

EUCHARIST AND CHURCH

A 17th Century philosopher, when asked what advantage people might expect from his teaching, said, "I will not bring you into a foreign country, but I may perhaps show you some important features of the country you inhabit that you may not have noticed." The Apostolic Exhortation is engaged in a somewhat similar task. It sets out for us the Eucharistic life of the Church, the insights, convictions and reflection of the Church. It contains no novelty, reveals no secrets hitherto completely inaccessible. The whole subject matter flows from the tradition of the Church, from its understanding and practice. But it does draw our attention to important facets and features of the Eucharist in relation to the Church that we may have missed or paid inadequate attention to. It calls us and enables us to think reverently and carefully about the celebration that is at the heart of the Church's life and of our own.

For the Eucharist is central in the life of the Church. The point and purpose of this talk is to set out some key aspects of the relationship as they are found in our document, and to engage in some reflection on them. We are not engaged merely in outlining facts, but in the sort of consideration that will enhance our own Eucharistic lives and our participation in the life of the Church at the same time. The very closeness and importance of the relationship between Eucharist and Church has been less than high-lighted in many presentations of the Faith. In the interests of a systematic exposition people have felt constrained to deal with the two in different chapters. The relationship was often a later discovery for people whose minds had been shaped according to catechism or textbook. It is essential for both the one and the other that we have an integral vision that embraces the two.

The Second Vatican Council was very careful to underline the inseparable bond between liturgy and Church. "The liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the fount from which all her power flows." That is centrality indeed. The Eucharist is not just a special gathering or activity of the Church. It is the activity in which the Church (and we as Church) is most truly Church, doing that which is most distinctive of it, exercising its fullest and deepest life.

In speaking of Church and Eucharist the document lays great stress on the role and activity of the Holy Spirit. Several Fathers of the Church saw the blood and water flowing from the side of Christ on the Cross as the birth of the Church from the side of Christ and as the pouring out of the Spirit on the Church and through the Church on the whole world. The initiation of people into the Church, the formation, building up and governance of the Church, its missionary thrust and activity, all derive from the active presence of the Holy Spirit. And of course the central activity of the Church, the celebration of the Liturgy, is the work too of the Spirit. The Spirit does not substitute for our part or render it superfluous; rather does it enhance our efforts and make them acceptable in the sight of God.

The Spirit has been present and active in the whole story of salvation, guiding it in the midst of human unfaithfulness and weakness, of disaster and disarray. The thread of God's purpose runs through it all and binds it together. Mary conceived her Son through the power of the Holy Spirit; God comes to live among his people in a radically new way. The Spirit is present at the Baptism in the Jordan, and led Jesus into the wilderness to be tempted. Through the Spirit, as we have seen was born the Church from Christ on the Cross – the Exhortation alludes to the bride of Christ being born from his side, as Eve was born from the side of Adam. On the evening of the Resurrection the Risen Lord

imparts to his Church the power to forgive sins. And at Pentecost we have the Spirit empowering the Church and sending it on its mission to the whole world. We find the Spirit guiding the infant Church along ways that clearly reflect the life of Christ. St. Luke in his account of the early Church leaves no doubt that the life and mission of Jesus are being continued by Peter, Paul and the congregations that they form around them. And he leaves no doubt about the way in which the Spirit strengthens and guides the Church. The Spirit draws us into the life and work of the Church, adapts us to it, and enlivens us in it. The Spirit forms and maintains the structures of the Church, and forms each of us in his/her particular role within it.

This brings us to the role of the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist. At the Consecration of the Mass, just before the Institution narrative in which the priest recounts once more what Jesus did at the Last Supper, he invokes the Holy Spirit to come down upon the gifts on the altar so that they may become the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The Spirit makes Christ present in His Passion, Death and Resurrection, so that at this time and place, at this juncture of our lives, we may offer ourselves with Jesus' self-offering which is made present, and be nourished in the deepest sense by His Body and Blood. The great work of the Spirit was and is to make Christ present in His saving reality, present initially in the womb of Mary, present under the species of bread and wine in the Eucharist, and present in the Church, which glories in the title of the Body of Christ, and through which the Lord brings to fruition what began at the Annunciation and was consummated on Calvary. In each of the three cases we are dealing with the Body of Christ; they constitute different modes of His presence.

At the Last Supper Jesus left the Church the Eucharist as His great memorial, 'in memory of him'. The great deed that God has done for us was the sacrificial death of His Son leading to the resurrection. The Church, as the bride of Christ, awaiting and preparing for his final coming, is called to celebrate his memory each day. We are essentially God's saved people, called to thank and praise Him for what He has done in Christ. The logic of this is in line with what Christ has commanded; it is this that draws us together; it is this that we have in common; this is our fundamental identity both as communion and as individuals. This is the gathering that primarily constitutes the Church. Through the Eucharist Christ makes us sharers with himself; he draws us into his saving activity, makes us into a communion of love based on his own love, and sends us out to complete his mission. Through our celebration then Christ forms us as Church, imbues us with his spirit and purpose, and determines the style and tone of his Church. It follows from this that there is no basis for distinguishing between the institutional Church and some Church that is more real, more genuine or more perfect. There is one Church, the Church of Jesus Christ, a pilgrim Church, composed of weak and blind human beings, a Church always called to repentance.

We depend on our ordinary human language in expressing our faith, and here particularly the nature and functioning of the Church. The Church is always careful in its use of words, and we need always to be careful in speaking of the Church. There is a temptation to use too readily a vocabulary drawn from secular life, or to think in misleading terms. For instance, in our familiar world Chief Executive Officers direct the operation of large commercial and administrative entities. It is an easy step to see the Pope as CEO of the universal Church with individual Bishops as local CEOs. A Eucharistic reflection will put the record right here. The Church is not an international corporation like General Motors. It is a communion of brothers and sisters in Christ, with Christ in their midst. The local Bishop leads his people in their celebration of the Eucharist. That is the primary

realisation of the Church. The Church is realised in every such gathering throughout the world. The Pope is the successor of St. Peter as Bishop of Rome; he is the centre of unity in the Church, the guardian of the faith, the one who strengthens his brothers and sisters, and he has oversight over the whole Church. He is the servant of the servants of God. The images available to us have enormous influence in shaping how we see the world. It is essential that images taken from our celebration of the Eucharist and from Scripture be dominant in our own minds as we strive to understand the work of the Church and understand our own lives. The Last Supper opens up a vision of the Church and of relations within the Church which we hope will flow into our thinking about the secular world as well. Again the devotional life of the Catholic is deeply Eucharistic. But as the Fathers of the Church insisted frequently, our relationship with Christ present in the Eucharist must reflect the fact that we are members of His Body, the Church, and that he is present in a special way in the poor. We are never concerned only with ourselves. We are members of Christ's Body, always on our way to fuller communion.

At the Institution of the Eucharist Jesus told the Apostles, "Do this in memory of me." The coming together to do this is at the heart of the life of the Church, and it is the key to that life. The actual form of our celebration has been built up over the centuries, and in the course of the centuries has been modified and renewed in a variety of ways. Most recently we have seen the changes introduced by Vatican II; one understands that more modifications of these are in prospect. But one reality is always there. 'Christ among you, your hope of glory' is St. Paul's way of putting it. This has application both to the Church and to the Eucharist. It is St. Paul's 'great mystery'. But Church and Eucharist and the relation between them are mysteries in another sense too. They are too much for us to understand fully or to live adequately. One theologian makes the point that we must not think of a mystery of the faith as something to be mastered bit by bit like hostile territory. Rather is it something that deepens as we enter into it. It is like looking into a dark tunnel so that you can gradually discern more and more, but with a sense that there is more, not less, to be discovered.

But there is something else. We participate in the Eucharist before we have any real understanding of it. Perhaps it is not completely inappropriate to see a resemblance between our participation and children playing. Someone has said that understanding rocket science is child's play compared with understanding child's play. One understands that there is a lively debate among psychologists and educationalists about the nature and role of child's play. And the role of play in adult human life is a matter of importance and controversy. But children and adults have the basic wisdom to keep playing without knowing exactly what they are doing. The celebration of the Eucharist is too great and rich a reality to be fully analysed or fully articulated. We learn in the doing before we learn in the classroom. We learn to hear God's word, to praise and thank God in the assembly of the faithful, to receive Communion in communion with others. We do not go to Mass to learn; we go to do those things that I mentioned. But we learn at this crucial and basic level. Granted this foundation, the Christian Living class can make its own special contribution. It stands out clearly that there can be no substitute for the Eucharist. No set of values, however good, can take its place. Our Christian values are inherent in it and flow from it, but they do not replace it. This has special application where our schools are concerned. Here as elsewhere we have to be counter-cultural. Whether one is dealing with business, or education or sport, our culture lays great stress on system and analysis, on setting specific goals, on checking each component. We have to be very careful in applying these to the Eucharist; for to be a member of the Church is to be immersed into the mystery, the mystery that is greater than us and greater than our minds.

I outlined the role of the Holy Spirit, the presence of Christ in different modes as the crucial relationship between Church and Eucharist. This led us to the Church as essentially a communion of love, and to the role that memory plays in the gathering of the Church. Something else to which our document draws our attention but might otherwise escape our notice is the beauty of the Eucharistic liturgy. One has to say that it does not expand on this theme to any great extent. But it certainly recognises it as important. It does make the point that if we are to think about beauty in relation to the Eucharistic celebration we must not expect it to conform to our preconceived notions. It will be a beauty distinctively its own. We can go farther; since we are essentially speaking of the beauty of the Incarnation and Redemption radiated on the human scene, we can and ought to look for the light it throws on our conception of the beautiful outside the context of liturgy altogether. We are speaking of the presence of Christ among us, forming the Church in the Eucharistic celebration, and rendering us sensitive to all that is good and appealing as it evokes a response from us. Our celebration of its nature is full of praise and thanksgiving, of joy and peace. It is rooted in Sacred Scripture and in the tradition of the Church, at once deeply personal and deeply communal. It brings to light all that is best in the members of the Church, is marked by reverence for God and for all that God has made; is redolent of personal dignity and freedom, and evokes an imaginative, but disciplined spontaneity. It draws out all that is best in Christian people; they are literally on their best behaviour and give of their best. It is no wonder that we have a sense that our celebrations of the Eucharist should be 'something beautiful for God'.

Very relevant to our theme was the recent reopening of St. Patrick's Cathedral. It was a joyful gathering of thankful people of the diocese in their varied cultures, age-groups, and walks of life about their Bishop. It was reverent, ordered, dignified. The Cathedral itself represented the history of the Auckland Diocese. It is not in itself recognised as a fine architectural gem. But it is ours, the fruit of and witness to our story. The disdain that sees it as no more than a colonial example of Gothic romanticism misses the point, and shows a perfectionism to be avoided in liturgy and in life. For it is the enemy of the individual and of the community in history.

The setting then linked past and present. It reflected us back to ourselves but was not the focus of attention. The whole ceremony was a Eucharistic celebration in which the best we had in colour and light and sound, in materials and utensils, in attire and vestments, blended into a splendid symphony to the glory of God. A harmony and graceful ease pervaded the whole celebration. There was no sense that some part had broken loose and set itself up as a stage piece. All was subordinated to worship.

I am fortunate to be able to look out my window on a fine day and see the well-tended green lawn surrounded by a great variety of bushes and flowers; over the seminary one can see the Waitemata with the Waitakeres and the blue sky beyond. To describe it the words, beautiful, glorious, splendid, stunning, come to mind. It catches and holds one's attention. The same adjectives would not be out of place in describing the liturgy of the Reopening. But they would be even more appropriate for describing the New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. In the Eucharist earth is joined to heaven, the beauty of the one points towards the beauty of the other.

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