Last Supper, when Jesus will say to his disciples: “This is my body” (26:26). Faber was of course elaborating upon this so as to draw our attention to an important detail with regard to the Eucharist, which he refers to by its technical term, “concomitance”.

You may, or may not, have heard of “concomitance”, but you should be familiar with the idea that under the species of bread there is not simply the Body; nor simply the Blood under that of wine, but (to quote the present *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which in turn is quoting from the Council of Trent): “the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, *the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially* contained [italics as in the text of the *Catechism*]” (CCC 1374). Faber obviously extends this concomitance, and in typically exuberant language, to include not only the Lord’s “Divine Person [...]”, but also the Father and the Holy Ghost by real and true concomitance”, though presumably not in the same way as the Person of the Son, who alone of the Holy Trinity was specifically made incarnate in Christ.

The term “concomitance” means an ‘accompanying’, a ‘coming together’, the ‘together’ reflected in the initial “con-”, the same “con-” as we heard sung during the Gospel: “*Ubi cumque fuerit corpus, illic congregabuntur et aquilae* (Wheresoever the body shall be, there shall the eagles also be gathered together [*congregabuntur*])” (Mt 24:28). The “eagles”, therefore, literally ‘congregate’, and while we could observe the “body (*corpus*)” as being that of the Eucharist: “This is my body (*hoc est corpus meum*)” (Mt 26:26), and the “blood, together with the soul and divinity” (CCC 1374), as such accompanying this same “body”; so we can perhaps also understand the saying in St Matthew as indicating a ‘congregation’, a ‘congregation’ who have “gathered together” for the Eucharist, the Mass: *you*, in other words!

And what have you come here for, if that’s not too much of a personal question?! Yes, to be present at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and, if you are properly disposed, to receive Holy Communion: the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Christ. You have therefore congregated here, if you don’t mind me saying, like those eagles-cum-vultures (anyway, you couldn’t really complain, given that they have already been compared to the Persons of the Most Holy Trinity!). The image of the body and the vultures, when you think about it, is very well suited to the dynamics of Holy Communion. The word  $\sigma\tilde{\omega}\mu\alpha$ , which St Matthew uses for “body”, originally meant a ‘dead body’ (hence the carcass and the

vultures); though, at the time of writing, it predominantly meant a 'living body'. Indeed, in Christ's Passion, celebrated in the Eucharist, his body was 'dead'; though in his Resurrection, of which the Eucharist is also a memorial, this same body was very much 'living', and of course remains so.

In Holy Communion, we feast upon the Body of Christ as if it were a carcase; hopefully, like hungry vultures, eagerly tucking our beaks in. Vultures, as with all other scavengers, are truly lazy creatures, not hunting and killing for their own prey: and so they are just like us! Christ offers himself and feeds us, without us really having to do anything at all. If we are the "eagles", or rather vultures, in the Eucharist; there is another bird which in turn would, without doubt, represent Our Lord himself: the pelican. And you probably know why. The mummy pelican was believed to feed her babies by piercing her breast with her own beak so as to give them the blood (as illustrated, for example, in medieval bestiaries, books cataloguing beasts): a no less gory image perhaps than the vultures feeding on the body; though one which nevertheless exemplifies as such the wonderful love of the Lord.



Whether lazy vultures or helpless little pelicans; Our Lord, in his love, feeds us with his own Body and Blood, together with his Soul and Divinity, and in a certain sense with the whole of the Holy Trinity. What more could we possibly want?!