

The Eucharist, a Mystery to be Lived: A Reflection on

POST-SYNODAL
APOSTOLIC EXHORTATION
SACRAMENTUM CARITATIS
OF THE HOLY FATHER
BENEDICT XVI
TO THE BISHOPS, CLERGY,
CONSECRATED PERSONS
AND THE LAY FAITHFUL
ON THE EUCHARIST
AS THE SOURCE AND SUMMIT
OF THE CHURCH'S LIFE AND MISSION

Introduction

This talk on the Eucharist, a Mystery to be Lived aims at outline a Eucharistic way of living the Christian life based on divine Revelation and Catholic Theology. In the second section there will be a clear focus on Eucharistic living as specific to the three groups to which the encyclical *Sacramentum Caritatis* is explicitly addressed, namely the Lay Faithful, Priests and Consecrated Persons. Finishing with a treatment of the transformation that the Eucharist is meant to effect in all of us, individually and as Church.

1 John 2:1 My children, I am writing this to prevent you from sinning; but if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the upright.

2 He is the sacrifice to expiate our sins, and not only ours, but also those of the whole world.

1 John 4: 10 Love consists in this: it is not we who loved God, but God loved us and sent his Son to expiate our sins.

11 My dear friends, if God loved us so much, we too should love one another.

19 Let us love, then, because he **first** loved us.

20 Anyone who says 'I love God' and hates his brother, is a liar, since whoever does not love the brother whom he can see cannot love God whom he has not seen.

21 Indeed this is the commandment we have received from him, that whoever loves God, must also love his brother.

God's Initiative

These texts from the First Letter of John do not mention the Eucharist explicitly. Nevertheless, they succinctly express the main theme of this talk: The Eucharist is God's initiative. The Eucharist is not our creation or symbol; it is in the first place God's symbol (1), God's creation. When we live the Eucharistic mystery we are living God's mystery.

The source and model of Eucharistic living is the Holy Trinity. This is constantly made manifest in the Liturgy itself. In the Liturgy we have a great movement which echoes the movement of salvation itself.

The movement within the Divine Liturgy is from the Father through the Son in the Holy Spirit and back to the Father.

We do gather as Church to celebrate the Liturgy. However it is not on our own initiative or out of a desire to "make community". It is the Holy Spirit who calls us together who in Christ makes of us the New People of God. It is the Holy Spirit who makes community out of our communion.

More specifically, the Holy Spirit transforms the substances of bread and wine into the substances of the Lord's Body and Blood.

Holy Spirit transforms persons who receive the Lord's Body and Blood into the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ.

The Eucharist is the sacrament of Jesus' self-giving and his self-gift

Whatever we do in Eucharist is a faith-filled response to God's gift and initiative. The Eucharist is not our own creation or invention.

It is God's gift and symbol given to us in a form that is suitable for us in our state of being creatures with both material and spiritual aspects. i.e. sacrament

We don't make the Eucharist relevant to us; we allow the Eucharist to speak to us in our own time and listen to what God tells us through the Eucharist, what He has to say to us through Christ's death and resurrection that we celebrate and that is made present to us in the Eucharist.

(1) Ever since the middle ages and the entrance of Aristotelian philosophy into Western Theology, there has been an unfortunate tendency to oppose "symbol" and "reality". Whenever we hear someone say "is this real or is it just a symbol" we know that this (false) dichotomy is at work. In the early Church the symbols — especially the Eucharist — were seen as containing the reality, not as opposing it or even "standing for something".

This is precisely why it is of vital importance to stress that the Eucharist is God's Symbol, not a mere human symbol that might conceivably deviate from the reality it was meant to symbolise and could not contain what it symbolises in the way that the Eucharist does. God's symbols, the Sacraments, even though they have the form of symbols actually go beyond human symbolising in that they are effective symbols — i.e. they cause what they symbolise and as St Thomas says, they cause by symbolising. Because it is God who is symbolising they actually cause what they symbolise e.g. Baptism symbolises cleansing, but in symbolising cleansing the rite (God's symbol) actually cleanses the soul of sin.

The main point is that when we talk of the sacraments as "symbols" there must be no implication that the symbol is not the reality — the symbol is the reality, but presented in a different mode.

Sacrament-Presence

Jesus promised to be with his disciples, and hence us, until the end of time. The Eucharist is the chief way in which this promise is realised.

In the Eucharist the Lord is present sacramentally and substantially – a different mode of being present. A presence that is bodily but also personal.

Sacrament-Sacrifice

Sacrifice of Calvary is made present to us in our own time. The Eucharist is a sacrifice not on account of anything we do or any destruction that happens or is imagined to happen locally, but on account of the once-and-for-all Sacrifice of Calvary. In the Eucharist Calvary is made present to us i.e. re-presented. In other words the Eucharist is the sacrament of Calvary. The essence of sacrifice (separation of body and blood) is emphasised symbolically in the separation of the species (appearances of Bread and Wine). The Sacrifice is thus still signed symbolically⁽²⁾ even though the Lord we receive in Communion is the risen glorified Lord as He now is.

Sacrament-Communion

Sacramentum Caritatis 77. Significantly, the Synod Fathers stated that "the Christian faithful need a fuller understanding of the relationship between the Eucharist and their daily lives. Eucharistic spirituality is not just participation in Mass and devotion to the Blessed Sacrament. It embraces the whole of life."

This observation is particularly insightful, given our situation today. It must be acknowledged that one of the most serious effects of the secularization just mentioned is that it has relegated the Christian faith to the margins of life as if it were irrelevant to everyday affairs.

Today there is a need to rediscover that Jesus Christ is not just a private conviction or an abstract idea, but a real person, whose becoming part of human history is capable of renewing the life of every man and woman. Hence the Eucharist, as the source and summit of the Church's life and mission, must be translated into spirituality, into a life lived "according to the Spirit" (*Rom 8:4ff.*; cf. *Gal 5:16, 25*).

Whatever happens in our lives as a result of our participation in the Eucharist is in the first place God's doing.

The Eucharist essentially and inevitably makes our being Christian a communitarian reality – not just individuals seeking God through his word, but God really, truly and substantially present to us under the appearances of Bread and Wine. Eucharist makes the Church into the place where Jesus can be found.

(2) Regarding Calvary, the same care must be taken not to oppose symbol and reality (as already explained in footnote 1), but to affirm that Calvary is really and truly present but in a symbolic (but none the less real) mode rather than the horrific, bloody manner of the actual event. It is the once-and-for-all event of Calvary that is really made present to us, but through the sacramental rite. The reality of sacrifice, and in particular Christ's death on the Cross, involves the separation of blood and flesh — it is this essential aspect of sacrifice that is symbolised by the separation of the two elements and the double consecration, as given to us by Christ himself at the last supper when He was looking to the sacrifice that would take place the next day.

The Eucharist is the sacrament of the Lord's Sacrifice on Calvary. Our sharing in that is to bring to the Eucharist our lives and offer them up in their totality and place them at God's service.

Communion brings about union with the Lord whom we receive which should lead to unity with all the others who have received him.

This prefigures the heavenly banquet at the end of time, the Eschaton. During the celebration of the Eucharist "earth unites with heaven in one great act of worship" but those who participate on earth should be changed, transformed by this celebration so that their lives will in some real way begin to resemble their future heavenly existence. 1 John 4:19 *Let us love, then, because he first loved us.*

The Eucharist and the Evangelization of Cultures

Today people often and almost automatically affirm that Gospel is enriched by cultures. What often forgotten or ignored is that the Gospel must challenge, convert and transform every human culture that it meets. The Eucharist has a central role in this challenge and transformation – how the culture reacts to the Eucharist as presence, sacrifice communion and transformation will be indicative of how deeply the Gospel has taken root there.

The question of the Eucharist and culture does not pertain only to ethnic cultures, but to academic cultures also. In particular we have to look at our philosophical and theological culture. Some philosophies are just not suitable or adequate to help us gain insights into the faith. In the 1960's and 70's there was a strong move to what was proudly described by its practitioners as "secular theology". They would look at the Christian revelation in the light of modern secular society and values, apparently without even asking whether these values are compatible with what God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ. There was no place for the truly supernatural in this system and all was reduced to economic or social or humanistic terms – all decidedly "this-worldly".

The after echoes of this approach are still with us. The other day I was reading a chapter in a book supposedly about the Eucharist. The author was trying to make sense of the Eucharist so she said that would look at it in the light of her great-uncle's death in the First World War. Now I'm not saying that there is no relationship between the two – Christ's suffering on the Cross and her great-uncle's sacrifice in the war, but she rather has the cart before the horse. It is Christ's death on the Cross that has won us salvation and changed history. It is in the light of Christ's death and resurrection that we look at our own lives and his death and resurrection give meaning to our lives – not the other way around. The Eucharist is not just some funny churchy ritual that we have to explain (or explain away) in our vain attempts at relevance. We should not make the Eucharist relevant to us; we should allow God to make us relevant to the Eucharist.

The Eucharist and the Lay Faithful

In Christ, Head of his Body, the Church, all Christians are "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people he claims for his own, to declare his wonderful deeds" (1 Pet 2:9).

Eucharist is the completion and intensification of the basic vocation that we have all received at our Baptism; the **vocation to Holiness**. This is the first and essential and most important vocation which we all have in common. Before we are called to Marriage, the Priesthood or the Religious life we are all called to holiness. What is more, if we have failed in our vocation to holiness, then all the rest of our lives will have correspondingly less value. This holiness must be clearly evident in the way we live our lives. Holiness makes us more human. How often we hear moral failure excused with the glib comment "To err is human; to forgive, Divine." As if sin were an essential element of being human and the more we sin the more human we are. In fact the opposite is true; sin makes us less human, and the more we sin the less human we become. Jesus Christ is most perfectly human because He is sinless. Associated with the former deeply destructive principle is the attitude that it does not matter if we sin as long as we are not hypocritical about it. I would contend that, while not wanting to turn it into a virtue in itself, in a real sense Hypocrisy is the "homage that vice pays to virtue" because virtue is at least held in esteem as worth having – even if only by pretence. Of course it is genuine virtue and holiness that makes us more human, not hypocrisy – but I hope you get the point.

Consecration of the world to God is the essential and specifically lay participation in the Priesthood of Christ. Lay ministry should not be focused on doing things in church, but on bringing the message of Christ to the world. This primary focus on the world and its need of salvation is the specific note of lay ministry which distinguishes it from the ordained ministry.

Ordained ministry is ordered to lay ministry; it is at the service of lay ministry. Ordained ministry makes lay ministry possible and helps it to be fruitful.

The Eucharist and Priestly Spirituality

Sacramentum Caritatis 80. Priestly spirituality is intrinsically eucharistic. The seeds of this spirituality are already found in the words spoken by the Bishop during the ordination liturgy: "Receive the oblation of the holy people to be offered to God. Understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord's Cross."

Priestly ordained ministry is inseparable from the Eucharist. In many ways the ordained ministry exists for the Eucharist. The two sacraments of Eucharist and Priestly ordination were instituted together. The ordained ministry exists so that the Church may have this special presence of Christ always with her until he comes again. This is a big responsibility. The priest should resemble Christ more and more so that the reality of Christ shines through him and that he is in total harmony with the mystery of the Eucharist.

The Eucharist and the Consecrated Life

Sacramentum Caritatis 81. In the Eucharist, consecrated virginity finds inspiration and nourishment for its complete dedication to Christ. From the Eucharist, moreover, it draws encouragement and strength to be a sign, in our own times too, of God's gracious and fruitful love for humanity. Finally, by its specific witness, consecrated life becomes an objective sign and foreshadowing of the "wedding- feast of the Lamb" (Rev 19:7-9) which is the goal of all salvation history. In this sense, it points to that eschatological horizon against which the choices and life decisions of every man and woman should be situated.

The Eucharistic celebration should be the heart and soul of the Religious community. For a number of reasons the Eucharist has been side-lined by some Religious congregations who have consequently lost focus on Christ and the Church.

The Eucharist and Moral Transformation

The love of Christ as given to us in the Eucharist should have a transforming effect in our lives. This goes beyond merely obeying laws and commandments but is the fruit of the Eucharist transforming all our faculties and everything that we are so that we resemble Christ more and more.

As St Augustine said: ordinary food when consumed becomes part of us. The food of the Eucharist makes us part of Christ.

This is why Pope Benedict has entitled this exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* – the Sacrament of Love. The Eucharist is the Sacrament of the Lord's love for us. It is the sacrament that makes us like him if we allow it and the sacrament that makes us live and act as he did if we are sensitive to the grace of the Holy Spirit in us, the Spirit who will take us back to the Father through the sacramental participation in the one Sacrifice of Christ at Calvary and the receiving this risen Lord in Communion.

This transformation is not merely of the Christian individual but in a real sense firstly of the whole Christian Community i.e. the Church into which we are baptised, whose faith we hold and whose life if nourished by the Eucharist, so that the earthly Church may come to resemble more and more the heavenly Church the New Jerusalem, her goal and model.

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