

History of the Feast of Corpus Christi Bolsena/Orvieto





Cathedral in Orvieto, Italy

History of the Feast of Corpus Christi and what happened at Bolsena/Orvieto Italy

In looking back over our Church History, we can compare Jesus to an artist who blends all the proper colors, supplies muted tones and pastels to create a masterpiece of balance. Or He is like a stage director whose task is to set a stage, build a series of events, and move a series of characters through Exposition, Conflict, and final, successful Conclusion.

The Middle Ages was such a period in our Church History. The Lord allowed our Church to plunge itself into the depths, to wallow in corruption and heresies. Many of the clergy and laity fell away from the Church. There was tremendous confusion as to what to believe. (Does this sound similar to the Church of Today?) The heresies were being expounded by strong figures within the church. Jesus painted these people and events as turbulence, or dark tones on the canvas. But He balanced the dark with the light and radiance of St. Francis of Assisi, St. Dominic, St. Anthony of Padua, and for our purposes in this episode of the Eucharistic Miracle of Bolsena, **ST. THOMAS AQUINAS, DEFENDER OF THE EUCHARIST.**

Another character of great importance is **POPE URBAN IV**, nee James Pantaleon. In his younger years, James had been influenced greatly by Blessed Juliana of Liege, a **THIRD CHARACTER** in the Eucharistic Miracle. Juliana was a Sister in Liege. From her earliest years, she had been plagued by a vision of the moon, streaked with a black band. She saw this vision day and night. She could not get it out of her mind. Then, she had a vision from Our Lord Jesus in which He explained the meaning of the moon streaked with a black band. **Our Lord explained to her that the moon represented the Christian year with all its feasts. The black band represented the one feast which was missing from the Christian Calendar year, one in honor of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.**

After the apparition, she devoted the rest of her life trying to



Above: Bolsena, Italy Below: Altar of Saint Cristina



initiate a feast in the Church in honor of the Blessed Sacrament. As is the case with any of God's people who have a devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, Juliana's life was filled with suffering and persecution. She became prioress of her community, and began her quest for a feast day for the Blessed Sacrament to be instituted. Because of this, she was accused of stealing, misappropriations of funds, and was thrown out of her community twice. This occurred in spite of support of James Pantaleon and other high ranking members of the Belgian Church. Her life ended in poverty and sickness in 1258, without her having seen this dream realized.

James Pantaleon was raised to Pope Urban IV, and became very involved in the many problems to which the Church was being subjected. But the seed of Jesus, planted by Blessed Juliana, remained in the recesses of his consciousness until the Lord was ready to put it to work.

In the Eleventh and Twelfth Centuries, a particular heresy, **BERENGARIANISM** became very strong throughout Europe. It denied the true presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. It gathered strength, and was followed by false mysticism, pantheism and free love movements. It was being accepted by many of the intelligentsia within the Church, who were in turn, spreading it to the people.

This brings us to the last character in Our Lord's drama, who appeared like a bright star that streaked across the sky, and disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. This was a priest, called **PETER OF PRAGUE**. He was the catalyst that produced the event, which brought all these people together, and accomplished the Lord's Goal.



Above: Interior of the Cathedral of Orvieto

THE MIRACLE

In 1263, Peter of Prague seemed to appear out of nowhere, and once the miracle had occurred, he disappeared, and was never heard from again. He was having great doubts about the physical presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. Peter was a good man, of great virtue. He was traveling on Pilgrimage towards Rome. He hoped that by praying at the tomb of his namesake, St. Peter, and at the tomb of one of the greatest sources of strength of our Church, St. Paul, he would be filled with the faith he needed to remain in his ministry.

On his way to Rome, he stopped for the night at the little village of Bolsena, about 70 miles north of Rome. He stayed at the Church of Santa Christina, a local heroine saint of the early days of the church. He had heard about the miraculous altar of the saint, and asked to celebrate Mass at that altar. He was looking for all the help he could get. He knew only one way to ask. **HE HAD FAITH, BUT HE DIDN'T KNOW IT.** He didn't go outside the church for help. He didn't look to humans for help. He knew that the only way he could regain his faith, become whole, was through Our Lord Jesus. So the following morning, he did the only thing he knew how to do. He went to the altar of St. Christina to celebrate the Mass.

As had become his custom, he prayed before the Mass for the grace which would give him faith. He prayed fervently to God. His prayer was the same. He begged for the faith to believe without any doubt that the gift we had been given at the Last Supper, that he had been given on the day of his ordination, was truly the Body of Christ. At the time of the Consecration of the Mass, he elevated the host high above his head, and said the words of consecration. As he said "THIS IS MY BODY", the unleavened bread turned into Flesh, and began to bleed profusely. The blood fell onto the Corporal. The priest, shocked, and not knowing exactly what to do, wrapped the host in the Corporal, folded the Corporal, and left the Altar. As he left, drops of blood spilled on the marble floor in front of the altar.

Pope Urban IV (James Pantaleon) was in Orvieto at the time, which is a short distance from Bolsena. We begin to see the Lord's plan unfold. As they say in the theater, "The Plot Thickens". Peter of Prague immediately went off to tell him what had happened. There's nothing recorded in history to tell us what went on in the mind of our Pope when this priest came to him. Had this burning of Blessed Juliana for a feast day in honor of the Blessed Sacrament stayed with him all through the years? Did he get a flashback of his younger days with her?

WE DO KNOW WHAT HE DID. He immediately sent a bishop back to Bolsena to speak to the priests at the church, in order to verify what Peter of Prague had told him, and bring back to Orvieto the Sacred Host and Corporal. We also know that the Pope didn't wait for the Bishop to return. He, followed by the entire population of Orvieto, went out to meet the Bishop. They met at a place called the Bridge of the Sun. When he saw the Eucharistic Miracle, Pope Urban IV went down on his knees at the sight of his Lord manifested before him in physical form on the Sacred Corporal.

The Pope had already made his decision, or perhaps the decision had been given to him by the Lord, that this was truly a miracle. He received the Miraculous Corporal from the Bishop and brought It back to Orvieto. He went to the balcony of the Papal Palace, raised It reverently, showing It to the people of the town. Proclaiming that the Lord had truly visited His people, he declared that the Eucharistic Miracle of Bolsena truly dispelled the heresies that had been running rampant.

At about this time, a follower of Blessed Juliana's contacted the Pope through a Bishop in Liege. She repeated the request of Blessed Juliana for a feast day in honor of the Blessed Sacrament. We are not sure of the sequence of events. Assuming that Pope Urban IV had been given the inspiration to institute the feast of Corpus Christi solely as a result of the Eucharistic Miracle of Bolsena, this additional prodding by the Lord might possibly have been what was needed to convince him. We do know that throughout the next year,



Above: Saint Thomas Aquinas

the Pope occupied himself almost exclusively to the task of writing the Papal Bull, TRANSITURUS, which was published on August 11, 1264. That Papal Bull instituted the Feast of Corpus Christi, in honor of the Blessed Sacrament.

Enter St. Thomas Aquinas. When the Pope made the decision to create this new feast in honor of the Blessed Sacrament, he asked St. Thomas Aquinas to write the Liturgy for the Mass. The Hymns created for this feast are considered to be among the greatest in our Church. O SALUTARIS and TANTUM ERGO are two of the beautiful hymns composed by St. Thomas for this feast.

But that's not all. Our Lord Jesus had a very special reason to get St. Thomas Aquinas involved in the Eucharistic Miracle of Bolsena, and the Feast of Corpus Christi. St. Thomas was a brilliant member of the Body of Christ. In 1269, St. Louis IX, King of France, asked for St. Thomas to settle an argument among the members of the University of Paris. **What argument would that be, but the physical presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.**

St. Thomas prayed fervently, because he realized that he was but an instrument of the Lord, and that an answer that would satisfy intellectuals would have to come from divine inspiration, rather than from his own mind. After much prayer, he wrote a treatise which was first accepted by the University, and then later by the whole church. After having written this treatise, we're told that he received an apparition from Our Dear Lord Jesus. In this apparition, Our Lord said to him: **"YOU HAVE WRITTEN WELL OF THE SACRAMENT OF MY BODY"** At this, St. Thomas went into an ecstasy, and levitated. He was above the ground so long that many of his associates were able to witness the levitation.

This is by no means the end of the story, but it does conclude the series of events the Lord put into motion many years before when he gave the sign on the moon to Blessed Juliana of Liege.

IN BOLSENA - The pieces of marble on which the blood spilled

were taken up from the floor of the altar, and placed into reliquaries. There are four stones, each showing the blood of the Sacred Host. Three of them were placed in a special Altar, called the Altar of the Miracle, in the Church of Bolsena. The fourth one was placed in a special reliquary, which was built later on. It was placed on the wall behind the original altar of St. Christina, where the miracle took place. Each year, on the feast of the Miracle, this reliquary is carried through the town in solemn procession.

There was a phenomenal occurrence regarding the stones of Bolsena. It was assumed that the blood had stained the marble floor, and what was seen was on top of the marble. It is well known that liquid can't penetrate marble. It beads on top, and stains marble. A priest came to Bolsena to request a piece of the Sacred Marble to use as a relic for the altar of a new church that was being built. When the officials of the church attempted to chip off a piece of the stone to give to the priest, they found that the blood had indeed **PENETRATED THE MARBLE**, causing it to become a part of the marble. Needless to say, they didn't give the piece of marble to the priest for the new church, nor have they given any pieces of the sacred stone to anyone to this day.

The new chapel dedicated to the Eucharistic Miracle of Bolsena is off to the left of the main altar in this very antique church. There is a deacon there who allows pilgrims to witness the Sacred Marble pieces, which are on the altar behind thin panes of glass. He tells the story of the miracle, as well as other reported miracles over the years. One better known local miracle that he tells about is that at various times throughout the years, individuals and groups of people have been known to see the face of Our Lord Jesus on the stones. These people also reported receiving sudden healings.

A Papal Bull was written by Pope Gregory X on September 11, 1272. Indulgences were granted to faithful who venerated the Eucharistic shrine at Bolsena. He is also responsible for a new Church being built.

Pope Paul VI visited the shrine in 1976, and raised it to the level of a Minor Basilica. He verified the Miracle, and reiterated the indulgences granted by his predecessor.

The Church is named in honor of St. Christina, a Virgin Martyr of the early Church, and also the Patron Saint of Bolsena. She was a young girl of fourteen when she embraced Our Lord Jesus and the Christian Faith. Her father, Urbanus, was Prefect of the city, whose job among other things, was to kill and torture Christians. He was very upset when he learned of her conversion. He was more than upset when she smashed all the gold and silver images of gods in their home, and sold the gold and silver to give the money to the poor.

Urbanus was a just man. He loved his daughter Christina very much. First he pleaded with her to deny Christianity, this new religion. When all his persuasion failed, he had no choice but to treat her in the same way he treated other Christians. Though his heart was heavy, he beat her, tied a large stone around her neck, and threw her into Lake Bolsena. The tradition is that all the water in the lake was absorbed by the stone, and Christina was found standing in the empty lake on the stone, her feet imprinted in the rock. That rock is embedded in the altar of St. Christina, where the Eucharistic Miracle took place.

Many other tortures were inflicted upon Christina, which had no effect on her, including cutting off her tongue and her breasts, being thrown into a vat of boiling oil, submitting to the bite of venomous snakes, and other atrocities. She finally succumbed to an arrow which was thrust into her heart. She died in the year 303 a.d.

There are in the church, catacombs, dating back to the early Christian times, where St. Christina was originally buried. The Miracle of the Eucharist occurred on the altar of St. Christina, where her remains are now buried. There are many beautiful sculptures done by the famous Italian, Della Robbia. _

There is a very special priest at the Church of Bolsena, **MONSIGNOR DON GIACOMO PURI**. He is the custodian of the Shrine of the Miracle of Bolsena. Msgr. Puri is a very spiritual man, who has devoted his life to the Miracle of Bolsena. Much of the information about this church and its background, as well as material on the Eucharistic Miracle of Bolsena was given to us by him. He took us on a tour of the shrine, explaining in detail the events of the Miracle. He also is responsible for a small Guide Book of the Basilica, which is written in English, French, Italian and German.

IN ORVIETO - A CATHEDRAL WAS ERECTED IMMEDIATELY - Again, we are witness to the Lord's power. When He wants something done, it gets done. The old Cathedral, Santa Maria de Vescovado, was in a shambles. Rain was coming through the roof, and grass was growing in between the cracks of the pavement. Major ceremonies had been transferred to other churches, because nobody wanted to use the run down old Cathedral.

Pope Urban IV took up residence at Orvieto in 1261, and stayed there until 1264. Prior to the Eucharistic Miracle in 1263, not enough interest could be worked up among the wealthy people of Orvieto to finance a new Cathedral. After the miracle, funds began pouring in almost immediately. They couldn't house the magnificent Eucharistic Miracle in a broken down Cathedral. Plans were drawn up, and work began. In 1281, a rich Cardinal died during a visit to Orvieto. In his will, he asked for his tomb to be built in an exquisite church, and left the money to do it. The Cathedral was on its way.

When it was completed in 1310, an entire side chapel was devoted to the Eucharistic Miracle of Bolsena. A reliquary of gilded silver, decorated with translucent enamels, was constructed for the Eucharistic Corporal. It was placed in a marble tabernacle above the altar in the chapel. There are paintings on all the walls of the chapel, telling stories of various Eucharistic Miracles. On the right wall, the entire story of Bolsena and Orvieto, including the declaration of the Papal Bull, verifying the Eucharistic Miracle, is depicted. On the

left wall are depicted various other Eucharistic Miracles.

A very important point is made here regarding the use of paintings in churches. Over the years, complaints have been made about all the paintings we have in Catholic Churches. “They’re distracting. They’re a waste of money.” The use of paintings in this chapel were for the purpose of instruction, as were the paintings in most churches. We must remember that in those days, there were no printing presses. Most books were printed by hand, which meant that there were not many books available. Since there were not many books, there was no reason to learn to read. Only monks and the very intelligent knew how to read. Therefore, paintings were used to instruct the people about our faith.

The Eucharistic Miracle of Bolsena shows the power of the Lord in many ways. In researching the events and people involved, at first it seemed like a series of disjointed people and occurrences. We read about the miracle, and found that Pope Urban IV and Thomas Aquinas were involved. In researching Pope Urban IV, we became aware of Blessed Juliana of Liege, and her vision of the Moon. We also found that James Pantaleon, who later became Pope Urban IV, was greatly influenced by Blessed Juliana. If that was not enough, we came to realize that Thomas’ role was much greater than writing the Liturgy of the Feast. He used all that he had learned about the Eucharist as a result of the Miracle of Bolsena in his treatise 5 years later in Paris, to defend the Eucharist from the Sophisticates and Students of that place and time.

As a plot for a movie, or mini-series on television, or a novel, the events leading up to the Eucharistic Miracle of Bolsena would be considered too contrived. And yet, as far as we can tell, the Lord’s plan was instituted 60 years prior to the miracle, in a city at the easternmost part of Belgium, with the birth of Blessed Juliana of Liege. The instrument he used as a catalyst was a priest from Prague, which is a great distance from Bolsena, Italy. The expression, “THE LORD WORKS IN MYSTERIOUS WAYS” is personified in this instance. If it were not the Lord’s plan, it would be too outrageous

considered plausible.

mentioned before about limiting the powers of God, of
him into a box. The Eucharistic Miracle of Bolsena and
is a perfect example that the Lord's power is not limited,
certainly does not allow Himself to be put in a box.



The Second Vatican Council describes the Eucharist as “the source and summit of the Christian life” (Lumen Gentium 11)

*This Is My Body,
This Is My Blood
Miracles of the Eucharist
Book I*



Bob and Penny Lord

**Corpus Christi
Bolsena/Orvieto
Booklet
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**By Bob and Penny
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Catholic**

**This pamphlet is an excerpt from "This Is My Body, This
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