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Rediscovering the Eucharist



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FOREWORD

I am pleased to present the Proceedings of the 20th Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity on the theme “*The need to continue on our path setting out anew from Christ, that is, from the Eucharist*”,¹ which was held in Rome on 21-23 November 2002 when I was the President of the Pontifical Council, and which closed the series of Plenaries dedicated to the sacraments of Christian initiation.

Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist are the sacraments that constitute the very identity of the Christian who is fashioned and fed by them. For the lay faithful, acquiring a full grasp of their meaning and significance therefore means understanding the very essence of their lives, their vocation, and their mission. The Eucharist is the fullness of the Christian life. It is the summit of the path that we have to take in order to be incorporated into Christ and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, making us capable of confessing the faith: the Eucharist places us face-to-face with the “scandal” of the Incarnation. Like Jesus’ first disciples, we must also be healed from our blindness in order to contemplate his glory, “glory as of a Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth” (*Jn* 1:14). The greatest challenge that we have to take up today is the tendency to live a disembodied faith, a deviant tendency which threatens to undermine the very foundations of the Church which is built on the cornerstone, our Lord Jesus Christ. The Christian identity, which is manifested in the unity between faith and life, is based on the mystery of our Lord’s Incarnation, in which the inseparable unity between the two natures of Christ, divine and human, is realised. This is the source of the Church’s mission to be the sign and sacrament of the Incarnate Word of God in

¹ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Homily on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, “L’Osservatore Romano”, 15-16 June 2001, 6-7.

the world. The Church is constituted as *communio*, to educate her children in the faith, so that they develop ethical conduct reflecting the holiness of the Trinitarian life in the world.

What emerges most evidently from an examination of the present situation is the identity crisis of the baptised lay Christian, caused precisely by the split between faith and life, between the Gospel and culture. It is no coincidence that John Paul II, in *Christifideles Laici*, urges the faithful “to overcome in themselves the separation of the Gospel from life, to again take up in their daily activities in family, work and society, an integrated approach to life that is fully brought about by the inspiration and strength of the Gospel”.² The expression *par excellence* of this matching of life and faith in the dead and risen Lord is the doxology, the dimension of thanksgiving and praise which are, as it were, the warp and weft of the Apostolic Exhortation in which the lay faithful “are invited to hear once again the words of Saint Augustine: “Let us rejoice and give thanks: we have not only become Christians, but Christ himself... Stand in awe and rejoice: We have become Christ”.³

Unity of life leads baptised Christians spontaneously to “hearken to the call of Christ the Lord to work in his vineyard, to take an active, conscientious and responsible part in the mission of the Church”,⁴ because “that life according to the Spirit expresses itself in a particular way in their involvement in temporal affairs”.⁵ For, as the Council says, “they are called by God so that they, led by the spirit of the Gospel, might contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven, by fulfilling their own particular duties. Thus, especially in this way of life, resplendent in faith, hope and charity they manifest Christ to others”.⁶

² JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, n. 34.

³ *Ibid.*, n. 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, n. 3.

⁵ *Ibid.*, n. 17.

⁶ *Ibid.*, n. 15.

When the Holy Father received the delegates to the Plenary Assembly in audience, he reiterated that the special place for education in the faith is the parish, because it is there that the sacramental path of Christian initiation is followed.⁷ This is why John Paul II had previously written, in *Christifideles Laici*, that it was possible to have “post-baptismal catechesis in the form of a catechumenate can also be helpful by presenting again some elements from the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults with the purpose of allowing a person to grasp and live the immense, extraordinary richness and responsibility received at Baptism”.⁸

The papers published here examine the Eucharist from different and complementary points of view, beginning with my own contribution that sets out to show that it is only by recovering both the ritual and theological dimensions of the sacraments of Christian initiation, that parishes can acquire a language that is capable of reaching the hearts of today’s disciples of Jesus, strengthening their identity which is being increasingly threatened by the current process of secularisation. Professor Arturo Elberti, SJ, draws on his detailed historical, theological and dogmatic *excursus* to provide arguments to address a number of essential issues relating to current sacramental practice, in which the natural order is often reversed, ultimately belittling the significance of the sacraments of initiation. Mgr Francesco Pio Tamburrino, the Secretary of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments at the time, shows the intimate unity and topical relevance of the three fundamental dimensions of the Eucharist – sacrifice, communion and presence – that express the offering that Christ made of himself and which enables Christians to offer themselves to their fellow men and women. Professor Matteo Calisi deals with the common priesthood of the faithful and the work of the Holy Spirit in ensuring that the Eucharist transforms the lives of the faithful into an authentic

⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II Address to the participants in the 20th Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity, Saturday, 23 November 2002. (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/speeches).

⁸ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, n. 61.

offering of self. Lastly, there are two papers on the Sunday Eucharist. The first is by Monsignor Vincenzo Paglia, Bishop of Terni-Narni-Amelia, in which he recalls the teachings and the practice of the Church in the early centuries and identifies the celebration of the Lord's Day as the source of the Christian identity and of the Church herself, indicating what the celebration of the Mass is potentially able to offer us, and how it must be more fully appreciated and drawn on. The second paper is by Mrs Anouk Meyer, who says that the Sunday Eucharist is the core and the pillar of the Christian family, around which family life has to be organised. Sharing her experience as a mother, Mrs Meyer emphasises the importance of educating children in prayer, enabling them attend Mass, as far as possible, from the earliest age.

We trust that the ideas offered in this book will stimulate the reader to take a greater interest in acquiring a better and more complete understanding of the significance of the Eucharist in the Christian's life. The book was completed coinciding with the opening of the Year of the Eucharist, which the Pope inaugurated on 17 October 2004 at the conclusion of the 48th International Eucharistic Congress at Guadalajara, Mexico. What better opportunity could there have been to announce, to a humanity riven by hatred, the mystery of *communio*, the miracle of unity brought about by the Eucharist and lived by the Church.

James Francis Card. STAFFORD

Address of His Holiness John Paul II
to the Participants in the Plenary Assembly,
received in audience on Saturday, 23rd November 2002

1. «**T**he grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 *Cor* 13: 13). I address the Apostle Paul’s greeting to the Corinthians to you who have gathered for the 20th Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

First, I greet the President, Cardinal James Francis Stafford, the Secretary, the Undersecretary and all the personnel of the Office. I greet you, dear members and consultors of this Pontifical Council, who come from different countries and continents.

I think of you, brothers and sisters, who represent the variety of experiences of the lay members of Christ’s faithful and serve the Successor of Peter in the sector of responsibility of this Council. As I offer each of you a most cordial welcome, I desire to express my deep gratitude for the generous availability with which you offer your faithful and qualified collaboration.

2. The work of the Plenary Assembly is taking place as we observe the 40th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. The greatest ecclesial event of our time has made the promotion of lay people flow like a strong tide into the river of the Church’s renewed consciousness of being a mystery of missionary communion. On the occasion of the Jubilee of the Apostolate of the Laity in the year 2000, I invited all the baptized to turn again to the Second Vatican Council, to take the documents into their hands in order to rediscover the richness of the doctrinal and pastoral incentives.

As I did two years ago, today I repeat this invitation to the laity. To them “the Council opened extraordinary perspectives of commitment

and involvement in the Church's mission", reminding them of their special participation in Christ's priestly, prophetic and kingly function.¹ For this reason, returning to the Council means collaborating in the continuation of its practical application in accord with the orientations drawn up in the Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles laici* and in the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*. Today we need lay faithful, who are aware of their evangelical vocation and their responsibility as disciples of Christ, to witness to charity and solidarity in all the situations of modern society.

3. The theme you have chosen for your assembly: "*The need to continue on our path setting out anew from Christ, that is, from the Eucharist*" is a theme that completes the itinerary of the sacraments of Christian initiation which began with your reflection on Baptism and Confirmation during the last two plenary meetings. The reflection on the sacraments of Christian initiation naturally draws attention to the parish, the community in which these great mysteries are celebrated. The parish community is the heart of liturgical life; it is the place of catechesis and of education in the faith.² In the parish the process of initiation and formation takes place for all Christians. How important it is to rediscover the value and importance of the parish as the place where the content of Catholic tradition is passed on!

Many baptized people, due to the impact of the strong currents of de-Christianization, seem to have lost contact with this religious heritage. Faith is often confined to episodes and fragments of life. A certain relativism tends to feed discriminating attitudes toward the content of Catholic doctrine and morals, accepted or rejected on the basis of subjective and arbitrary preference. So the faith received ceases to be lived as a divine gift, as an extraordinary opportunity for human and Christian growth, as a meaningful event leading, as conversion of life. Only a faith that sinks its roots in the Church's sacramental life, whose

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Mass for the Jubilee of the Apostolate of the Laity*, 26 November 2000, n. 3; "L'Osservatore Romano", Weekly edition, 29 November 2000, 1.

² Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2226.

thirst is quenched at the sources of God's Word and Tradition, that becomes new life and a renewed understanding of reality, can make the baptized effectively capable of withstanding the impact of the prevailing secularized culture.

4. The Eucharist completes and crowns Christian initiation, "the source and summit of the Christian life".³ It increases our union with Christ, separates and preserves us from sin, strengthens the bonds of charity, sustains our strength during the pilgrimage of life, and gives us a foretaste of the glory to which we are destined. The lay faithful, sharing in the priestly office of Christ, in the celebration of the Eucharist present their lives – affections and suffering, family and married life, work and the commitments they assume in society – as a spiritual offering pleasing to the Father, consecrating the world to God.⁴

The Church and the Eucharist permeate each other in the mystery of *communio*, a miracle of unity among human beings in a world where human relations are often darkened by antagonisms if not actually destroyed by enmity.

I encourage you to keep this centrality of the Eucharist present in your formation and in your participation in the life of the parochial and diocesan communities. It is important always to start afresh from Christ, that is, from the Eucharist, in the full depth of his mystery.

5. A prayer that helps to penetrate Christ's mystery with the vision of the Virgin Mary is the Rosary, which has become a familiar contemplative experience for me and for countless members of the faithful. Dear brothers and sisters, entrust yourselves to Mary with this prayer. In her immaculate womb the human body of Jesus of Nazareth was formed, who died and rose, and who comes to meet us in the Eucharist.

Dear members and consultors of the Pontifical Council of the Laity, to whom I feel particularly bound since as Archbishop of Krakow I was

³ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11.

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 34.

one of your consultors, the Eucharist will make you capable of carrying out your important mission at the service of a “mature and fruitful epiphany of the Catholic laity”.⁵

With these sentiments, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you and to your loved ones.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *General Audience*, 25 November 1998, n. 6; “L’Osservatore Romano”, Weekly edition, 2 December 1998, 19.

Sacraments of Christian Initiation Today: a Pastoral Challenge

JAMES F. CARDINAL STAFFORD

The Sacraments of Initiation are the most splendid forms of God's sacramental pedagogy in the Church. The invisible God can only be revealed perceived through the perception of the senses. In Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist, Christians receive the sacramental imprinting of the Trinitarian life. In *Christifideles Laici*. Pope John Paul II took up once again the theme of the vineyard with which he introduced his Apostolic Letter. He wrote that "the Gospel image of the vine and the branches reveals to us another fundamental aspect of the lay faithful's life and mission: the call to growth and a continual process of maturation, of always bearing much fruit".¹ He highlighted the fruitfulness of the branch connected to the vine. Later, he emphasized the Trinitarian basis of this fruitfulness. "[The Synod Fathers] described Christian formation as a continual process of maturation in faith and a likening to Christ, according to the will of the Father, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit".²

The Pope draws from the Johannine texts the beautiful truth that the Holy Spirit is the fruitfulness of the love of the Father and the Son.

Originally from Baltimore (Maryland), he studied at Loyola College, St Mary's Seminary University and the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. He was elevated to the episcopate in 1976, and was Auxiliary in Baltimore, Bishop in Memphis (Tennessee), and Archbishop of Denver where he worked in the field of ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue. He was appointed President of the Pontifical Council for the Laity in 1996, and was created cardinal on 21 February 1998. On 4 October 2003, he was nominated Major Apostolic Penitentiary and member of the Congregations for the Doctrine of the Faith, for Causes of Saints, and for Bishops, and he is a member of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts.

¹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Christifideles Laici*, n. 57.

² *Ibid.*

The Spirit is the source of the endless fruitfulness of the Trinity in the world. He renders fruitful the *kenosis*, the self-emptying of the Son, according to the inner Trinitarian life of self-giving. The Church's sacramental life is the dispensable mystagogic curriculum in which the form of Christ, dead and risen, imprints and expresses the Trinitarian paradox of the uniqueness of every human being within a loving communion of persons.

The three Sacraments of Initiation are the most important forms of God's pedagogy in the parish. So at our Plenary Assembly in October 1997 we studied the Sacrament of Baptism. And at the Plenary Assembly in March 1999 we studied the Sacrament of Confirmation. At this Assembly we will be studying the Sacrament of the Eucharist. The pastoral challenge lies in the tension in Catholic sacramental theology between an abstract and purely theoretical rationalism and the concrete signs of rituals based upon the symbolic narrative of the Bible. This tension is acutely felt in the parish which is the institutional form of Christ's presence among His people.

In 1997, the emphasis was placed not on abstract concepts but on the meaning and interpretation of the baptismal ritual. For the most part, we attempted a retrieval of the teachings of the Bible and of the catechetical homilies of the Fathers. I will give a few brief reflections on my own current understanding of these Sacraments. I will attempt to explain the pastoral challenge in terms of the parish.

The Sacrament of Baptism marks the beginning of the spiritual pilgrimage of Christians. Baptism is "a mystagogic initiation into the form of the crucified Christ because by being initiated into the Church by baptism one enters into the sphere of the Spirit, who trains believers in receptivity to Christ".³ It is important to note that the Pope makes an essential connection between sacramental and Trinitarian life. The role of the Holy Spirit in Baptism makes it clear that this Sacrament is not simply an initiation into a human community

³ KEVIN MONGRAIN, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs von Balthasar, An Irenaean Retrieval*, N.Y., 2002, 116.

but is also an initiation into the inner communion of the divine Persons in the Trinity.

The parish can form a curriculum of the Baptismal mystagogy with the help of the Fathers of the Church. I recommend St. Cyril, Bishop of Jerusalem in the fourth century: he insists on sacramental realism, but his use of biblical typology serves only to explain the meaning of the rites “not to ensure the connection between saving event and liturgical rite”.⁴ He stresses the way in which the liturgical actions in the present image the scriptural past. By being immersed three times in the baptismal water, the drama of the burial of Christ is repeated in the one being baptized. It means that the baptized is now united with Christ in the likeness of his death and of his resurrection under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. For St. Cyril, the threefold immersion in the baptismal water was a symbol and an imitation of Christ’s three days in the tomb and he instructs the baptized on their identity, “So you in your first immersion imitated Christ’s first day in the earth where he was immersed in darkness”.⁵

St Cyril’s catechetical homilies actually took place in the Church of the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Jesus in Jerusalem. They further developed the sacramental value of the ‘imitation’ of Christ which is symbolized by the Sacrament of Baptism,

“In one and the same moment you died and were born: this saving water was your tomb and your mother... One and the same moment produced these two events, and your [new] birth coincided with your death”.⁶

In instructing the newly baptized, he spoke of the same sacramental relation between symbol and imitation. He said

“We are not really dead, we have not really been buried, we have not really been crucified and raised to life again, but while the imitation is

⁴ E. MAZZA, *Mystagogy*, New York 1989, 164.

⁵ CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Mystagogical Catechesis* 2, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*

only an image, the salvation is real. Christ was really crucified, really buried, and truly raised to life again, and all this grace has been given to us in order that, participating in his sufferings by imitating them, we may really obtain salvation”.⁷

Enrico Mazza, commenting on this passage, says that Christian baptism is “a participation, through imitation, in the real sufferings of Christ”. He further comments, “The object of the imitation is the passion of Christ, the point being that by imitating it, one truly participates in it: ‘participating in his sufferings by imitating them’”.⁸

Baptism is spiritually associated with the Jewish Passover and pilgrimage through the desert from Egypt to the Promised Land. Baptism represents the crossing of the great threshold to life. The parish should use these great biblical events to enhance further the identity and dignity of the baptized.

In a book-length interview, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, Pope John Paul II said that Baptism is foundational for the identity of Christians.

“[Jesus] is... present in each Christian, by virtue of Baptism... It was usual to say, as early as the era of the Fathers, ‘Christianus alter Christus’ (‘The Christian is another Christ’), to emphasize the *dignity of the* baptized and his vocation through Christ to holiness”.⁹

It is *the* liminal experience. It is an experience of passing beyond one age or aeon into another, of being led over a decisive threshold, a passage from darkness into light. Consequently, the Holy Father exhorts the baptized, especially the young, “Do not be afraid! You are children of God!”.

Paul spoke of the *identity* of the baptized with Jesus Crucified and Risen, for they have *imitated* his death and resurrection by being immersed in and raised from the depths of the baptismal water.

⁷ *Ibid.* 2, 5.

⁸ E. MAZZA, *Mystagogy*, op. cit., p. 158.

⁹ JOHN PAUL II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, London 1994, 12-13.

“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. If we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his” (*Rom* 6:2-5).

The baptized have been configured to the passion, death and resurrection of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Through a mystagogic imitation of his Paschal Mystery the baptized participate in a mystagogic initiation into the form of the crucified Christ; and thus into the life of the Trinity. By being initiated to the Church through Baptism they enter into the sphere of the Holy Spirit, who trains the baptized in active receptivity to Christ. They are in communion with him. Henceforth their death can only be understood in light of Christ's death. And Christ's death was not a consequence of sin (cf. *Rom* 5) but of his obedience to his Father.

In 1999 we raised the question, “How does the parish instruct its members in the meaning of the Sacrament of Confirmation?” What does this Sacrament add to the identity of the Christian? The parish should again draw upon the teachings of the Fathers. In a remarkable description of sacramental theology, St. Cyril of Jerusalem establishes the roots of Confirmation.

“Christ was not anointed by an oil or by a physical perfume given by the hand of men. Who established Him in advance as Savior of the whole universe, anointed Him with the Holy Spirit (*Acts* 10: 38). And in the same way as Christ was truly crucified, truly buried, truly risen from the dead, and as it has been granted to you in Baptism to be crucified with Him, buried with Him, risen with Him in a certain imitation, so it is with the chrism. He was anointed with the spiritual oil of exultation, that is to say, with the Holy Spirit, called the Oil of Exultation because He is the source of spiritual joy, and you, you have been anointed with perfumed oil, and become participants in Christ”.¹⁰

¹⁰ CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Mystagogical Catechesis* 3, 2.

When Christians receive the sacrament of the Holy Spirit, they become images of Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah. For the anointing with the holy chrism that follows the baptismal bath is the “sacrament” with which Christ was anointed. This is the Holy Spirit. There is an identity between the descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christ after his Baptism in the River Jordan and the sacramental descent of the Holy Spirit upon Christians in the Sacrament of Confirmation.

As Baptism is the Sacrament of regeneration, so Confirmation is the Sacrament of perfecting the Christian through the gifts of the Holy Spirit. The *holy myron* is a mixture of olive oil, balm and aromatic herbs. This holy anointing, according to Dionysius, “sets in motion the energies given in the sacred bath,” that is, by the waters of Baptism.¹¹ The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth comes to “bear witness to [Jesus]”. Through Confirmation the Spirit gives Christians the spiritual sense or capacity both to become aware of the aroma of the perfume of the hidden God in Jesus and to become themselves the sweet scent of Christ through their virtuous life in the family and in the marketplace. This spiritual aroma of the Christian in the marketplace is the source of the teaching of Confirmation as the Sacrament of Christian maturity.

This year we ask about the meaning of the concrete ritual signs of the Sacrament of the Eucharist. In *I Cor* 11:17-34 St. Paul suggests that the Sacrament of the Eucharist is a dramatized proclamation analogous to Baptism. But this time the symbolic ideas of the first Sacrament, together with that of Confirmation, are surpassed. It is the epitome of the Church. In the Sacrament of the Eucharist, the representation of Christ is so real that we are confronted not just with material nourishment but with the real body and blood of the Lord and with his real death. “For Christ our paschal lamb has been sacrificed”. In *1 Pet* 1: 13-21 the baptized are compared to the people of God who, redeemed by the blood of the lamb without spot or blemish, set forth on their pilgrimage with loins girded.

¹¹ Cf. PSEUDO DIONYSIUS, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* IV, 11.

The Gospel of John speaks frequently of the community of disciples as those whom Jesus has called friends. In the Gospels of Luke and John, Jesus frequently uses the word 'friend' to describe his followers. "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into hell" (*Lk* 12: 4-5). John the Baptist describes himself as the 'friend of the Bridegroom' (*Jn* 3:29). "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (*Jn* 15:13).

The bonds of community among Christian friends are rooted in the Eucharistic proclamation of the abandonment of Jesus. The parish, like every Christian community including the family, is founded upon the solitude of the Crucified One. This is an immense mystery and a supreme paradox of faith. The parish is a community founded upon the friendship of Jesus. It is not a friendship born of flesh and blood but of the Holy Spirit, that is, friendship born of a charism. Friendship among disciples is more profound, stronger and more vital than simple blood kinship. Their togetherness in faith comes from the ultimate loneliness of Christ on the Cross. "When we eat this bread and drink this cup, Lord Jesus, we proclaim your death until you come in glory".¹²

The final loneliness of Jesus's abandonment is an absolute condition for the parish. Hans Urs von Balthasar relates this Eucharistic mystery to the Sacrament of Baptism, the Sacrament which is the foundation of the identity of the Christian layperson. "For this reason there is no togetherness in faith on earth that could not have come from the ultimate loneliness of the death on the cross. The baptismal rite, by which the person is immersed in the water and which bears a strong symbolic likeness to the threat of death, cuts him off from every other kind of communication in order to bring him to the source where one communion begins. Consequently, faith itself must stand necessarily face to face with Christ's abandonment by God and the world".

¹² *Ordinary of the Mass, Acclamation after the consecration.*

The connection between the Last Supper and the Cross in John's Gospel indicates that together they constitute the 'hour', the supreme *kairos* of Christ. The compelling and transparent logic of the Incarnation of the Eternal Son of God is most apparent here. What is that logic? "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (*Jn* 3:16). This is the glory for which Christ prayed at the Last Supper, namely that the Father might give to Jesus

"the power to share his life with others, so that through this sharing the Father's love might come into the world. ... There is a mutual glorification of the Trinitarian persons here in which the Son glorifies the Father by allowing himself to be the one through whom the Father's love comes, and the Father and Spirit glorify the Son by raising him from the dead. The Resurrection renders the Church's Eucharistic celebration a doxological event between the Father and the Son because it is here that, out of obedience, the Son is 'liquefied' and poured into human hearts. Von Balthasar is quite clear that the 'Eucharistic liquefying' of Christ is a communal reality with communal effects".¹³

The parish might usefully employ that wonderful phrase 'liquefying' in its catechesis on the Eucharist with great effect. It has enormous connotative power the longer one reflects upon it. In elaborating on its suggestive meaning, one thinks of the 21st chapter of the Book of Revelation where Jesus says, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the fountain of the water of life without payment" (21:6). Another holy association comes to mind. "We offer you, Father, this life-giving bread this saving cup". Now we can understand better why the Church uses the adjectives 'saving' and 'life-giving' in this very ancient prayer in which the parish praises God through the offering of the Eucharistic bread and cup.¹⁴

¹³ K. MONGRAIN, *op. cit.*, 117.

¹⁴ *Eucharist Prayer II*.

It should be clear that the priesthood of the laity is not a colorless, faded imitation of the priesthood of the ordained. The lay offering of worship to God must not become a banality by making it auxiliary to the ordained priest. The Council, by recapturing this long-obscured doctrine, described the rich complementarity between the priesthood of the ordained and of the laity in the celebration of the Eucharist.

“Jesus Christ, the supreme and eternal priest, wants to continue his witness and service also through the laity. So he gives them life through his Spirit and unceasingly urges them on to every good and perfect work. He associates them intimately with his life and mission and has also given them a share in his priestly office of offering spiritual worship, so that God may be glorified and human beings be saved.”¹⁵

It is clearly evident that these three Sacraments initiate the believer into an agonistic interpretation of history. For the baptized, the realm of history is a drama of divine-human freedoms. As the Book of Revelation and the other apocalyptic teachings of the New Testament make clear, “the realm of history is an arena of conflict in which the Church must struggle for its conception of the good in the midst of a situation of competition, hostility and obstruction”.¹⁶ The Sacraments of Initiation are indicators of the embattled nature and context of Christian praxis in history.

In concluding, we must recognize the pastoral challenges such a doxological mystagogy presents to the parish. The contradictions and the tensions of postmodern society have shattered all traditional points of reference. The laity proceed through their lives in a fog with only glimpses of the spiritual landscape. Through a fog the laity contemplate the face of the crucified Christ. Their contemplation of him is done without blinking.

¹⁵ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 34.

¹⁶ K. MONGRAIN, *op. cit.*, 193.

At the same time, they experience the vertiginous chaos of everyday life. Their equilibrium and serenity will be tested. They will know that they must not flee. For at the center of history stands the contradiction that life died on the Cross. And the lay faithful unfailingly will end up in front of the altar of the Cross in their historical lifetime. Being baptized into the death of Christ can have no other meaning. Paul asked the Romans, “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ have been baptized into his death?” (*Rom* 6:3).

The Eucharist: the Fullness of Christian Initiation

ARTURO ELBERTI, S.I.

According to God's plan for those who embrace God's presence and action, Christian life and the Christian identity inevitably culminate in the Eucharist. The sacrament of Baptism and the sacrament of Confirmation prepare the believer for the Eucharist: sacrifice, sacrament and real presence of the Son of God-made-man, Jesus Christ, our Lord. The Eucharist is a constituent and essential element of the Christian universe and the Christian identity. They are inconceivable without it, just as the Eucharist is inconceivable without them.

Forty years after the Second Vatican Council the debate is still continuing on the role of the liturgy and the Eucharist in the life of the Church, not so much as a theological and doctrinal discipline, but rather as a moment of celebration, even though the Council declared *apertis verbis* that it had to be considered its *culmen et fons*. The Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* preferred not to use the generic word "liturgy" in favour of "Eucharist", which had behind it a long theological and magisterial tradition, particularly with reference to Christian initiation.

With the inclusion of the Eucharist in the concept of initiation, it becomes easier to understand the two "*culmen et fons*" images, and it is hardly a coincidence that they were taken up subsequently in the

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later Council documents¹ referring to the Eucharist in the whole context of Christian initiation and in the moment of its celebration, marking a nuanced departure from the theological tradition, which stressed only the objective presence of Christ.

Sacrosanctum Concilium states that the task of the Church in relations with nonbelievers is to lead them, through faith and baptism, to the eucharistic assembly.² As far as believers are concerned, the Church's task is to prepare them, through repentance, for the sacraments, and for their regular appointment with the Eucharist, urging them to live their lives consistently.³ This makes the eucharistic liturgical moment the constituent element which builds up the Church.

Just as all individual believers acquire their full identity as Christians incorporated into Christ and into the Church by taking part for the first time in the eucharistic assembly, the culminating point of Christian initiation, so does the Church, gathering together and building herself up around the eucharistic celebration, as the summit of her work – indeed, the summit of her life. And the term “life”, which the Council Commission for the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* document⁴ had originally excluded, was taken up in the later Council documents dealing with the Eucharist.

1. THE EUCHARIST AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

After stating that “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows”,⁵ the Second Vatican Council went on to declare

¹ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11; Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 5; Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 15.

² Cf. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 10.

³ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 9.

⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, n. 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*

that the eucharistic mystery is the summit of the liturgy: “especially from the eucharist, as from a font, grace is poured forth upon us; and the sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God, to which all other activities of the Church are directed as toward their end, is achieved in the most efficacious possible way”.⁶

The Eucharist is therefore the perfection of Christian initiation and at the same time the eschatological consummation of Christian life and of the Christian’s earthly pilgrimage.

At the beginning of the Christian’s earthly existence, the liturgical action of the Church comprises three sacraments: Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist.⁷ At the end of life, the liturgy also offers three sacraments: Penance, Anointing and the Eucharist.

Between these two extreme moments, the Eucharist fosters the growth and maturity of the Christian’s existence, life and actions. The other sacraments are ordered towards the Eucharist, and it is from the Eucharist that they all flow, even the ones that more specifically express the social aspect of Church life: matrimony, as the sign of the union between Jesus Christ and his Church, and Orders, with its degrees, as the sign of the mediation of Christ, the eternal high Priest, Pastor and Teacher.

It is in this perspective that we can better appreciate the way in which the path of Christian initiation reaches its culmination in the sacrament of the Eucharist:

– *Baptism*, makes us children of God, new creatures reborn by water and by the Spirit, members of the Church, and participants in a royal and prophetic dignity, after obtaining the remission of sins;

– *Confirmation*, marks us with the gift of the Holy Spirit, and gives us a more profound configuration with Christ and a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit, to make us capable of bringing the testimony of the

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ordo baptismi parvulorum* (editio typica latina), *Praenotanda generalia* nos. 1-2, 7; *Ordo initiationis christianae adultorum* (editio typica latina), *Praenotanda generalia* nos. 1-2, 7.

Spirit into the world to the full maturity of the Body of Christ. By giving us the dignity of the royal priesthood, it prepares us to offer the Father the true spiritual worship that was begun by his Son with the Incarnation and the Paschal mystery;

– The *Eucharist*, through which we celebrate and fully participate in the Sacrifice of our Lord, by true worship in Spirit and Truth, in communion with the Flesh and Blood of the Son of Man, to receive eternal life and manifest the unity of the people of God.⁸

God's work of sanctifying the world in Christ, and our worship of the Father by adoring him through Christ the Son of God,⁹ culminate in the eucharistic celebration, as the action of Christ and the people of God, organised hierarchically. Today, the Magisterium emphasises the need to preserve at all times the profound and dynamic unity of the eucharistic mystery, and its character as a sacred action *par excellence*.¹⁰

2. CONFIRMATION AND THE EUCHARIST

Theologians and liturgists have taken up widely differing stances in the current debate on Confirmation in relation to the sacraments of Christian initiation, some basing their arguments on tradition, others on a number of theological problems, while others have had pastoral concerns in mind.¹¹

⁸ Cf. *Ordo initiationis christianae adulatorum* (editio typica latina).

⁹ *Instructio generalis missalis romani* (1970).

¹⁰ Cf. The Encyclical Letters *Mediator Dei* (1947) and *Mysterium Fidei* (1965); the Instructions *Eucharisticum Mysterium* (1967) and *Instructio generalis missalis romani* (1970), and the Letter *Dominicae cenae* (1980). On this subject see also A. RENWART, *L'Eucharistie à la lumière des documents récents*, in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* (NRTh) 89 (1987), 225-286.

¹¹ Cf. A. ELBERTI, *Testimoni di Cristo nello Spirito*, in Pontifical Council for the Laity, *Rediscovering Confirmation*, Vatican City, 2000, 35-81.

Our position is that the solution to this problem can only be found by adopting a liturgical approach, once again linking Confirmation to the sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist, as the starting point and the culmination of Christian initiation. The unity of the initiation cycle is the traditional element with a dogmatic value, and any pastoral concerns must be consistent with this unchangeable liturgical structure. This was the approach adopted originally by the Preconciliar Central Commission, which it set out in its *schema* on the sacrament of Confirmation, stating that “Confirmation is the second sacrament of the Christian life, and is, as it were, the completion of Baptism and the preparation for Communion”.¹²

As such, Confirmation makes the Christian ready to be an active participant, because it completes Baptism and paves the way to the Eucharist. Some Protestant denominations that defer Communion until after Confirmation at the age of twelve also take this approach: “The Church *confirms* those she already considers to be her members, as a sign of which she invites them to participate in the Holy Supper”.¹³

It is evident from the writings of the Fathers and from theology that Confirmation is ordered towards the Eucharist. When the Fathers declare the faithful to be ready to participate at the table of the Body and the Blood of our Lord, it is always taken for granted that they have already been confirmed, because they do not consider Christians to be truly Christians and fully incorporated into the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, until they have been confirmed.

But if all the sacraments are directed towards the Eucharist, could Confirmation be the sole exception, such that it could even be postponed until after First Communion? It is no justification to say that it is sufficient to incorporate it into the celebration of the Eucharist, or that the question of *before* and *after* in no way detracts from its being directed

¹² *Comptes rendus des travaux de la III session de la Commission Centrale*, “La Documentation Catholique” 1370 (18 février 1962), 237; (Unofficial translation). Cf. also A. BUGNINI, *La riforma liturgica* (1948-1975), Roma, CLV 30, 1997, 596-607.

¹³ Cf. L. VISCHER, *La confirmation au cours des siècles*, Neuchâtel 1959, 87.

towards the Eucharist, because it is all part of the cycle of Christian initiation – namely, a gradual introduction into the mystery, which necessarily entails a time sequence, and not a merely logical sequence.

The fact that Confirmation is directed towards the Eucharist can also be seen by arguing from what is most specific to it: the link with the Holy Spirit. Having received the Spirit, the confirmed Christian is now ready to fully participate in the eucharistic act of worship as the sacrifice of the new Covenant and can revive the grace of Pentecost in a community act. The confirmed Christian is made, *naturaliter*, a participant in that fullness of the re-enactment that takes place in the Eucharist, particularly in the Sunday celebration, on the day of the Covenant, the day of the new Pentecost.

"Si vera sunt exposita", three consequences necessarily follow: the Eucharist is the pinnacle and the fullness of Christian initiation; Confirmation cannot and must not be celebrated after this great sacrament; and age must not be allowed to subvert the order of salvation willed by Christ for his Church.

3. THE EUCHARIST AND CHRISTIAN INITIATION: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW AND ITS THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

a) *The first Eucharist*

Baptismal Eucharist, first Eucharist, first communion, first communion Mass: these are all expressions that have been used across the ages to refer to the first time that baptised Christians take part in the eucharistic mystery. Today's concerns seem to be related to preparing for it, and the way of celebrating it, on the basis of the moment it is done, or the age of the candidate (around 8) as established by Pius X, ignoring the theological significance of the Eucharist.

This issue deserves closer examination, firstly with a brief historical overview to trace the causes, and then with a few words about the Catholic Church's present proposal.

Brief historical overview

As early as the latter half of the second century we find explicit examples of the Eucharist concluding the celebration of baptism: the Christian, regenerated by water and in the Spirit, completed the “initiation” process by being welcomed in by the Christian community gathered around the eucharistic table. St Justin describes the baptismal Eucharist as being distinct from the Sunday Eucharist. After Justin, more information came from a variety of different sources, describing various rites (the sacred kiss, offerings, etc) such as the whole Easter Vigil, particularly in the patristic catechetical texts explaining the mystery and the individual parts of the celebration. After the Easter celebration, the neophyte became a full member of the “family” of God and would subsequently attend the Lord’s Supper every Sunday of every week. That practice applied to adults and to children alike: “infants” received the Eucharist in a few drops of wine in a small spoon, or by sucking the finger of the deacon dipped into the wine in the chalice. Baptised children, even if they had not yet been *consignati* (confirmed) by the bishop, were always given communion, because it was considered necessary for their salvation, on a par with Baptism, on the basis of the words that Jesus spoke according to John ‘You must be born anew’ (Jn 3:6) and ‘unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man’ (Jn 6:53). The Eucharist was considered to be the food of life and immortality, participating with the *ecclesia* in the Lord’s supper.

By the third century, the fundamental structural features of the celebration already appear to have become established: in addition to Baptism, the sacramental initiation process included the celebration of Confirmation and the Eucharist. In the fourth and fifth centuries, the baptismal rites were enriched with further outward signs, and in some churches a number of novel celebrations were introduced, such as opening the baptistery door, the *ephthatha* rite, washing the feet, and lighting the lamp, whereas the celebration of the first Eucharist was made clearer in the composition of its rites.

Baptism was immediately followed by the post-baptismal rites, and

in this regard there were considerable differences between the churches.¹⁴ There were two main rites: the laying-on of hands with the anointing with chrism, and the rite of the white garment.

Sacramental initiation culminated in the celebration of the Eucharist: after leaving the baptistery the neophytes often processed into the place where the Eucharist was to be celebrated, welcomed in by the community of the faithful. They had specially reserved places, and they took part in the celebration of the Eucharist for the first time, beginning at the Offertory. With the celebration of the Eucharist the neophytes completed their participation in the Paschal Mystery, and were made full members of the Church. During Holy Week, according to evidence from the fourth and fifth centuries, the newly baptised Christians were ordinarily introduced to an understanding of the mysteries at the celebration of the Easter Vigil through several catechesis sessions, usually given by the bishop. Lastly, as Augustine reminds us, on Low Sunday – *dominica in albis* – the neophytes would remove their white garments and give up their reserved places in the Church, and mingle thereafter with the rest of the congregation: “Today our newly reborn gather together with the other faithful and, as it were, fly out of their nest”.¹⁵

Until the fifth century the solemn baptismal celebration normally took place in the main Church. The Bishop presided at it with the priests and the deacons, and in some churches also with deaconesses. Invariably, the three sacraments – Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist – were celebrated together.

In the 12th century two changes were introduced, with unexpected consequences: the total separation of Baptism, and the privatisation of the Eucharist which was no longer part of the Baptismal celebration. *Firstly*, it was taught that the Eucharist was not necessary for salvation, based on a text wrongly attributed to St Augustine (but which was actu-

¹⁴ Cf. R. CABIÉ, *L'iniziazione cristiana*, in *La Chiesa in preghiera. Introduzione alla Liturgia*, a cura di A.G. Martimort, *I sacramenti*, Brescia 1987, III, 51-81.

¹⁵ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, Sermon 376/A, 2.

ally written by Florus of Lyon): this text was included among the canonical writings forming part of the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. *Secondly*, the Eucharist was no longer seen as food, but as a remedy for sin. The faithful communicated because they were sinners, because they were sick, and were therefore in need of grace. The most appropriate age appeared to be the age of reason, after a period of preparation. The Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 made Easter confession and communion compulsory for everyone who had reached the age of reason, and prescribed Confirmation at the age of discretion.¹⁶ It was therefore prohibited to administer communion to infants, with the result that the sacraments of Christian initiation were now disconnected, and the traditional order subverted. Indeed, confirmation was often celebrated after the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. As mentioned already, the early Church forbade anyone who had not already been marked with the seal of the Spirit to receive the Eucharistic Body of Christ.

It was in that same period that the practice of administering the chalice to the faithful was suspended (and subsequently prohibited) and the Host, which was identified with the person of Christ, became the object of veneration. Small children were denied communion (the Council of Trent condemned those who considered it necessary) because by now an appropriate catechetical preparation was required. The new expression, “first communion”, came into being and the intimistic dimension prevailed: it was no longer a right or a need, but a reward, an achievement. It was in this climate that Jansenism developed, and was to advocate deferring the age of first communion to 12-14, particularly in France. And it was in France, after the 17th century, that the “first communion party” was instituted, with a sumptuous ritual (procession, festive dress, singing, presents, banqueting, etc), preceded by an intense group preparation, with retreats organised by a number of Religious Congregations such as the Lazarites, the Sulpicians, and the Jesuits. It was supposed to be “the best day of your life”,

¹⁶ CONCILIO LATERANENSE IV, canon 21. Internet Mediaeval Sourcebook: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/sbook.html>

but it could also be an act of sacrilege and a judgment, and so a general confession was required beforehand.

In his 1910 decree *Quam singulari* and earlier documents,¹⁷ Pius X, arguing on the basis that communion helps children to become educated in the faith, reduced the age of first communion to the age of reason, around 8 years, when children were able to discern the body of Christ. This met with considerable opposition on the part of the French and German Episcopates (a distinction was later drawn in France between “private” communion and “solemn” communion). This change led to a postponement in the age of Confirmation, because Confirmation was to be conferred when the child was more mature. That could be the age of 12, when children went to their first Eucharist, and was therefore after the “First Communion”. In order not to forget that the Eucharist was the pinnacle of Christian initiation, what was called “Solemn Communion” was instituted.

The theological significance: the present proposal

The nature of the Eucharist as the culmination of the initiation process was strongly emphasised beginning with the Second Vatican Council and the reform of the liturgy. All the Conciliar and post-Conciliar documents, without any exception, and up to the publication of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, including the catechisms of the Italian Bishops’ Conference¹⁸ reiterate the unity and the succession of the three sacraments, giving the Eucharist the significance and role of the pinnacle and the source of Christian life. In practice, however, we are still far from acting on these teachings, and all that has been done is to change the name of the rite to “First Communion Mass” and to

¹⁷ Cf. PIUS X, *On the instruction of children for First Communion*, in “Acta Sanctae Sedis” XXXVII (1904-1905), 425-432; *Sacra Tridentina Synodus*, “Acta Sanctae Sedis” XXXVIII (1905-1906), 400-406; cf. also SACRED CONGREGATION FOR THE DISCIPLINE OF THE SACRAMENTS, *Decree on First Communion*, “Acta Apostolicae Sedis” II (1910), 777.583.

¹⁸ PERMANENT EPISCOPAL COUNCIL OF THE ITALIAN BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE, *Nota pastorale: Iniziazione cristiana. 1 e 2 Orientamenti per il catecumenato degli adulti*, 1997 e 2001.

reorganise the catechesis. Unless the initiatory value is restored, at the cost of changing the age of the candidate, we shall continue to experience the drama of so many young people continuing to misunderstand the eucharistic mystery, its lack of influence on their lives, and their gradual but inexorable lapsing from the sacrament, the very source of our faith.

b) *The Eucharist is the origin and the completion of initiation according to St Thomas Aquinas*

This short outline of “eucharistic primacy” is set out theologically according to the teachings of St Thomas Aquinas, rightly considered to be the apogee of the axiom: the Eucharist, *culmen et fons*.

Eucharistic primacy

Rereading *De ecclesiastica hierarchia* by the Pseudo Dionysius, Aquinas set out a number of theses regarding eucharistic primacy, which we might summarise as follows:

– The Eucharist is *teleutè teleutòn* (*the initiation of initiations*), that is, the perfection of perfections, and is “perfective” of all the sacraments;¹⁹

– in the administration of all the other sacraments, the summit and the apogee of the rite is the celebration of the Eucharist;²⁰

– although Baptism precedes the Eucharist in the order of preparation, in the order of intention, the Eucharist precedes Baptism;²¹

– lastly, the need for the Eucharist has a different rationale from the need for Baptism and all the other sacraments.²²

¹⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica* III q. 75, a 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, q. 65, a. 3 and q. 63, a. 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*, q. 75, a. 5 ad. 4.

²² *Ibid.*, q. 65 aa. 3-4; q. 73, a. 3 c.

We will return to this latter statement shortly, to look more closely at it and emphasise its exemplary value. A summary consideration of these arguments makes it clear that there is a close convergence between this Thomist interpretation and the overall interpretive approach we have adopted here.²³

The most important sacrament

A careful reading of two articles in the *Summa Theologica* further confirm this position, and offer a brilliant solution to the problem.

I am referring to the final sentences in *De sacramentis in genere*, which deals with *de numero sacramentorum* (pars III, quaestio 65). After offering a number of arguments in favour of the existence of seven sacraments in the first two articles, in article 3 Aquinas addresses the question *utrum sacramentum Eucharistiae sit potissimum inter sacramenta* (whether the Eucharist is the greatest of the sacraments). Aquinas responds in the affirmative, on the basis of three arguments: first, because Christ is present substantially, whereas in the other sacraments he is present by participation; all the other sacraments are ordained to the *Eucharist as to their end*; and thirdly, by reference to the rites of the sacraments: nearly all the sacraments take place within the eucharistic celebration, and at all events are completed by the Eucharist.

The *corpus* of this article prepares further arguments that we find in the answers to the objections, particularly in *ad secundum* and in *ad quartum*. In his reply to objection 2 – which discusses the position that the greater sacraments are the ones conferred by the greater minister (Confirmation and Orders) – he concludes that *per sacramentum vero Eucharistiae non deputatur homo ad aliquod officium: sed magis hoc sacramentum est finis omnium officiorum* (a man is not deputed to any duty by the sacrament of the Eucharist, rather is this sacrament the end of all duties).

²³ A. GRILLO, *L'Eucaristia "culmen et fons": il sacramento più importante*, in AA.Vv., *L'Eucaristia. Cristo sorgente di vita per l'umanità*, Milano 2000, 116-117.

c) *The Council of Trent*

We all know that the doctrinal work of the Council of Trent, after the session dealing with original sin and justification, was wholly concerned with the sacraments, and that it was *the Sacrament of the Eucharist* and *the Sacrifice of the Mass* which was debated at the greatest length (the latter being examined in terms of doctrine, worship, and celebration). It did so in three long sessions: *Decree on the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist* (1551), *Doctrine of Communion under both species and Communion of Children* (1562), and the *Doctrine of the Sacrifice of the Mass* and the *Decree on the Granting of the Cup* (to the laity) (1562). Like every Council, the Council of Trent was both a finishing point and a starting point.

A *finishing point*, in that it took up all the ideas handed down by Tradition. For the Council had no problems formulating the facts of the faith regarding this sacrament, because it had to do with the presence of the Body and Blood of Christ (the institution of the Last Supper): it was clearly evidenced from both Scripture and Tradition. But it proved less easy to define how this belief was expressed in the *celebratory practice* which was so closely focused on the Eucharist in the Church at the time of the Council of Trent. It was specifically against the “eucharistic practice” that the Protestant “reformation” targeted its most ferocious criticisms, because they held that the “celebratory practice and worship” showed that Catholics did not have a clear understanding of the sacrament.

The Council of Trent was also a *starting point*, because it marked a new lease of life in the Church. The term “Eucharist” in the sense of being a sacrifice, took on an importance and dimensions that it had never had until then.

It should not be forgotten that the doctrinal approach adopted by the Council was dominated by the errors that had emerged, above all in the Protestant reform movement; this has to be borne in mind when interpreting the doctrinal decisions. By themselves, they cannot give us a complete picture of the full reality of the Eucharist, and they remain conditioned by the cultural and rational thinking of the age.

Apologetics of celebratory practice

The Council affirmed the absolute superiority of the Eucharist over the other sacraments. It was therefore not intended necessarily to be *wholly distributed* to the faithful, but could be *reserved* in the ‘*sacrarium*’ (today’s tabernacle), to be *taken to the sick*, to be *adored* with full worship of ‘*latria*’ (the worship due to God alone), be carried in *procession* and be *exposed* to public adoration.

On the *manner* of receiving communion, the Council defended the practice of allowing only priests to distribute communion to the laity, while on the issue of the eucharistic species the Council did not appeal to a principle of faith, but to “custom”, merely defending “the custom of administering the species of bread alone”, without directly taking action against those who continued the practice of administering communion under both kinds. From the point of view of *celebratory practice*, even though the Council was aware of the very serious abuses that had been introduced, it was obliged to adopt an apologetical stance. For example, the Council found theological justification for the celebrant alone to communicate when celebrating Mass before crowded congregations, without underlining the importance of communion to the faithful. It adopted the same criterion in the *Decree that little Children are not bound to sacramental Communion*.²⁴

d) *The Second Vatican Council*

Sacrosanctum Concilium nos. 64-71 reinstated the catechumenate for adults and laid down the criteria for reforming the rites of Baptism and Confirmation. On the sacrament of Confirmation, the Council advocated that “the intimate connection which this sacrament has with the whole of Christian initiation is to be more clearly set forth”.²⁵ Even

²⁴ H. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, Bologna 1995, nos. 1730 and 1734.

²⁵ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 71.

though it avoids making any strictly doctrinal statements on the Eucharist, Vatican II dealt with the question in the broader context of the Church, the other sacraments, and above all Christian initiation. On the relationship between the Church and the Eucharist (which occurs about 40 times) the Council states that:

“... Through Baptism we are formed in the likeness of Christ ... in the breaking of the eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with Him and with one another ... In this way all of us are made members of His Body”.²⁶

“[All the] sacraments, as well as every ministry of the Church and every work of the apostolate, are tied together with the Eucharist and are directed toward it ... In this light, the Eucharist shows itself as the source and the apex of the whole work of preaching the Gospel. Those under instruction are introduced by stages to a sharing in the Eucharist, and the faithful, already marked with the seal of Baptism and Confirmation, are through the reception of the Eucharist fully joined to the Body of Christ”.²⁷

Elsewhere, the Council emphasises that:

“It is through the sacraments and the exercise of the virtues that the sacred nature and organic structure of the priestly community is brought into operation. Incorporated in the Church through baptism, the faithful are destined by the baptismal character for the worship of the Christian religion; reborn as sons of God ... They are more perfectly bound to the Church by the sacrament of Confirmation and the Holy Spirit endows them with special strength... Taking part in the eucharistic sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life, they offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with it”.²⁸

²⁶ ID., Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 7

²⁷ ID., Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 5.

²⁸ ID., Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11.

“... Baptism therefore establishes a sacramental bond of unity which links all who have been reborn by it. But of itself Baptism is only a beginning, an inauguration wholly directed toward the fullness of life in Christ. Baptism, therefore, envisages a complete profession of faith, complete incorporation in the system of salvation such as Christ willed it to be, and finally complete ingrafting in eucharistic communion”.²⁹

“Both the rites for the baptism of adults are to be revised: not only the simpler rite, but also the more solemn one, which must take into account the restored catechumenate. A special Mass ‘for the conferring of baptism’ is to be inserted into the Roman Missal”.³⁰

e) *The Eucharist today*

In order to define the nature of the primacy of the Eucharist, we will draw a distinction between two different but related levels:

– as a *sacrament of initiation* or, to use more traditional terminology, a *major sacrament* (together with Baptism), the Eucharist has primacy over the other four “minor” sacraments. It should not be forgotten that the Council of Trent not only established the “number of the sacraments”³¹ but it also stated that the seven sacraments could not all be compared in a uniform manner, and that they are not equal in dignity;³²

– also in relation to Baptism and Confirmation the Eucharist is the *culmen* and the *fons*. It should not be forgotten that even though this expression has only recently been used to qualify the relationship *between the liturgy and the activity of the Church*.³³ It was originally used to indicate the relationship between the Eucharist and the rest of the liturgy of the Christian Church.

²⁹ ID., Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 22.

³⁰ ID., Constitution on the Sacred liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 66.

³¹ H. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, op. cit., n. IV.

³² *Ibid.*, n. 1603.

³³ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 10.

4. THE EUCHARIST AS THE FULLNESS OF CHRISTIAN INITIATION

a) *The rites of Christian initiation*

The evangelising and catechumenal renewal of the Catholic Church and the ecumenical movement have highlighted the value of initiation and the inestimable value of the Baptism of adults.³⁴ Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist, according to the Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults, “closely combine to bring us, the faithful of Christ, to full stature and to enable us to carry out the mission of the entire people of God to the Church and to the world”.³⁵

As we have already seen, Christian initiation is not only baptismal, but eucharistic. “The sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the blessed Eucharist so complement one another”, according to the new *Code of Canon Law*, “that all three are required for full Christian initiation”.³⁶ According to Tillard, initiation comprises “the catechuminate, the specific liturgical rites of Baptism and Confirmation, and lastly, the sacrament par excellence, the Eucharist”.³⁷ The Eucharist is both the end of the catechuminate and its starting point, a continuing initiation process. Christian initiation, however, is not merely a matter of the liturgical-sacramental element. As Regli says, “it must be seen above all as the growth of the person in the Christian faith, in the communion of faith, in Christian existence, in the exercise of, and becoming familiar with *being* a full and convinced Christian (Christian orthopraxis) within the Church”.³⁸ For Christian initiation is completed by the participation in the Eucharist celebrated by the Christian community and in the mission of the community of believers.

³⁴ D. LAMARCHE, *Le baptême, une initiation?* Montreal – Paris 1984.

³⁵ *Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults*, n. 2.

³⁶ *Code of Canon Law*, can. 842(2).

³⁷ J.M.R. TILLARD, *Los sacramentos de la Iglesia*, op. cit., 396.

³⁸ S. REGLI, *El sacramento de la confirmación y el desarrollo cristiano*, in *Mysterium Salutis*, V, Madrid 1984, 286 (Unofficial translation).

While Baptism and Confirmation are sacraments that are performed once only (repeating them has always been rigorously prohibited), the Eucharist is a *lasting* or repetitive sacrament. Between the first communion and the viaticum, the last sacrament, there are different types of Eucharists or communions, with specific emphases depending upon whether they are for unconfirmed children, young people being confirmed or adults being baptised, after having passed through a catechumenate in the strict sense of the term. Quite clearly, even though the first communion is important, what is even more important is “frequent communion”, or better still, the full, aware and active participation in the community celebration of the Eucharist.

The fundamental features of initiation may be summarised as follows: a tangible, dynamic and effective link with the risen Christ (faith); a change of life and forgiveness of sins (conversion); the seal of the Holy Spirit (gift); ecclesial community life (*koinonìa*), and service in the world (*diakonia*).

The language of the Eucharist

In the early days the Christians’ weekly or daily liturgical worship was called the *breaking of bread* (Luke) or the *Lord’s supper* (Paul). Later it was called the *Eucharist*, meaning the act of giving thanks, which forms the central part of the celebration. Only later was it called Mass, after the Latin words of dismissal, “*Ite missa est*”. Today, the Mass is once again tending to be called by the excellent term *Eucharist*.³⁹

The Eucharist is the supper of the Lord’s brothers and sisters: Christianity is the religion of the word (Bible), and the meal (Eucharist) in fellowship (community or church) as a service to the world (ministry) for its salvation.

³⁹ See P. JOUNEL’s simple and well-documented account in *La misa, ayer y hoy*, Barcelona 1988; C. FLORISTAN, *La teología y pastoral de la Eucaristía: La comunidad eucarística*, in *Los sacramentos hoy: teología y pastoral*, XIII Giornata della pastorale educativa, Madrid 1982, 27-51.

The Eucharist is the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus Christ: the death of Jesus is the eschatological Paschal sacrifice, and the Eucharist is the sacrament of the sacrifice of Jesus. The eucharistic celebration is not a memorial of a generic death, but the commemoration of the saving and prophetic death of Jesus, justified in the Paschal act. With the Resurrection of his Son, God made the Messiah and Lord the One who, in his Messiahship and Lordship, was led to die for all humanity, in the defence of love and justice, the quintessence of the Kingdom.

The Eucharist is an act of thanksgiving to the Father: giving thanks means recognising the freely-given nature of the gift, an idea which is by no means taken for granted in our culture, which tends to emphasise the concept of “rights”. *Eucharist* means *thanksgiving*; it comes from *khàris* (joy, or everything that pleases) and *eu*, (good, right, appropriate). It is also equivalent to praise (from the verb *ainèò*, which means mention, promise, vow, approve, applaud). But the whole liturgy is blessing, praise and doxology. Blessing is above all a gift of God. God blesses, and his blessing is life. Children, for example, are a blessing from God. In the liturgy Christians give back to God the blessings that our Lord has already given them. It is adoration when it becomes an uninterrupted attitude.

The Eucharist is the commemoration of the New Covenant: covenant is a key concept in the Bible, and expresses the relationships between God and God’s people. It is equivalent to an “irrevocable decision” or one person’s commitment to many. This was the case with the covenants between Yahweh and Noah (*Gen* 6:18), Abraham (*2 Kings* 13:23), and David (*Jer* 33:20-21), or the covenants between God and his people (*Ex* 34). The history of the covenant was a definitive history of salvation, a foretaste of the Gospel, because it created a community of life that was defined in terms of faithfulness to God. The second or “new” covenant, which Jeremiah prophesied (31:31) became effective thanks to the sacrifice of Christ (*Heb* 9:15). In the four accounts of the Last Supper, the concept of the covenant was central (*1 Cor* 11:25; *Mk* 14:24; *Mt* 26:28; *Lk* 22:20), and was always linked to the formula of the cup, because of its connection with blood. Mark and Matthew bring

the Jewish expression “the blood of the covenant” up-to-date. Covenant and Kingdom of God are correlated concepts: memory and prophecy in action, symbolised by the fraternal agape, the Last Supper and the Christian Eucharist. The effects are evident: forgiveness and liberating salvation, just as the demands stemming from faithfulness to a commitment to build up the Kingdom of God are evident. The new covenant becomes a liberating mission or evangelisation.⁴⁰

The Eucharist is the Real Presence of Christ: the meaning of this statement can be seen in the New Testament accounts of the Last Supper or the breaking of bread. Christian tradition has always acknowledged this Presence by virtue of the *epiclesis* or invocation to the sanctifying plan of the Holy Spirit. The discussion has been about the *manner* or *mode* of the Presence, interpreted in terms of differing philosophical and theological ideas. The presence of any human being can be manifested in different ways: through a gift, a letter, a message, a telephone call or – today – a video or a live satellite broadcast. But Christ makes himself present among Christians “only” in two ways: when they gather together in his name, and when someone obeys his commandment of love to help the abandoned. In particular, our Lord becomes present in the celebration of the Eucharist, which is the gathering of believers, where the table symbolises the totality of love. The bread (his body) and the wine (his blood) are his complete Person, really, and not merely intentionally. It is an effective sign of communion in which Christ is present and active.⁴¹

The explanations of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist have swung between two extremes: *ultrarealism*, considering Christ to be present almost physically, and *pure symbolism*, reducing Christ’s presence to a mere symbolic or allegorical representation, and therefore without any effectiveness. In order to explain the change of bread and

⁴⁰ A. JAUBERT, *La notion d’alliance dans le judaïsme aux abords de l’ère chrétienne*, Paris 1963.

⁴¹ Cf. The *Final Report* of the International Anglican – Roman Catholic Commission: http://www.prounione.urbe.it/dia-int/arcic/doc/e_arcic_final.html, or the commentary by P. PARRÉ, *L’Eucharistie dans le Rapport Final d’ARCIC I*, in *Irenikon* 57 (1984), 469-489.

wine into the body and blood of Jesus, the Greek Fathers spoke of “substantial transformation” in the ontological sense. Towards the 11th century, the term *substantiation* gained currency, and was received by the Scholastics in terms of the Aristotelian categories of “substance” and “accident”, which countless generations of Catholics have learnt through the catechism.

Some areas of contemporary theology linked to symbolic or existentialist philosophy prefer to speak about *transignification*, or *transfinalisation*: the bread and wine are realities correlated to man, and their basic core lies in “relationality”. Accordingly, with the eucharistic prayer the relational context of the bread and wine changes so that they become the food of eternal life, divine gifts, sacramental symbols of Christ present and giving of himself. But this reduces the concreteness of the faith to a purely mental dimension. By denying the real presence of Christ, the Eucharist is reduced to a religious “collection” of psychological memories, a psychodrama being played out without the personal involvement of the actors, food which is being shared without sacramental effectiveness or prayer of believers without the epiclesis of the Holy Spirit. Whereas in the other sacraments the material elements do not change, in the Eucharist there is a meaningful and eschatological change of substance in the bread and in the wine: into Christ himself, with his total self-offering and self-giving.

b) *The Paschal sacraments*

The first sacrament of the faith is Baptism. This means, firstly, that faith is a condition for receiving Baptism. The Christian faith which acknowledges the God of Jesus Christ through the witness of the Church knows man in the depths of his being. Faith is closely linked to conversion. Secondly, Baptism is the seal and confirmation of the faith. The Church acknowledges the candidate’s profession of faith and considers as valid the request to receive baptism, by introducing the candidate into the community. Baptism sets the seal on the faith of the neophyte, and fully confirms it through the sacrament.

Sacramental initiation, in the form of Baptism-Confirmation, reaches its fullness in the *first Eucharist*. In the catechesis which precedes the Easter Vigil and follows it through Eastertide, the fundamental aspects of the Eucharist have to be emphasised. As Christ passed from death to life, so the neophyte passes from death to newness of life. The victory of Christ which enlightens the whole of human existence is celebrated in the Easter Eucharist, *the pinnacle and the source of the whole of Christian life*.

The Easter Octave

The great feast of Easter continues for a period of fifty days. It comprises eight Sundays and a week of weeks. This period, known as *Eastertide* or "*Quinquagesima paschalis*", commemorates the risen Christ, present in the Church, and the Holy Spirit, the gift and promise of the Father. Whereas Lent is the time of trial and temptation, Eastertide is a sign of perfection and eternity. After the end of the fourth century, the original meaning of the 50-day Eastertide began to wane, and the Church began to celebrate the Easter Octave. In the ancient cycle of seven weeks a new cycle of eight days became established, with an eminently baptismal character. The primary purpose of this week was to give the neophytes their final catechesis, called *mystagogy*. The Easter Octave is therefore very closely bound up with the initiation into the sacraments of those who have just been baptised at the Easter Vigil. During the seven Sundays of Easter, the liturgy celebrates the *Easter message* of the Resurrection of the Lord, the *joy* of the Church at hope reborn, the *new life* of the neophytes, and the *action of the Holy Spirit* in the Christian community.

Mystagogy

The neophytes' first contact with the baptismal liturgy of the Easter Vigil must have seemed too symbolic and expressive to be properly understood. The Easter Vigil experience is profound. Everyone needs

time to savour the meaning of the symbols they have just experienced and to penetrate into the mysterious reality of the new life that they have accepted. This is the meaning of *mystagogic catechesis*: to provide the means enabling the neophytes to play their full part in the Christian community. The time of *mystagogy* is, for the neophytes, the last stage in their initiation. The *Rite of the Christian Initiation of Adults* states that they acquire a fuller and more fruitful understanding of the *mysteries* with the novelty of the catechesis and particularly through the experience of the sacraments they have received.

c) *The Eucharist as the culmination of initiation*

The reinstatement of the ritual for adults made no provision for emphasising the first eucharistic celebration of the newly initiated. We consider that it would be worthwhile giving thought to it. One might, for example, emphasise the importance of the celebration through an appropriate commentary addressed to the communicants when taking the bread and wine to the altar for the sacrifice. At the moment of communion, another commentary might be proposed, such as: “Blessed are you who have been invited to our Lord’s supper for the first time with the whole of our community”. However, it must once again be recalled that it would be a serious anomaly to administer the Eucharist to the initiates using bread consecrated at another Mass: that would empty the sign of all of its meaning. One wonders whether it might be possible to recover the usage reported in the *Apostolic Tradition*, of offering water, milk and honey to the newly initiated Christians, backed up by appropriate catechesis, to highlight the significance of this first participation in the Eucharist. In the liturgy of the Easter Vigil, after the rather unusual celebrations (such as the Renunciation of Sin, the anointing before and after Baptism, the laying-on of hands, and the anointing of Confirmation), the assembly returns to celebrate the rite to which it is accustomed; without some appropriate means of emphasis, there is the risk that the unique aspect of this Eucharist, as the culmination of the process of initiation, may not be appreciated.

d) *The Eucharist as the “source” and the “summit” of Christian life*

It was almost obvious for *Lumen Gentium* to attribute to the Eucharist the prerogative of being the “source and summit of the Christian life”: it made few comments, merely citing well-known texts of St Thomas Aquinas and from the *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, justifying the thesis with the presence of Christ as the author of life. These are the same texts used in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n. 10 in order to support the same designation – applied in this case, however, to the liturgy in general (“the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows”); the Council Fathers, originally, and some theologians, subsequently, expressed the fear of over-emphasising the celebratory moment. Insufficient thought had been given to an appreciation of the context of that statement, which includes the concept of the Eucharist in that of the liturgy, as its centre and highest expression, and which refers to the process of initiation.

In the interim period between *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and the later Council documents, this twin image was reserved exclusively to the Eucharist, giving pride of place to “source” rather than “pinnacle” or “summit”: “the eucharistic sacrifice is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium* n. 11); the Eucharist is “the source and the apex of the whole work of preaching the Gospel... Thus the Eucharistic Action, over which the priest presides, is the very heart of the congregation” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* n. 5); “the eucharistic celebration, source of the Church’s life and pledge of future glory” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 15); priests and pastors must ensure that “the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice is the centre and culmination of the whole life of the Christian community” (*Christus Dominus*, n. 30). From all of these texts it becomes clear that the Eucharist is to be understood as a celebration, the expression therefore of the *ecclesia*, and therefore not only is the mere objective reality of the presence of Christ but, above all, as sacrifice, the memorial of the Paschal Mystery of Christ celebrated by the Church, which therefore includes the eschatological perspective.

The preference given to the expression “source” places the Eucharist before and above the Church, as the gift of Christ; it “creates” the Church, convoking her in by word and then incorporating her into the dynamics of Easter and the New Covenant. The Church does not own the Eucharist, and neither may she dispose of it at will. The Eucharist is revealed as the source of all the sacraments, as the “fount” sacrament (in its ritual dimension and Paschal substance).

The Council texts do not spell out the meaning of the expression “the fount of all Christian life”, and the commentators appear to avoid all clarification or discussion of it. The same applies to the image of the “summit” or “apex”, which becomes comprehensible in the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (which depends on *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 10) in relation to catechumens and the baptised/confirmed faithful, but not to the Christian community to the same degree. In short, the reserved areas of “liturgisation” of Christian life and of the Church’s many activities run the risk of being perpetuated deleteriously, precisely because of the silence of theology. In order to properly understand the Council expression, the three, closely linked, elements – Eucharist, Church, Paschal Mystery – must be examined in greater depth.

A second observation has to do with the application of the Council principle, focusing on the image of the “pinnacle” or “summit” which in both *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and in *Presbyterorum Ordinis* relates to Christian initiation, as a Church celebration and as personal communion with the body of Christ; Italian catechisms do not deviate from this approach, even though the practice does not match the doctrine. Proposals for a “Eucharist for mature Christians” demonstrate the discomfort caused by this separation between doctrine and practice, which is an inevitable cause of deviant formation in the faith and in Christian life. If the faithful do not experience the first Eucharist in its fullness, how can they perceive it as being the “centre” of their lives in the future? Under present practice, new Christians acquire neither a sense of Church, nor a sense of the Eucharist. They do not even realise that their Christian character cannot subsist

unless they celebrate the Paschal event with their brothers and sisters. It is hardly surprising that at the end of their so-called Christian initiation, concluding with Confirmation, which is explained to them above all in a wholly individualistic, operational or testimonial manner, there is a general tendency to lapse from the sacraments, beginning with attendance at Sunday Mass.

5. CHRISTIAN INITIATION AND THE ROYAL PRIESTHOOD

Saying that the confirmed Christian is “filled” with the Holy Spirit means that the Spirit is given for itself (unlike what occurs in Baptism) to bring about a transformation (changing the man-creature into a child of God), so that the gift is not without effect. In Patristic terminology, the verbs *dare* and *accipere* in relation to the Holy Spirit are used in reference to the laying-on of hands by the Apostles. The Fathers all agree on this specific character of Confirmation;⁴² however, this gift also entails an ecclesial service. The theological meaning of prayer reported to Hippolytus for the laying-on of hands by the bishop stresses this purpose:

“Lord God, who have made these worthy to have their sins remitted through the waters of regeneration of the Holy Spirit, grant them your grace, so that they may serve you according to your will, for to you is the glory, Father, Son and Holy Spirit in the Holy Church, now and for ever. Amen”.⁴³

The baptised therefore receive grace, “... so that they may serve you according to your will”.

⁴² J. LECUYER, *La confirmation chez les Pères*, in *LMD* 54 (1958) 23-53; A. ELBERTI, *Accipe signaculum doni Spiritus Sancti. La Confermazione: fonte del sacerdozio regale dei fedeli?* In *Gregorianum*, 72.3. (1991) 491-513; Id., *Testimoni di Cristo nello Spirito, in Rediscovering Confirmation*, PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE LAITY, Vatican City, 2000, 74-75.

⁴³ HIPPOLYTUS OF ROME, *Traditio apostolica*, in BERNARD BOTTE *La Tradition Apostolique*, Paris 1968, 88 (Unofficial translation).

“In other parts of *Apostolic Tradition* we find the term ‘serve’. This is often the service of liturgical prayer, a service that seems to be frequently identified with prayer, liturgical service, offering sacrifice, in which the Father’s will is done...”⁴⁴

The insight of Fr Ligier, who sees Confirmation as the sacrament that equips us for Christian prayer,⁴⁵ seems to be backed up by Hippolytus: the theme of service – prayer, viewed as the consequence of the gift of the Spirit, is found at the end of the Confirmation rite:

“... (the newly-baptised) now pray with all the people, but separate from the faithful until they have received all this. After they have finished praying, they give the kiss of peace”.⁴⁶

The gift of the Spirit conferred by the sacrament *was therefore linked to divine worship, even in the earliest times.*

For Aquinas, too, the Spirit is given because by leaving an indelible character on the Christian’s soul it prepares Christians for divine worship (*Deputatio ad cultum*), a view that has been upheld by the Church’s tradition until today. Writing about Confirmation in the *Summa*, Aquinas says:

“... not all the sacraments are directly ordained to the Divine worship... In regard to the thing done, the Eucharist belongs to the Divine worship, for the Divine worship consists principally therein, so far as it is the sacrifice of the Church... since rather is it “the end and consummation of all the sacraments”, as Dionysius says. But it contains within itself Christ, in Whom there is not the character, but the very plenitude of the Priesthood... But every sacrament does not depute a man to do or receive something pertaining to the worship of the priesthood of Christ: while it

⁴⁴ A. NOCENT, *I tre sacramenti dell’iniziazione cristiana*, in *Anàmnesis* 3/1, *La liturgia. I sacramenti*, Genova, 1986, 98.

⁴⁵ L. LIGIER, *La confirmation: sens et conjoncture oecumenique hier et aujourd’hui*, Paris 1973, 261-ss. (Unofficial translation).

⁴⁶ HIPPOLYTUS OF ROME, *Traditio apostolica*, op. cit.

is just this that is required for a sacrament to imprint a character... By Orders and Confirmation the faithful of Christ are deputed to certain special duties; and this can be done by the priest alone”.⁴⁷

Vatican II explicitly emphasised the gift of the Spirit and the related ability to worship in relation to the common priesthood:

“The baptised, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated as a spiritual house and a holy priesthood, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer spiritual sacrifices”.⁴⁸

The faithful are endowed with the royal, priestly and prophetic office by virtue of being Christian. For in Baptism, the Spirit *acts* by purifying the creature from original sin and from actual sin, making them children of God and members of the Mystical Body of Christ. Through Confirmation, the faithful receive the *Spirit in person*, and are given the power to worship, which is the true Christian worship: to serve in a liturgy, which is spiritual worship, where the sacrifice is authentic, according to Ligier’s insight. Being a sacrifice, the Eucharist, the Catholic Church’s true worship of the Father, requires a priesthood, the only priesthood, the priesthood of Christ, which he shares with his Church.

The union of the three sacramental parts of Christian initiation highlights their saving value: *after being born again in the waters of Baptism, the Christian receives the Spirit and is empowered to worship (Confirmation), the true worship in Spirit and in truth: the Eucharist.*

The memorial has been entrusted by Christ to the community of believers as such, to the Church, and the community acts through the man whom Christ gives to her in the Spirit.⁴⁹ The man who exercises the ministry of presiding acts only in Christ and in the name of the community of

⁴⁷ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica* III, q. 63, a. 6.

⁴⁸ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 10.

⁴⁹ On the presence of this dimension in the Paul VI Missal, cf. B. NEUHEUSER, *La relation entre le prêtre et les fidèles dans la liturgie de Pie V et celle de Paul VI*, in *L’assemblée liturgique et les différents rôles dans l’assemblée*, Roma 1977, 239-252.

believers (“*in persona Ecclesiae*”). All the faithful, lay and ordained, offer themselves to the Father with Christ and in the Spirit. Is it not perhaps the case that the highest expression of their common priesthood is the fact of being able to offer the sacrifice of Christ to the Father through their life, seeking in the power of the Spirit the riches of the Resurrection of Christ that are concealed for them in the Father’s heart?

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

At the end of this attempt to probe more deeply into the mystery of the Eucharist a great deal more could still be said about the meaning it receives from the whole of the Christian mystery and the meaning which it gives to it.

To what extent does the eucharistic mystery question the Christian mystery, and to what extent is it a source for understanding it? Although we should always be seeking to explain the eucharistic mystery, we must also allow it to explain itself to us: no Christian reality is indifferent to it, and all receive some light from it. It is in the eucharistic mystery that we are shown what the living God is, what he wants to be for us, and what we want to be in this world for God and with God.

What new meaning does the Word of God take on as a result of the existence of the eucharistic mystery? What new meaning does the daily practice of Christian life take on as a result of the existence of the eucharistic mystery? What new meaning does the Christian challenge to the world take on as a result of the existence of the eucharistic mystery?

We should constantly refer to other areas of theology to which these questions are more directly relevant. But precisely because the eucharistic mystery – as it were – ‘encapsulates’ in terms of worship the very essence of the whole of the Christian mystery of salvation, everything could ultimately be incorporated into a theological reflection on the fact of the liturgy, without ignoring the rightful role of theology.

At all events, what is essential is for every Christian to sum up all this for themselves, personally, perhaps starting with what we have tried to do here! “*Finis operae, sed non finis laboris*”: “the opus is finished, but the hard work is still to be done” (St. Bernard).

The Mystery of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist: Sacrifice, Communion, Presence

Mgr FRANCESCO PIO TAMBURRINO, O.S.B.

INTRODUCTION

The mystery of the Body of Christ which was “given” and of His Blood which was “shed” is a virtually inexhaustible object of Christian contemplation and reflection. It is a mystery that so exceeds our capacity to comprehend it, that it is natural and beneficial for theologians to increasingly devote their reflections to it.

Not infrequently, we find theologians and liturgists today trying to make the eucharistic mystery more acceptable, more “relevant”, by demonstrating its rationale by approaching it “bottom up”, in terms of social anthropology:

“The practice of the ritual meal – they maintain – is shared by all religions. Indeed, the convivial form of relating and establishing communion is consistent with human nature itself, which is structurally symbolic, in addition to the fact that, in more general terms, sacramentality is consistent with corporeity, which intrinsically defines Man. It is, in a sense, its ritual “translation”. And they conclude that it is not hard to recognise that the Eucharist represents the peak of these experiences, and is the highest expression of this sym-

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bolism. At all events, based on these arguments, it appears plausible, and indeed to a certain extent “logical”, albeit not “necessary”. The Christian liturgy should therefore not surprise anyone, particularly the Eucharistic liturgy. It is perfectly acceptable. This, then, is the reasoning advanced by not a few of today’s theologians and liturgists”.¹

The boldest writers then move on to applying it: to humanise the Eucharist, they do exactly the opposite to what the apostle Paul ordered: they link it up again to eating and drinking in “houses” (1 Cor 11:22). The result is inevitably the reverse of what it should be: the “Body of the Lord” is no longer set apart, and it is no longer “the Lord’s Supper” which is eaten.²

A sound approach will not seek to deny that the Eucharist can be partly understood in terms of conviviality, but the essential originality of the Eucharist is absolute and total. The “mystery of faith” cannot be understood by arguing from the human level, unless it begins with the “unprecedented” event of Jesus, the root source of all things, and unless it is viewed as part of the eternal and unique plan of the Father: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). The only-begotten Son, crucified and risen, is the substance of that plan.

The Body and Blood of Christ consigned to the Church are an absolutely free and unexpected gift. This grace of the Father reaches its peak in the death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

As St Thomas Aquinas says, “This makes God’s love appear extreme. This is perceived in terms of the person who loves, and loves immensely: God; and of the condition of the one who is loved: Man, a being of this world, of the flesh, a sinner; and of the greatness of the gift: Love is manifested through the gift; now, God’s gift to us is the greatest of all gifts, his only-begotten Son – Rom 8:22: “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all”.³

¹ I. BIFFI, *Il corpo dato e il sangue versato. Profilo di teologia eucaristica*, Milano 1996, 14 (Unofficial translation).

² Cf. *ibid.*

³ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Super Evangelium Sancti Ioannis Lectura*, Romae-Taurini 1952, 92, n. 477 (Unofficial translation).

Faced with this gift of salvation, the people of God stand in amazement, with a joyful sense of wonder and gratitude for God's generous gift. Wonder and gratitude are the theme of the *praefatio* to the Eucharistic Prayer: it is the solo prayer of the celebrant who invites the people to proclaim the *magnalia Dei*, beginning with the history of salvation and culminating in the Easter of Christ, and the gift of his Spirit. "But there is only one centrepiece, one dominant note: the irrepressible need to give praise and thanksgiving to God for all he has done in Christ for our salvation".⁴

Almost as a preamble to any other reflection, I would like to emphasise the fact that any approach to the Eucharist in the purest and most universal Christian tradition must always be adoring, wondering, doxological and contemplative.

In the prayer of the Divine Liturgy of St Basil the Great for Great Saturday, we pray:

"Let all mortal flesh keep silent, and with fear and trembling stand, and ponder nothing earthly within itself, for the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords cometh to be slain, and to give Himself to be the food of the faithful. And before Him also come the archangelic choirs with all dominion and authority, the many-eyed Cherubim, and the six-winged Seraphim, covering their faces and crying aloud the song, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia".⁵

THE SOURCE OF THE EUCHARIST IS THE CRUCIFIED AND RISEN CHRIST

The Eucharist is the *paschale sacramentum*, or Christ's Paschal meal, whose internal component elements are the "cena novissima", Passion, Death and Resurrection, bread and wine given as the sacra-

⁴ P. VISENTIN and D. SARTORE, *Eucaristia*, in *Liturgia*, a cura di D. SARTORE, A.M. TRIACCA and C. CIBIEN, Cisinello Balsamo 2001, 750-751 (Unofficial translation).

⁵ *The Priest's Service Book*, translated by Archbishop Dimitry (Royster), Diocese of the South, Orthodox Church in America.

ment of the new Passover, a covenant sealed forever, a propitiation for our sins, the gift of eternal life, *sacrifice, communion and presence*.

These three last aspects are just different facets of the saving event of Easter celebrated through worship. For in the Eucharist, “we celebrate the memory of Christ ... recall his passion, his resurrection from the dead, and his ascension into glory”.⁶ Christ’s Easter is the recapitulation of the origins; the Eucharist is the recapitulation of Christ’s Easter, and opens up to the future of salvation.

As a fourth century homily affirms, “Having reached his Passion, Christ left the bread and the cup as the ritual repetition of his sacrifice *par excellence* making the former his own body and the latter his own blood, thanks to the mystical epiclesis, ordering his disciples to celebrate the Pasch under these forms”.⁷

And the Eucharist offers the compendium of salvation in Christ, exactly like the Pasch, or better still, because the Eucharist is the Christian Pasch.

“Jesus places the whole event of salvation in the hands of his disciples when, at his command, they celebrate the Eucharist. It is offered to us under the form of bread and wine, to become the principle and the food of the whole of Christian existence”.⁸

Truly, “The whole mystery of our salvation is contained in this sacrament”.⁹ This synthesis of salvation summed up in the Paschal sacrament of the Eucharist is also a compendium of the past, the present and the future.

“When Christ instituted the Eucharist, he intended Eucharistic worship to be essentially an anamnesis (cf *Lk* 22:19; *1 Cor* 11: 24ff). This memorial refers above all to the past. By remembering, we look back to the historical Jesus and his historical work of salvation. This

⁶ *Eucharistic Prayer I*.

⁷ PSEUDO-CHRYSOSTOM, *In St. Pascha*, VIII, 38: SCh 48, 149 (Unofficial translation).

⁸ Cf. AA.VV., *L'Eucaristia sacramento di ogni salvezza*, Casale Monferrato 1996, 20 (Unofficial translation).

⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologicæ* III, q. 83, a. 4 c.

subjective act of remembrance itself, but above all the objective performance of the ritual act of worship instituted at a particular time, make salvation present. This representation itself becomes an act that looks ahead to the future of salvation (cf *1 Cor* 11:26) of which the pledge is the saving act commemorated, of which this representation is, in a sense, a foretaste. At the same time, the memorial act of worship decisively determines the shape of the whole of the Christian life, in that all the moral obligations derive from and are motivated above all by a saving act performed in the past and relived once again in the liturgy, but also by the immediate future of salvation and the condition of salvation already present”.¹⁰

THE EUCHARISTIC SACRAMENT IS A SACRIFICE

The Church has always seen the celebration of the Eucharist as an act of obedience to Christ’s command, “Do this in remembrance of me” (*Lk* 22:19). But while the Lord’s Supper has the nature of a memorial, it is not merely the subjective remembrance of what Jesus did and what he ordered us to celebrate as the “memory” of him, and is not only a liturgical act which makes the Lord present: “It is a liturgical act which commemorates before the Father the unique sacrifice of his Son, which makes him present in the act of remembrance of him”.¹¹

The Christian tradition views the essence of the act of Eucharistic worship in terms of the concept of a sacrificial meal, being based on the sacrificial offering of Christ, of which it is the extension. “Its elements are the bread and wine, as the meaningful representation of the body (flesh) and the blood of Jesus, which must be interpreted sacrificially”.¹²

¹⁰ N. FÜGLISTER, *Il valore salvifico della Pasqua*, Brescia 1976, 338-339; cf. C. VAGAGINI, *Il senso teologico della liturgia*, Roma 1965, 87-88 (Unofficial translation).

¹¹ M. THURIAN, *L’Eucaristia, memoriale del Signore*, Roma 1967, 193.

¹² N. FÜGLISTER, *Il valore salvifico della Pasqua*, op. cit. 339-340 (Unofficial translation).

Affirming with St Augustine¹³ that the Eucharist is a “memorial sacrament” or a “memorial sacrifice”, one writer has said that, *by virtue of the Holy Spirit,*

*“the saving action of Christ, foremost and directly his sacrificial death and the Resurrection that crowns it, but also the whole of his work of salvation, as one single great unity, centred specifically in the ‘transitus paschalis’, the passage of our Lord from death to life. This also includes his entry into the world, his incarnation as the epiphany of God the saviour, the epiphany which, after the Paschal passage to life at the right-hand of the Father, will also be achieved for us one day in the Parousia of the Glorified One; in the meantime, through the presence of his sacrificial action, we participate in his death and resurrection, receiving the light and life of his epiphany and the pledge of future glory. Condensed within the true memorial of the Eucharist, the work of redeeming humanity and glorifying God takes place. The second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy describes it in the following words: ‘the work... of Christ our Lord... achieved ... principally by the Paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead and glorious Ascension’ (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n. 5). The liturgy – and surpassingly the Eucharist – is a ‘memorial’ of the *unique* saving action of Christ; it commemorates the saving action of our Lord that was performed in history once and for all time, without repeating it (which would suggest that it had not been sufficient) but making it affective in the present for the salvation of the celebrants, involving them as participants in the *unique* action of our Lord as a pledge of its future fulfilment, of which it is already a foretaste (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n. 8).¹⁴*

The Council of Trent declared that, “the sacrifice of the Mass is not only one of praise and thanksgiving [but is also] propitiatory”.¹⁵ It is

¹³ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *Contra Faustum* 20, 21.

¹⁴ B. NEUNHEUSER (A.M. TRIACCA), *Memoriale* in *Liturgia*, op. cit. 1177 (Unofficial translation).

¹⁵ Cf. H. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, Bologna 1995 n. 1753. Cf. S. MARSILI, *La Messa mistero pasquale e mistero della Chiesa*, in AA.Vv., *La sacra Liturgia rinnovata dal Concilio*, Leumann 1964, 347.

not only a purely conceptual remembrance, not a “*nuda commemoratio*”, but a real remembrance.

“The Mass contains the sacrifice of Christ in the Johannine sense of his being uplifted upon the cross when the “Son of Man calls all to him” (cf. *Jn* 12:13), where his death is not seen as distinct from its fruits, and the humiliation of the Son obedient unto death was infinitely pleasing to the Father, deserving the glorification of Easter (...). His body represented by the bread is truly “the body given and broken” which was offered once and for all on Calvary, and the blood is truly the blood that was shed then for the redemption of the world; but now *consummatum est* (*Jn* 19:30), everything has been fulfilled, the consummative act of the whole history of salvation, both before and after, has been formed and its positive outcome is assured, regardless of the way (as far as we are able to perceive it) human affairs may proceed. Through the memorial and real celebration, we hold in our hands “the bread of life and the cup of salvation” (*Roman Canon of the Mass*) which are more powerful than any event of history. Because of the inseparability of death and resurrection, one can no longer be celebrated without the other”.¹⁶

But there is also another side to the memorial – sacrifice: through the offering of the gifts of bread and wine and “standing before God” the Church is *taken into* the sacrificial self-giving of her Lord.¹⁷ “By partaking of the banquet of the Body and Blood of the Lord we become ‘parties’ to his death and hence of his resurrection. The eternal Paschal destination is fulfilled in those who eat the flesh of the Lord and drink his blood (*Jn* 6:53-57)”.¹⁸ Every day the Church learns to offer herself “*seipsam per ipsum discit offerre*”.¹⁹

¹⁶ P. VISENTIN and D. SARTORE, *Eucaristia*, op. cit., 751-752 (Unofficial translation).

¹⁷ For a thorough discussion of this issue, see *L'idea di sacrificio. Un approccio di teologia liturgica*, a cura di E. MAZZA, Bologna 2002.

¹⁸ I. BIFFI, *Il Corpo dato e il Sangue versato*, op. cit., 61 (Unofficial translation).

¹⁹ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, *De civitate Dei*, 10, 20.

COMMUNION

“The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?”, asks St Paul (1 Cor 10:16).

The culminating point of the sacrificial meal, of the *cena dominica*, is *sacramental communion*. It is there that we become one – a communion – not only in communion with the Person of the risen Lord, but also with his sacrifice. It is instituted as a mutual immanence, which Jesus has already announced to us and guaranteed: “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (Jn 6:56).

This communion is the inexhaustible principle of life, as he himself has once again told us: “He who eats me will live because of me” (Jn 6:57); and it is a life which begins here on earth, in our tormented earthly existence, but will continue well beyond the end of time, for ever and ever: “If any one eats of this bread, he will live for ever” (Jn 6:51).²⁰ And this is done by virtue of the transforming work of the Holy Spirit. The epiclesis solemnly invokes the Spirit on the bread and wine, to become the body and blood of Christ, our Head; but it also calls for sacramental communion to create the unity of all in Christ and with one another: “Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ”;²¹ “by your Holy Spirit, gather all who share this one bread and one cup into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise”;²² The Eucharist is a “*signum unitatis, vinculum caritatis*” (a sign of unity, a bond of charity);²³ it is a gift and a *task*: “*Commendatur vobis in isto pane quomodo unitatem amare debeatis*” (this bread recommends to you how much you should love unity).²⁴

²⁰ See the Documento dottrinale, XXIII Congresso Eucaristico Nazionale, 1997, in AA.VV. *L'Eucaristia sacramento di salvezza*, Casale Monferrato 1996, 15-26.

²¹ *Eucharistic Prayer III*.

²² *Eucharistic Prayer IV*.

²³ The expression used by St Augustine taken up by the Second Vatican Council in The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 47.

²⁴ AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO, Sermon 227.

Furthermore, in the Eucharistic Prayer, in several places during the performance of the different parts of the rite, the Christian community celebrating the mystery has felt the need to re-create communion around the altar with the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Apostles, the martyrs and the Saints,²⁵ and also to declare communion and intercession for the living and the dead, naming the Pope, the Bishops, the clergy, and the community of the faithful themselves. All are called to gather around the source of grace and all blessings. Communicating with the sacrament already presupposes communion with the Church. For heretics, schismatics and excommunicates are excluded from it. In the early Church, in order to achieve communion with the eucharistic species, it was first necessary to establish ecclesial communion with the Bishop in the procession.²⁶

Communion also becomes an ecumenical commitment, stemming from the sacrament of Christ, the heart and the centre of worship of every Church or ecclesial Community.

“The eucharist shows us that our behaviour is inconsistent in face of the reconciling presence of God in human history: we are placed under continual judgment by the persistence of unjust relationships of all kinds in our society, the manifold divisions on account of human pride, material interest and power politics and, above all, the obstinacy of unjustifiable confessional oppositions within the body of Christ”.²⁷

²⁵ Cf. *Eucharistic Prayer I*: “Communicantes et memoria venerantes...”.

²⁶ The kiss of peace was exchanged between the baptised, but was not even offered to the catechumens, who were dismissed after the sermon. The formulae for dismissing them were highly developed and included all the categories of people who were unable to communicate with the Sacred mysteries because they were not in peace with the Church. In the early Beneventan liturgy this *dismissio* was used: “Si quis catechumenus est procedat. Si quis iudaeus est procedat. Si quis haereticus est procedat. Si quis paganus est procedat. Si quis arianus est procedat. Cuius cura non est procedat”. *Benevento Biblioteca Capitolare, 40 Graduale*, a cura di N. ALBAROSA, A. TURCO, Padova 1991, 19r. Cf also *Regula Benedicti*, 63, 4: “Sic accedant ad pacem et communionem”.

²⁷ World Council of Churches, “Faith and Order” Commission, *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, Faith and Order Paper n. 111, E20.

THE EUCHARIST IS A PRESENCE

The Eucharist is a sacrifice because it makes the Passion of Christ present; it is a “host” because it contains Christ himself, the saving victim. His presence is much more than the symbol, the subjective experience, or meaning without substance. It belongs, and leads us, to the plane of being and working on behalf of humanity.

“It is he himself who is in the sacrament of bread and wine even though there are many assemblies in which the Church gathers together. It is he himself who by being sacrificed recreates, being believed in vivifies, and being consecrated sanctifies the consecrators”.²⁸

Christ is present to his Church in many ways.²⁹ In a very special manner – *vere, realiter, substantialiter*, as the Council of Trent puts it³⁰ – he is present in the eucharistic species: the true sacramental, substantial and permanent *real presence*, whole and entire.³¹ This real presence comes about through the conversion of the whole of the substance of the bread and wine into the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ,³² through the words of consecration and the epiclesis-invocation of the Holy Spirit. Everything touched by the Spirit is always transformed.³³ “Christ is whole and entire under the species of bread and under any other part of the species, and also a whole under the species of wine in all its parts”.³⁴

In the *Liturgy of St John Chrysostom*, when the priest comes to break the bread, he does so saying the following words, “Broken and divided is the Lamb of God, which is broken and not disunited, which

²⁸ GAUDENTIUS OF BRESCIA, *Tractatus*, 2.

²⁹ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 48; Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 7.

³⁰ Cf. H. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, op. cit., n. 1651.

³¹ Cf. PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter *Mysterium Fidei*, n. 39.

³² Cf. H. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, op. cit., n. 1642.

³³ Cf. ST CYRIL OF JERUSALEM, *Mystagogical Catechesis*, V, 16.

³⁴ Cf. H. DENZINGER, *Enchiridion symbolorum*, op. cit. nos. 1641 and 1653. cf. THOMAS AQUINAS, *Sequence for the Mass of Corpus Christi*, “Fracto demum Sacramento, Ne vacilles, sed memento, Tantam esse sub fragmento, Quantum toto tegitur”.

is ever eaten and never consumed, but sanctifieth those that partake thereof".³⁵

It would, however, be understating the truth to say that the presence of Christ only has to do with the transformation of the elements, almost in a static manner. The Roman liturgy, particularly in the Prayers after Communion, emphasises the dynamic power of the Eucharist: it becomes a real *participation* in the mystery being celebrated, purification, support, remission of sins and forgiveness, atonement, medicine, spiritual nourishment, renewal, reparation, a source of life, sanctification, the pledge of eternal life.³⁶

One writer has perceptively pointed out that the eucharistic presence procures *salus*, which is both *health and salvation*³⁷ *in utroque*, that is to say, *mente et corpore*.³⁸ St Thomas beautifully put it in these words: "The whole mystery of our salvation is contained in this sacrament".³⁹

CONCLUSION

Sacrifice, communion, presence: these are three dimensions which express Christ's total self-giving "for us men and for our salvation". For "greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (*Jn 15: 13*). In his sacrifice, Christ teaches us *how* to translate the eucharistic sacrifice into our daily lives, how to live the *koinonia* in the Church and with our fellow brothers and sisters, showing us that his presence is an invitation to "*pro-existence*". By "*pro-existence*" is meant a life directed *for the benefit* of our neighbour, commitment in the world, on behalf of the poorest people, to try to bring them justice and fellowship and, where necessary, enduring persecution and death.

³⁵ *Hieratikon, Sluzhebnik*, the Priest's Service Book as translated by Archbishop Dimitry (Royster), Diocese of the South, Orthodox Church in America.

³⁶ Cf. A. BLAISE, *Le vocabulaire latin des principaux thèmes liturgiques*, Turnhout s.d., 397-406.

³⁷ Cf. *idem*, 432ff.

³⁸ Cf. *Sacramentarium Veronense* 31; 60; 630.

³⁹ THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologica* III, q. 83, a. 4 c.

The rationale of our world is based on calculation, possession, power. The rationale of the Eucharist is *sacrifice*, or self-giving; *communion*, or a radical sharing of gifts, breaking the bread; *presence*, putting ourselves in our neighbour's place, committing ourselves and espousing their cause, *bending down to wash the feet* of the poor (cf. *Jn* 13:1-20). The Eucharist not only represents to us the sacrifice of Christ in the sacramental celebration, but continually renews the Church, which emerges from it "as an unusual community, in which the love of the Crucified Christ for the Father and for all humanity surprisingly lives and acts".⁴⁰

It is therefore from the eucharistic sacrament that the Church and the new humanity is born. As Paul VI teaches us, the Eucharist "was instituted so that we could become *brothers* (...) so that instead of being alien, scattered and indifferent towards one another, we can be united, equal, friends; this is given to us so that instead of being an apathetic, selfish mass of divided and adversarial individuals we can become a people, a true, believing and loving people, with one heart and with one soul".⁴¹

⁴⁰ AA.VV., *L'Eucaristia sacramento di ogni salvezza*, op. cit., 30.

⁴¹ PAUL VI, *L'Eucaristia sacramento di unione, sorgente e vincolo di carità*, "Insegnamenti" III (1965), 358 (Unofficial translation).

The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life of the Lay Faithful

MATTEO CALISI

FOREWORD

In this modest reflection I shall try to speak of my own experience as a Catholic layman seeking to avoid losing, in the chaos of daily life, my perception of what Berger calls the “rumour of Angels”, by listening to the Word of God made flesh – the Eucharist, that is to say – which does not dwell in thunder, fire, or earthquakes, but is a voice that speaks in silence to our consciences, because, as Isaiah said, Christ “will not cry or lift up his voice” (*Is* 42:2).

I would like to offer a few reflections on this subject, once again recalling that they are based on my own personal experience, supported by the experience of the Community of Jesus, which is dedicated to adoration, evangelisation and reconciliation between Christians.

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THE PARTICIPATION OF THE LAITY IN THE “TRIA MUNERA CHRISTI”

One of the first questions that arises when discussing this issue is: what is the relationship between the Eucharist and the life of the Christian laity who are called to bear witness in every dimension of their earthly existence?

The answer is to be found, unambiguously, in the Word of God himself set out in Peter's first Letter: "But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light". (1 Pet 2:9).

First of all, I know as a layman that I have been elevated to a dignity beyond compare: the dignity of belonging to the holy people of God, which clearly stands apart from all the other religious, ethnic, political or cultural groupings of history. God himself acquired this people for himself through the sacrifice of his Son, giving them the destiny of "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation".

By entering into the people of God through faith and Baptism, the Christian laity become sharers in the unique vocation of this people: its *priestly* vocation. "Christ the Lord, High Priest taken from among men, (cf. Eph 5:1-5) made the new people 'a kingdom and priests to God the Father' (Rev 1:6; cf. 5:9-10). By regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, this people are *consecrated* as a spiritual house and a *holy priesthood*, in order that through all those works which are those of the Christian man they may offer *spiritual sacrifices*".¹

By virtue of its priestly nature, the people of God has been made worthy of celebrating the liturgy: "The faithful, in virtue of *their royal priesthood*, join in the offering of the Eucharist".²

As St Leo the Great wrote:

"All those who are reborn in Christ are given a royal dignity though the sign of the Cross. With the anointing of the Holy Spirit they are consecrated priests. There is therefore not only that service which is specific to our priestly ministry, because by being endowed with a spiritual charism and using their own reason, all Christians acknowledge that they are members of this royal nation and participants in the priestly function. Is it not a royal function for a soul to govern its body

¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 10.

² *Ibid.*

in submission to God? Is it not a royal function to consecrate a pure conscience to the Lord, and on the altar of one's own heart offer him the unblemished sacrifices of our worship?"³

This "common priesthood" is the priesthood of Christ, the one Priest, which is shared by all his members,⁴ and which by its nature is distinct from the consecrated priesthood which is conferred by the Sacrament of Holy Orders, which represents Christ as the Head of the Body. Yet the Church is governed by the law of the Holy Spirit, who is communion; any distinctions that exist in the Church have to be interpreted in terms of integration. The priesthood of Christ is one and indivisible, and remains such when it is communicated to the Church. It is for this reason that at the celebration of the Eucharist, the whole assembly itself becomes a "liturgia" – ministers and faithful, each with their own functions, but all in the unity of the Holy Spirit who acts in all of them.

Nevertheless, the lay faithful participate in the *tria munera Christi* by performing the "priestly, prophetic and royal" functions, which they manifest by bearing Christian witness in every dimension of their earthly existence.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE EUCHARIST AND WITNESS

In relation to the Eucharist, this Christian witness is expressed specifically in terms of our perception of the living presence of the risen Christ in the sacrament. This is the first, indispensable, condition! We bear witness to what we know and actually experience! It is a perception that causes prayer, first of all, to flow from the heart, since prayer is the dialogue that takes place between persons who are present to each other and who listen to one another. Dialogue is not possible with someone who is absent. It is often said, poetically, that prayer is the breath of life. One

³ LEO THE GREAT, *Sermons*, 4, 1: PL 54, 149.

⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n. 14, and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 10.

might therefore add that just as the lungs move when they come into contact with the oxygen in the air, so the most intimate part of Man moves when it is in contact with this presence perceived in faith.

Under the signs of bread and wine a *most real and substantial* presence is revealed, and remains there after the celebration is over. Through the sacramental act, which is the “personal action of Christ”, it is revealed as *dynamic, speaking, personal presence, embodied in the Church*, and constitutes the heart of the lay Christian’s faith: their prayer, witness and mission in the world all depend on the living, deeply felt and jubilant perception of this presence. How could anyone experience this and remain unaffected? St Ambrose spoke of “meeting him face-to-face in his sacraments”, almost as if to feel “his breath” – “*presentiae eius flatum aspirare*”. There is no other place and time where the meeting with Christ is easier and more complete.

Nothing is more important to the believer than this living, real and personal perception of Our Lord in the Eucharist. Often, we wrongly bring faith down to the level of merely endorsing a certain number of truths; but the essence of faith lies in our capacity to perceive this mysterious, hidden, yet powerful, presence of the Risen Lord in the Church and in the world, and above all in the Eucharist, which is the “the fount and apex of the whole Christian life”.⁵ Those who believe this, know how to meet Jesus, “breathing in” His presence, and prayer becomes the breath of their lives. The Eucharist thereby becomes the focus of our days, because it is the focal point of every activity of the Spirit and of the temporal dimensions.

HOW DO THE LAITY PERCEIVE THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE EUCHARIST?

The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is perceived as part of a “theological” experience of God, bound up with conscientious participation in the celebration of the eucharistic mystery. This theological experience depends on two conditions: the first is general in character, because

⁵ Id., Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11.

it is essential to everyone, laity and ordained ministers alike, and consists of the degree of purity that the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity reach in the believer's heart. The perception of Christ's presence and of union with him in the Eucharist is directly proportional to the level of this purity: only the pure in heart can see God (cf. *Mt 5:5*).

The second, equally indispensable, condition is that the faithful must play an active part and truly participate in the celebration of the Eucharist, making a conscious contribution in terms of their threefold *function*: *priestly* – praising and adoring God, *royal* – exercising gifts, charisms and ministries, and *prophetic* – publicly and frankly proclaiming the Word of God.

This is how the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy puts it:

“Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people (*1 Pet 2:9*; cf. *2:4-5*), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism”.⁶

We nevertheless know that being able to meet this condition depends on the solid basic formation and the spiritual capacity of the one presiding at the celebration of the Eucharist, the priest; for it is based upon the realisation that he is not only carrying out a ritual function by performing a rite according to the liturgical rubrics, but has also been given the task of making this rite a mystagogy, a rising up to God, which is able to facilitate the meeting between God and his people:

“Yet it would be futile to entertain any hopes of realising this unless the pastors themselves, in the first place, become thoroughly imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy, and undertake to give instruction about it. A prime need, therefore, is that attention be directed, first of all, to the liturgical instruction of the clergy”.⁷

⁶ *Id.*, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 14.

⁷ *Ibid.*

Consequently, the laity derive great benefit from participating in a Mass celebrated in a lively manner by the priest. They see that the priest is first to experience the presence of the risen Christ, in the Word and in the Eucharist.

At the same time, by practising the theological virtues and the charisms with which the Holy Spirit has endowed them – when they are free to manifest them – the laity make a palpable contribution to the manifestation of the risen Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist. As the most solemn and public expression of the people of God, the liturgy automatically becomes a living manifestation of the Catholic laity, who make up the largest proportion of the People of God.

Unfortunately, however, despite liturgical reform, there still lingers on a widespread clerical mentality in the liturgy, seeing the celebration of the mystery more as the work of the clergy – the celebrant – than the “work of the whole people of God” celebrating their Lord. For it is often the case that the people do not unite themselves with the celebrant by active and lively participation, but in a formal manner, by only relating to the celebrant through the dialogue of ritual responses.

Such a mentality cannot be overcome by applying the current idea that the lay faithful alone, or mainly, have the right and power to manifest their faith and hence to exercise their *priestly*, *prophetic* and *royal function* in contact with earthly and worldly realities. The consequence of this is that when they do participate in the eucharistic sacrifice, even *conscientiously* and *actively*, they tend to see themselves more as passive spectators, whose only function is to be users and recipients of the mystery which is being performed in the liturgical *actio*, and not as active participants in the liturgical action through which the mystery is accomplished.

Is not the people of God, the whole Church, founded and generated by Christ through the work of the Spirit, that “celebrates” the Eucharist? Is the People of God made up only of ordained ministers? If that were the case, what would become of Christ’s *royal priesthood* which is poured out and communicated to every Christian through Baptism?

The eucharistic celebration is therefore the place in which the *ministerial priesthood* and the *royal priesthood*, each in their own right, are harmonised and mutually interact in order to perform two wonderful events, through the power of the Holy Spirit: the generation of Christ in the eucharistic Mystery, and the creation of the People of God as the Mystical Body of which Christ is the Head.

The Eucharist is the principal place where the laity express and feed on the faith, hope and charity with which the Spirit has endowed them. That is the place where the laity must overcome any fear of bearing witness by praising and adoring God in the company of their brothers and sisters in the faith. By pondering deeply on the Word of God and feeding on Christ, they receive an irresistible impetus to go out of the Church and into the world to proclaim the salvation and Lordship of Jesus Christ, so that they themselves then become the bread broken for their brothers and sisters, and for all humanity.

For many years I have attended the Eucharist celebrated in various typical forms used by *Catholic Charismatic Renewal*, and I have to say that at these holy Masses one perceives the living presence of the risen Christ, and an intimate communion is created with him precisely by virtue of this living participation, full of faith, hope and charity, both in the priest who presides and in the lay faithful. By virtue of this “divine charge” received through the celebration of the Eucharist, it becomes easier for the laity to transfer *the grace and power of the Holy Spirit* into their daily activities, and to bear witness to the risen Christ to today’s unbelieving and secularised world.

THE EUCHARIST AND THE EXPERIENCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Eucharist is a gift of grace, living bread, the blood of redemption, the power of love, which becomes food and drink. This gift of grace, which is a gift of the Holy Spirit, is a new and powerful *outpouring of the Holy Spirit* in those who nurture themselves with his food and quench their thirst with this drink: this *outpouring* is given to each

one of us for the Christian life, that is to say, for the path towards holiness to which all baptised Christians are called, and for Christian witness in the world.

This truth is, and always has been, living and present in the Christian experience, as the whole of the liturgical tradition demonstrates.

This outpouring of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of believers, to make them witnesses to the Risen Christ did not occur once and for all with Baptism and Confirmation, but is constantly given to us in the Eucharist.

We know that great importance is attributed to the intervention of the *Spirit* in the eucharistic event in the Eastern Tradition. The Eucharist is an act performed not only by Christ, but also by the *Spirit*, and many people will remember how, at the Second Vatican Council, the Fathers from the Eastern Churches denounced the West's shortcomings in this regard. Christ truly meets us in the *Spirit*. It is inconceivable that Christ intervened in the history of salvation alone, without the action of the *Spirit*. Christ, who is invoked in the liturgy with the title "Kyrios", exercises his Lordship and performs his saving action only through the power of the "Pneuma", namely his Spirit.

This is how the great Cabasilas expressed it in the 14th century:

"At Pentecost, the Church received the Holy Spirit after Christ had ascended to heaven. She now receives the gift of the Spirit after the gifts have been accepted on the heavenly altar. God has welcomed these gifts, and in exchange sends us the Holy Spirit".⁸

It is for this reason that the *Anaphora of St James* introduces the second part of the account of the institution with the following words: "He took the cup [...] He gave thanks, and hollowed and blessed it, and filled it with the Holy Spirit, and gave it to us His disciples, saying..."⁹.

⁸ NICOLAS CABASILAS, *Commentary on the Divine Liturgy*. (Unofficial translation).

⁹ This is the version of text published by the Eastern Catholic Pastoral Association of Southern California, <http://www.faswebdesign.com/ECPA/>.

St Ephrem wrote, on the same subject, “In the cup is wine mixed with the fire of the Spirit”.¹⁰ He says the same about the bread, which becomes the living Body of Christ, *filled with the Holy Spirit*, such that “he who eats with faith eats the fire of the Spirit; eat it all of you, and thereby eat the fire of the Spirit”.¹¹

In lyrical terms, this “lyre of the Holy Spirit” expressed himself more effusively in a hymn:

“Fire and Spirit in the womb of your Mother,
Fire and Spirit in the waters of the Jordan,
And Fire and Spirit again in our Baptism
Fire and Spirit in the bread and the cup”.¹²
“Concealed in your bread is the Spirit, who is not eaten;
In your wine is the Fire which is not drunk.
The Spirit in your bread, the Fire in your wine,
A sublime wonder that our lips have welcomed,
In the bread we eat Fire, and find life”.¹³

In allegorical terms, then, the bread and the wine must therefore pass through the *brazier* of Pentecost in order to come out of it as the Body and the Blood of the spotless Lamb, just as in the natural world, there is no bread which has not first passed through a hot oven, or wine whose grapes have not first been inebriated by the heat of the sun.

This idea of *Divine Fire* created a series of visions, first in the East and then in the West, in which a ball of fire hovers over the altar and above the celebrant at the culminating moment in the Mass. It is no coincidence that in the Chaldean rite the deacon urges the faithful to participate in the mystery using these words:

¹⁰ ST EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Hymni et sermones* (Unofficial translation).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 415.

¹² HYMN, *De Fide* VI, 17. Cf. P. Yousif, *L'Eucharistie et le Saint-Esprit d'après S. Ephrem de Nisibe*, in *A tribute to Arthur Voobus. Studies in early Christian Literature*, Chicago 1977, 235-246.

¹³ HYMN, *De Fide* X, 8.

“My dearest Brothers, terrible is this hour and this moment: the Holy Spirit is coming down from his heavenly home to descend on this offering and to consecrate it. Stand and pray in silence and with trembling”.¹⁴

Saint John Chrysostom also says that, “it is not the priest who does something, but the grace of the Spirit which bursts forth within him, enveloping him with his wings and performing this mystical sacrifice”.¹⁵

Through an intense experience of this principle of the liturgy, as they participated in the sacred Mysteries, some holy men in the Eastern tradition saw the Bread on fire, the altar in flames, and the celebrant enveloped in light. Brother Simone, for example, saw a flame licking around the prothesis table and the altar engulfed in fire as St Sergius celebrated the Eucharist. At the moment of communion, the fire entered the chalice and the saint drank the fire.¹⁶

We could also cite similar mystical experiences in the Western tradition. For example, St Catherine of Siena saw the altar engulfed in flames like the burning bush on Mount Horeb. She saw the *Holy Spirit* hovering over the altar like a dove, and at the moment of communion she felt the host touch her lips like a burning coal and penetrate her body like a searing flame.¹⁷

In the Celebration, the *Spirit* who changes the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is the same *Spirit* who is invoked in the second eucharistic epiclesis, to make all those who are participating in the Eucharist “one body and one spirit” according to the words of St Paul: “By one Spirit we were all baptised into one body” (1 Cor 12:13).

In the Eucharist, the living and risen Jesus copiously baptises us “with the Holy Spirit and with fire” (cf. Mt 3:11) to make us his disciples and his witnesses: that is why we can say that the Eucharist is a

¹⁴ Cf. *Messale caldeo*, Ed. Roma 1767 and Marseille 1936 (Unofficial translation).

¹⁵ JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *De Pentecoste*, Hom. I, 4; PG 50, 458-459 (Unofficial translation).

¹⁶ Cf. EPIPHANIUS THE WISE, *Life of St Sergius of Radonez*.

¹⁷ Cf. TOMMASO D'ANTONIO CAFFARINI, *Legenda minor*.

perennial Pentecost which transforms Christians into missionaries of the risen Christ.

It follows from this that every Christian, by virtue of this new and continuous *outpouring of the Holy Spirit*, is called to become a witness of the risen Christ, regardless of the state of life to which God has called them, and in every circumstance of their lives, happy or sad, and in every activity they perform, whether worldly or more specifically religious.

In this way, the laity, “clothed with power from on high” (*Lk* 24:49), will be able to perform their *spiritual priesthood* as we are told in one of the basic texts of the Second Vatican Council, to which it is worth referring here:

“For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavours, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne – all these become “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (cf. *1 Pet* 2:5). Together with the offering of the Lord’s body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God”.¹⁸

THE HISTORICAL FORMS OF EUCHARISTIC WORSHIP

From the time the Church was founded, the Eucharist has always been, and still remains, the synthesis of the whole history of salvation. The eucharistic mystery, moreover, is like a foretaste of the future, because the Eucharist brings forward the return of Christ to today. It is where all the activities of the Church converge: pastoral care, preaching, theology, dialogue with the world and ecumenism. All these activities have their focus and their heart in the Eucharist.

¹⁸ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 34.

The centrality of the Eucharist, throughout the course of history, has taken on those exemplary forms which Manzoni would call “singular and incommunicable acts”. They are wonderful, impressive forms such as *martyrdom* and the *monastic life* from which the *religious life* has also been generated.

Martyrdom is the offering of self to God in the form of immolation. It is the gift of one’s life, offered with such seriousness that it becomes a total oblation and the acceptance of death for the love of Christ. In this connection it is interesting to see how, in Tradition, martyrdom has always been indissolubly linked to the Eucharist: in the Eucharist, Christ is immolated, and in martyrdom, the martyrs immolate themselves, becoming bread broken and eaten for the glory of God. There are so many outstanding examples! We only need to recall a few here.

The second century Bishop *Ignatius of Antioch*, on his pilgrimage in chains from Asia to Rome where he was to suffer martyrdom, ordered his followers to do nothing to save him from total immolation, and as he walked onwards joyfully towards martyrdom he said, “I am God’s grain, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts, that I may become the bread of the world”.¹⁹

His allusion to the Eucharist is manifestly evident in these words, and the metaphor is wonderfully effective: just as the physical bread consecrated in the eucharistic celebration becomes food, so his body consecrated by martyrdom and eaten by beasts becomes bread for the world.

By accepting martyrdom, St Ignatius expressed the will to offer up his own life as a sacrifice to God. He would later declare that “I ask you only one thing: grant me nothing more than that I be poured out a libation to God until the altar is ready”.²⁰ He speaks as if he were in Church, and yet he was in a den of wild animals.

For this reason, in the same letter to the Christians of Rome, St Ignatius goes on to say: “I have no pleasure in earthly food. I desire God’s bread, which is the flesh of Christ, and for drink I desire His

¹⁹ IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Letter to the Romans*, IV.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, II.

blood”.²¹ The martyr yearns for no other food than the Eucharist. Any other earthly food no longer appeals to him. The martyr finds his food in the Eucharist, because it is there that the most perfect association with Christ’s Easter is to be found. He dies with Christ *really*, he is *really* associated with the life of the risen Christ and, in the most perfect manner, he shares in the same love that drove Christ to give up his life.

Another extremely interesting example is the martyrdom of *Polycarp of Smyrna*. The hagiographer, in a text that is now a classic, tells of how the holy martyr, standing on the gallows, recited a kind of eucharistic prayer.²² He offered up a prayer similar to the Canon, but it was not bread, but his own life, that was to be consecrated.

In the account of his martyrdom, the hagiographer says that the fire formed a kind of veil around the body of the saint, which “appeared like bread that is baked”.²³ This is an evident allusion to the Eucharist. This text gives us some idea of what the early generations of Christians felt about the relationship between martyrdom and the Eucharist.

It was for this reason that the *49 martyrs of Abitene*, in today’s Tunisia, who were arrested during the period of persecution under Diocletian as they celebrated the Eucharist in defiance of the Emperor’s orders, went courageously to their deaths declaring, “as if a Christian could exist without celebrating the Sunday assembly or the Sunday assembly exist without a Christian”. And one of them, *Emeritus*, who had hosted the other Christians in his house for prayers, had no hesitation in exclaiming, “without Sunday we cannot live!”²⁴

In an excellent book published recently in Italian, Professor Andrea Riccardi, a scholar of the Church in the modern and contemporary age, has recorded a number of testimonies gathered by the Holy See’s *New Martyrs Commission*. One of these accounts, of an experi-

²¹ *Ibid.*, VII.

²² Cf. *The martyrdom of Polycarp*, XIV.

²³ *Ibid.*, XV.

²⁴ Referred to in ANGELO COMASTRI and FRANCESCO CACUCCI, *Senza la domenica non possiamo vivere*, Letter presenting the Bari National Eucharistic Congress, 21-29 May 2005.

ence in a Nazi concentration camp, once again demonstrates the relationship between the eucharistic sacrifice and martyrdom:

“Fr Angeli wrote, ‘It was useful, perhaps necessary, to have priests in those places of terror and death... We did not celebrate Mass. But in the mornings, at rollcall, when twenty thousand distressed men and women began their day of indescribable suffering, standing in the camp yard, we were there to perform our office as mediators between God and humanity. That bustling camp was like a huge paten, more precious than all those gold patens in our churches, a paten laden with all the atrocious sufferings of the world, and we raised it up to Heaven imploring mercy and pardon and peace. Yes, the priest was needed in those places. His task was to gather together all that pain without end, and offer it up to God’.”²⁵

Entering the *monastic* and *religious life* is the other singular and incommunicable act in which the Eucharist has been historically embodied. It is the response to a special calling from God, involving the total giving of one’s life, leaving the world and giving up the things of the world, and dedicating oneself in response to that call. It is an irrevocable offering in chastity, obedience and poverty, in a kind of daily martyrdom, of constant death to self, not involving the shedding of blood through martyrdom, but the constant and daily sacrifice of self for the glory of God. The contemplative monk or nun, and members of religious Congregations which translate contemplation into action – in practice, the whole of the Consecrated and Religious Life – become a constant offering on behalf of their fellow men and women for the upbuilding of the Kingdom. Consecrated Religious, like martyrs, become bread broken for their fellow men and women, and theirs is a specifically eucharistic mission, because just as Christ, the Eucharist, gives himself to his own, so consecrated men and women give themselves to their own.

²⁵ R. ANGELI, *Vangelo nei Lager*, cited in A. Riccardi, *Il secolo del martirio, i cristiani nel Novecento*, Milano 2000, 132 (Unofficial translation).

THE EUCHARIST AND THE LAY APOSTOLATE

Even though the Lay Apostolate is not one of the specific forms of martyrdom and consecration, it has always had a close relationship with the Eucharist. The lay faithful, either as individuals or through their unions, confraternities, associations and other forms that the Holy Spirit has raised up from time to time among the People of God, have always made a real contribution to the mission of the Church, based invariably on the centrality of the Eucharist.

But the historical novelty of our age is the unusual form of apostolate performed by the *ecclesial movements* and the *new communities* that have emerged since the Second Vatican Council, and which have been hailed by the Holy Father, John Paul II, as a great hope for the Church and for the world. The ecclesial movements and the new communities are made up almost entirely of lay members, precisely because, as participants in the one and only mission of the Church, they must necessarily have the eucharistic mystery²⁶ as the *font* and the *pinnacle* of their apostolate, because their path is underpinned by a formidable *eucharistic spirituality*.

Those who have founded or inspired these movements and communities, with their various different emphases or nuances, all basically say the same thing: their apostolate or charism stems from a meeting with a living Person, not from some abstract notion or mere doctrine. And the meeting with this living Person – Christ – takes place and is experienced primarily in the Eucharist.

It is in the Eucharist that the members of the ecclesial movements and the new communities, in continuity with Tradition, recognise, see, experience, listen to and feel the living and very real presence of the Risen Jesus. And it is Jesus, encountered in the Eucharist, who makes them his disciples and the living witnesses and mediators of his coming, his deputies in a sense, so that he can be welcomed in by humanity: “He who receives you receives me” (*Mt* 10:40).

²⁶ Cf. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 14 and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11.

Discipleship and witness, communion and mission are the two fundamental milestones in the history and the life of the ecclesial movements and new communities. Running throughout their apostolate is this leit-motif: everyone who is met by Jesus becomes an envoy of Jesus. Mary Magdalene, the first woman to be met by Jesus after the Resurrection, was also his first envoy. The Emmaus disciples, after meeting and recognising the Risen Jesus in the sharing of the Eucharist, “rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem” (*Lk* 24:33), to announce the Resurrection. Jesus appeared to the eleven and sent them out to all nations.

The Eucharist enables us to meet Jesus, and takes life where previously there had been death, bringing Resurrection to those who have died because of their sin, and who live in hopelessness, far away from God. It stimulates a personal meeting with Jesus, and those who celebrate it are sent out personally by him, just as he sent out the Eleven “who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead” (*Acts* 10:41; cf. *Lk* 24:36-38).

Witnesses are people who testify to what they have personally seen and heard, first-hand. Some would like to see the Church’s role merely as preserving and handing on the witness of the disciples to whom he appeared as the Risen Lord. But that view seriously belittles the work of the Church, because it reduces the Church to being merely the preserver and historical transmitter of the witness borne by men and women 2000 years ago: and that is the task of an archivist, or a historian. But the Church is a witness of the Resurrection, because it is the Church that meets Christ at every moment in history, which therefore includes the *hic et nunc*: here and now. And the Church’s testimony is true, because she constantly meets Christ in her life through the Word and the Eucharist. Christian witness is therefore the consequence of this personal meeting with Christ, which triggers the commitment to go out to proclaim to the world that Christ is risen.

In his first letter, John describes Christian witness in the following words: “that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you” (*1 Jn* 1:3), “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world” (*1 Jn* 4:14).

The focus of the ecclesial movements and new communities and the way they reach out towards Christ are naturally part of what we call today “the horizontal dimension”, that is to say, by attending to those to whom we must be close, because going out towards Christ is meaningless unless we do so with our hands full of history.

This is the conviction that drives the members of these lay movements and associations to undertake specific Christian life commitments individually, and in their families, their society, and the Church. They often undertake important social activities and charitable work in every part of the world, to help the poor and the needy. Without practical commitments, worship runs the risk of becoming an easy distraction, an empty act, or a mere show of worship (cf *Is* 29:13).

The Eucharist, then, as a place for meeting and communing with Christ, becomes for the laity a starting point to reach out to others, to become, like Christ, broken bread – if necessary, to the point of martyrdom – for the people of our age, all of whom are poor and in need of salvation and love.

For this reason, the ecclesial movements and the new communities are playing a decisive part in bridging the existing dichotomy between faith and life, between worship and action, between communion with God and communion with our fellow men and women, between eucharistic communion and ethical commitment. This is a never-ending action, to overcome what Paul VI called “the deplorable separation” as a result of which the Eucharist longer speaks to the world, such that some Christians have, unfortunately, given up celebrating it, or where they do celebrate it, they give counter-testimony to its effectiveness in their daily lives.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we cannot fail to mention the contemplative dimension when addressing this issue, because it is the source of all Christian action. Ecclesial movements and new communities have rediscovered

the importance and the value of eucharistic adoration, and not only see themselves as being the beneficiaries of it, but as having the responsibility to promote and propagate the contemplative dimension.

It is absolutely necessary for the Catholic laity and the whole of the Church to return to eucharistic adoration, as the Holy Father John Paul II has reiterated on so many occasions, and particularly at the International Eucharistic Congress for the Jubilee Year in Rome.

For it is only in eucharistic contemplation that the Apostles of Christ are able to find the strength they need to go out and, like Christ, become bread broken for their fellow men and women. This is why I would like to offer for meditation to the reader of these modest ideas of mine, the words written by the Holy Father himself on this subject, in his *Letter to the Bishop of Liège on the 750th Anniversary of the Feast of Corpus Christi*:

“I urge Christians to regularly visit Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament, because all of us are called to remain permanently in the presence of God, thanks to the One who will be with us until the end of the world. In this contemplation, the Christian can see much more clearly that the Easter mystery is at the centre of the whole of the Christian life”.²⁷

In the same letter the Holy Father goes on to say:

“Contemplation prolongs communion and makes it possible to meet Christ on a lasting basis, as true God and true Man, to allow ourselves to be looked at by him and to experience his presence. When we contemplate him present in the Blessed Sacrament, Christ draws close to us and becomes more intimate with us than we are with ourselves; he makes us sharers in his divine life, in a union which transforms, and through the Spirit, opens to us the door that leads to the Father, as he himself said to Philip, “He who has seen me has seen the Father”

²⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to the Bishop of Liège on the 750th Anniversary of the Feast of Corpus Christi*, n. 6.

(*Jn* 14:9). When we kneel in silence before the Blessed Sacrament, it is Christ who is wholly and really present, whom we discover, whom we adore, and to whom we relate. Through adoration, the Christian contributes mysteriously to the radical transformation of the world and to spreading the Gospel. Everyone who prays to our Saviour brings with them the whole world, and offers it up to God”.²⁸

²⁸ *Ibid.*, n. 2.

The Lord's Day: the Eucharistic Assembly, the Heart of Sunday

Mgr VINCENZO PAGLIA

FOREWORD

I think I should begin with a short introduction. It was exactly 40 years ago that the Council Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was approved. And it was precisely in the course of these days, after the first general approval of the *schema* on the 14th of November, that the final text was drafted and then adopted with a huge majority by the Council Fathers. Some say – and this is the position of Giuseppe Dossetti who worked with Cardinal Lercaro during the Council – that this Constitution was not only earlier in time than the other documents, but that it is also a kind of key for interpreting the substance of the Church's teaching as set out by Vatican II. I mention this to emphasise not only the appropriateness of this meeting, but also its “timeliness” in terms of Vatican II.

Mgr Paglia, Bishop of Terni-Narni-Amelia since 2000, was for a long time the General Ecclesiastical Assistant to the Community of Sant'Egidio. He is the President of the Catholic Biblical Federation, and President of the Italian Bishops' Conference Commission for Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue, and works with the “Men and Religions” Association of the Community of Sant'Egidio which organises the ecumenical and interfaith meetings for peace and dialogue between faiths and cultures. He has published numerous historical and spiritual books, including *Lettera a un amico che non crede* (1998-2003), *Nel cuore di Dio. Le parole di chi crede* (1999), and *La parola di Dio ogni giorno* (2002).

“WE CANNOT LIVE WITHOUT SUNDAY”

It was Vatican II itself that stated that, “By a tradition handed down from the apostles which took its origin from the very day of Christ's resurrection, the Church celebrates the paschal mystery every

eighth day; with good reason this, then, bears the name of the Lord's Day or Sunday",¹ adding that "Sunday is the fundamental feastday"² of Christians. Christians celebrated Sunday from the earliest times. St Jerome said, "Sunday is the Christians' day, it is our day". For Sunday was set apart from other days: only Jesus' disciples remembered the Pasch of the Resurrection, which occurred on "the first day after the Sabbath". It was the memory of this that led the early Christians to say, "We cannot live without Sunday", meaning, "We cannot live without commemorating Easter".

The first Christian communities, amid the evident apathy of both Jewish and Roman society, gathered together on the day following the Sabbath, to commemorate the risen Lord by celebrating the Eucharist. One of Justin's well-known accounts written around the year 150, describes the Christians' Sunday as follows:

"And on the day called Sunday, all who live in cities or in the country gather together to one place, and the memoirs of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read, as long as time permits; then, when the reader has ceased, the president verbally instructs, and exhorts all to follow these good examples. Then we all rise together and pray for ourselves and for everyone else, wherever they may be. [...] Having ended the prayers, we salute one another with a kiss. There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and taking them, he gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and gives thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these gifts at His hands. And when he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all the people present express their assent by saying Amen. [...] And when the president has given thanks, and all the people have expressed their assent, those who are called by us deacons give to each of those present to partake of the

¹ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 106.

² *Ibid.*

bread and wine mixed with water over which the thanksgiving was pronounced, and to those who are absent they carry away a portion. And this food is called among us *Eucaristia*”.³

This is how the early Christians spent their Sundays. If Christians today were able to take part, in spirit, in that second century Sunday Eucharist they would not feel at all out of place. At that time, of course, it would have been a decision that people considered decisive, even though it created problems. Some even faced martyrdom rather than give it up.

And there were also martyrs that we might call the “Sunday martyrs”. In a town called Abitene (in today’s Tunisia), a group of Christians with a priest and two lectors were arrested in 304. When brought before the proconsul who accused them of unlawful assembly, one of them, Saturninus, replied:

“We have to celebrate the Lord’s Day. That is our law’. The owner of the house, named Emeritus, was then questioned. In answer to the proconsul’s question, ‘Are unlawful meetings being held in your house?’ he replied, ‘Yes, we have celebrated the Lord’s Day’. Asked, ‘Why did you allow these people to enter?’ continued the proconsul, Emeritus replied, ‘They are our brothers, and I could not prevent it.’ ‘You should have prevented it,’ replied the proconsul. But Emeritus answered, ‘I could not, because we cannot live without celebrating the Lord’s supper.’ They told those who were questioning them, ‘we cannot live without Sunday’. And when the proconsul insisted, another one replied, ‘As if a Christian could exist without celebrating the Sunday assembly, or the Sunday assembly could be celebrated without a Christian attending it! Or perhaps you do not know that being a Christian is one with attending the Sunday assembly, and the Sunday assembly is one with being a Christian, such that one cannot exist without the other?’”.

³ JUSTIN, *Apologia*, 1, 65, 67.

There is no doubt that this awareness is rare in our Christian communities today, and not only because of secularisation, which has weakened them. Their testimony as martyrs, according to Cardinal Ratzinger, is not blind obedience to an ecclesiastical law viewed as some external obligation, but is rather the expression of an interior duty and at the same time a personal decision.⁴ The Church has always been seriously concerned to ensure that Christians attend the Sunday Mass. The obligation to sanctify the Feast Day, under pain of mortal sin, is the way the Church has expressed this grave concern. As a good and caring mother, the Church knows very well that it is impossible to live without the Sunday Mass. And since some were beginning to neglect it, she found herself obliged to make it compulsory. In short, the obligation made up for the lack of responsibility of her children. And this happened fairly early on. I do not want to dwell at length on describing the way the Church has always stressed the need to attend the Sunday eucharistic celebration. Among the apocryphal writings of the early Church is one called a *Letter on Sunday*, claiming to have been sent from heaven by Jesus himself. It is a 5th century text, written to shake Christians out of their indolence regarding Sunday. It is Jesus himself speaking, and he begins by saying that, “on the first day” – which has now become Sunday – heaven and earth were created, Abraham took in the three angels, Moses received the law, the Angel visited Mary, John baptised Jesus, and the Day of Judgment will take place on Sunday. It then continues in apocalyptic terms to warn of the consequences of failing to attend the liturgy. Here is just as short extract linking the liturgy to caring for the poor. The author uses the literary device “woe to”:

“Woe to those who insult and dishonour the priest: for they does not insult the priest, but the Church of God. [...] Woe to those who speak during the sacred liturgy and distract the priest who is praying for their sins. Woe to those who do not believe in the Sacred Scriptures. [...] Woe to those who deprive workers of their pay. [...] Woe

⁴ J. RATZINGER, in “*Communio*”, 129 (1993), 44.

to those who use their money for usury; they shall be judged with Judas. [...] Woe to those who offer gifts in the Church and are in enmity with their neighbour. Woe to the priest who performs the liturgy in a state of enmity: for he is not alone in celebrating and in raising up the sacred things, for the angels are also performing the liturgy with him”.⁵

I cannot refrain from recalling the efforts deployed by Cardinal Cardijn – the founder of *Young Christian Workers* – to vigorously defend the workers’ right to devote Sunday to God, as work encroached on their private lives. He even spoke of “profanation”:

“It is a matter of giving back to the people a valuable asset lost, a privilege stolen, a right violated. [...] The Christian reconquest of Sunday must be seen by all as an essential condition for being victorious over violence, terror, injustice and oppression, as the indispensable condition for showing respect to the individual, to the family, to the human dignity of the worker”.⁶

Without mincing his words, he went on to say that:

“Without the Christian Sunday, there is no respect for the worker! Without the Christian Sunday, there is no respect for the worker’s family! Without the Christian Sunday, there is no respect for the worker’s human dignity!”⁷

But let us return to the present day. The most specific document of the Magisterium regarding Sunday is John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, issued in 1998. This is not the place to discuss its contents in

⁵ H. DELEHAYE, *Notes sur la Lettre du Christ tombée du ciel*, in Id. *Mélanges d’hagiographie grecque et latine*, Bruxelles 1966, 155-159 (Unofficial translation from the Italian).

⁶ P. DUPLOYÉ, *Le congrès de Lyon*, cited in *Le jour du Seigneur*, Paris in 1948, 14 (Unofficial translation).

⁷ J. CARDIJN, *Programme 1938-39. La conquête du Dimanche pour la Masse*, cited in *NPJ*, 6 (1938/6), 149 (Unofficial translation).

detail, but a glance at the organisation of the five chapters gives some idea of the document's theological, spiritual and pastoral value. Sunday is the *dies Domini, dies Christi, dies Ecclesiae, dies Homini, dies dierum*. It was perhaps because it was published so near to the celebration of the 2000 Great Jubilee Year that the document was not able to be thoroughly studied by the Christian communities. This makes the decision of the Pontifical Council for the Laity to return once again to study this decisive aspect of the Christian life extremely timely. The Pope himself took the matter up once again in his Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, where he said that the Eucharist is the very heart of Sunday. Returning to an ancient church tradition, he restated its topical relevance to our own age:

“We are entering a millennium which already shows signs of being marked by a profound interweaving of cultures and religions, even in countries which have been Christian for many centuries. In many regions Christians are, or are becoming, a “little flock”. This presents them with the challenge, often in isolated and difficult situations, to bear stronger witness to the distinguishing elements of their own identity. The duty to take part in the Eucharist every Sunday is one of these”.⁸

Sunday remains the Church's day, the day of Christian identity.

“It is necessary”, he continues, “to stress particularly *the Sunday Eucharist* and *Sunday* itself experienced as a special day of faith, the day of the Risen Lord and of the gift of the Spirit, the true weekly Easter”.⁹

He then draws attention to the profound bond linking the Eucharist to Easter: “The Sunday Eucharist which every week gathers Christians together as God's family round the table of the Word and the Bread of Life”.¹⁰

⁸ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, n. 35.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, n. 36.

The ancient third century document addressed to the bishops, the *Didaskalia Apostolorum*, is no less topical today:

“When you [bishops] teach, command and persuade the people to be faithful in assembling in the Church, and never to absent themselves but always to assemble in order not to diminish the Church by their absence, and cause the Body of Christ to be diminished. [...] Since you are the members of Christ, do not scatter yourselves from the Church by failing to assemble. For since you have Christ as your head [...] do not neglect yourselves and do not deprive our Saviour of his members, do not break and scatter his body by not congregating at the assembly. Do not give precedence to your worldly affairs over the Word of God, but on the Lord's day set everything aside and hasten to the Church. For what justification have you to offer God if you do not assemble on the Lord's day to listen to the Word of salvation and be nourished by the divine food which lasts forever?”¹¹

For most people in the Christian countries, Sunday has sadly become a day of little spiritual value. It is the weekend, the end of the week. But we well know that the message of Sunday is much more than merely coinciding with the end of the week. One only has to think of the Christian communities that live, for example, in Muslim countries, where Friday is the civil holiday. Yet this does not prevent the Christian communities there from celebrating Sunday, or cause them to move the Christian feasts. In my opinion, it would be a dangerous act of surrender for the Western countries to agree to the idea of choosing another holy day of obligation to replace Sunday because of the difficulty of celebrating the Sunday Eucharist.

John Paul II makes it quite clear that, far from being merely “the end of the week”, Sunday reveals to Christians and to the whole world the ultimate purpose of history: the unity of all peoples gathered around the Lord. The Sunday Mass therefore gives us a glimpse of that

¹¹ *Didaskalia Apostolorum*, 11, 59, 1-3 (Unofficial translation).

banquet at the end of time that Jesus announced: “And men will come from east and west, and from north and south, and sit at table in the kingdom of God” (*Lk* 13: 29). In short, the Lord’s Day, re-located in the new century, once again offers God’s saving plan for the history of humanity.

SUNDAY, THE EIGHTH DAY

According to an old Jewish saying, “It is not Israel that saved the Sabbath, but the Sabbath that saved Israel”. The same might be said about Christians and Sunday. But we should remember that the reasons for keeping the Jewish Sabbath differ from the reasons for Sunday observance. For the Jews, the Sabbath is the day that is sanctified in memory of the work of creation and the liberation of Israel from slavery in Egypt. It is a day of total rest, just as the Lord rested on the seventh day of creation. But Sunday is the day on which we commemorate the Resurrection of Jesus. The first disciples also celebrated the Sabbath day. It was only later that they stopped keeping the Sabbath day, and only celebrated the day of the Resurrection. This was not done to “Christianise” Sabbath observance or to transform Sunday into a Sabbath day. By celebrating Sunday, Christians acknowledged the radical change that had been brought about by Christ, by overcoming death once and for all “on the first day after the Sabbath”.

At that moment, human history saw the central event of history unfolding. The Lord had liberated men and women from the slavery of evil and death. The history of that day changed the course of history. This is why, with the resurrection of Jesus, time no longer revolved around humanity, or around us, or around what we do; and it was certainly not led by a faceless destiny (even though there are countless men and women who cast themselves into the hands of destiny!). Sunday, with a far greater power, marks the pace of history, breaks into our days and directs them towards God, towards the day in which we shall meet him “face-to-face”.

This being so, some Church Fathers called Sunday the “eighth day”, to indicate it as being the fullness of time. Basil, the great fourth century Bishop of Caesarea, said that the day devoted to the Resurrection is “a kind of image of the future”, and then goes on to say that, being the eighth day, it is, “a day without end, without nightfall or a successor, an age which does not grow old or come to an end”.¹² Considering it the eighth day is based upon the words of the New Testament, “Eight days later, his disciples were again in the house [...] the doors were shut, but Jesus came and stood among them, and said, “Peace be with you” (*Jn* 20:26). Sunday is the “eighth day”, that is to say, the day of the Resurrection, the beginning of “that Sunday which will know no evening when all humanity will enter into God’s rest”, that the Preface in the Roman Missal speaks of. One might say that if you wish to have a real, albeit pale, idea of eternity, experience Sunday!

Time is not only something that is measured in terms of the conventions of civil society (the calendar year, the working year, the academic year and so on) but also something that is measured by the work of God, of which Sunday is the revelation. The Lord’s Day certainly highlights the difference between religious time and ordinary time; not to stay outside it, but to add leaven to it, to give it meaning, to save it. With Sunday, the Gospel calls Christians to break out of the egocentric thinking of this world, in order to experience a moment of freedom, interiority, free-giving and communion. None of this is a foregone conclusion; on the contrary, it requires us to make a choice and to educate ourselves. In today’s frantic, bustling world, Sunday can (*must*) be a time for resting in terms of all its interior dimensions of prayer, and listening, love and communion.

Christian communities, but also the towns and cities in which they live, need the Mass, just as the body needs the heart. One might say that those who do not take part also need it, exactly as the other parts of the body need the heart in order to live. The Sunday Mass remains the heart of the Church and of the land which the Church inhabits. Believers have

¹² BASIL THE GREAT, *On the Holy Spirit*, 66.

been given responsibility for this heart, to ensure that it is not left cold, and to infuse the sense of God into a world which is drifting away from Him. The drab and sometimes violent life in our cities also has to do with the lack or the weakness of Sunday Masses. All need the day of the Resurrection, the day of celebration, the day of friendship and forgiveness, the day on which it is possible to see the “first fruits of the Spirit” and to personally experience for themselves the beginning of the new creation. The apostle Paul speaks of the whole of creation which, “has been groaning in travail” (*Rm* 8:22). And yet the Sunday Eucharist is what best shows the world the “presence of God”, what best reveals the “sense of God” and consequently most forcefully drives the world to be a “new earth”. The Mass drags the earth heavenwards. Conversely, an insipid Sunday takes out the joy, revealing a weakened and mean Church, which cannot become the leaven of new life.

But it is also the case that, despite all the shortcomings, the Sunday Mass continues the work of redeeming the world, rather like that seed of which the Gospel speaks which is scattered by the sower in the fields, and sprouts whether we are waking or sleeping (*Mk* 4:26). Perhaps this is what the Russian author, Gogol, had in mind when he wrote about the celebration of the Eucharist in his own country in the following terms, “the secret reason why society is not yet totally fragmented, and that people do not yet harbour absolute hatred for one another, is the celebration of the Eucharist”.¹³

THE DAY OF EMMAUS

John Paul II has written, “I therefore wish to insist that *sharing in the Eucharist* should really be *the heart of Sunday* for every baptized person. It is a fundamental duty, to be fulfilled not just in order to observe a precept but as something felt as essential to a truly informed and consistent Christian life”.¹⁴ Why did the Christian community

¹³ Cited in O. CLÉMENT, *Dialoghi con Atenagora*, Torino 1972, 336 (Unofficial translation).

¹⁴ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 36.

chose Sunday as the day for celebrating the Eucharist, rather than Thursday which is the day in which we celebrate the memory of the Last Supper? The answer is clear: the Sunday Eucharist celebrates Jesus' death and resurrection. It is therefore the moment when Christians experience the meeting with the Risen Christ. The Sunday Mass is our Emmaus. If we carefully read the episode recounted by Luke we can see that he is describing both fundamental parts of the Mass: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Supper.

Let us take a closer look at Chapter 24 of Luke's Gospel. In this Chapter, the Evangelist recounts the story of Easter Day. He divides the whole narrative into three parts: in the first part, which takes place early in the morning, he speaks of the meeting between the risen Jesus and the women, and in the third part he speaks of what happened late at night, with Jesus' meeting with the Apostles in the Upper Room. In the second part, which covers virtually the whole day (and takes up most of the verses in this Chapter) Luke speaks of the long encounter between the Risen Christ and two ordinary disciples. For the identity of these two is unknown (one of them was not even named, while the other, called Cleopas, never appears anywhere else in the Gospel). What made Luke compose this chapter narrating Christianity's fundamental day in this form? Would it not have been more logical to have shown Jesus meeting the "leaders" of the Christian community, which would also have clearly emphasised the fundamental instructions for governing the Church? It is, however, obvious that the Evangelist wishes to give a symbolic value to the episode of the two on the road to Emmaus. Why was this? It would not perhaps be far from the truth to say that Luke saw those two as representing all Christians in every age.

Christians, today as then, meet the Risen Christ just as the two on the road to Emmaus met him: by listening to the Scriptures and by breaking the bread. In other words, by celebrating the Eucharistic Liturgy. This is why every time we celebrate Mass, Jesus returns in person to be with his disciples who have gathered together, and speaks to them, listens to them and breaks bread with them. Yes, the Sunday Eucharist enacts Emmaus. It is the same Easter for us as it was for those

two disciples! And, like them, we cannot understand the mystery of this stranger who approaches us and speaks to us. How often the Mass is a “stranger” to us! It comes out to meet us, but we fail to understand it; often, we do not even welcome it. Yet the Mass comes back faithfully to us, Sunday after Sunday. It also comes back when we would prefer other appointments. But if we really wish to meet the Risen Christ, there is no other way. And so let us attend it, let us experience it, let us make it the key moment of our lives. And – why not? – let us reflect on it, and take a long time to do so! This is what we intend to do with these reflections. I hope that little by little we shall also feel our hearts burning within us. I am certain that if we are able to view the “breaking of the bread” with new eyes, we shall also “rejoice at seeing the Lord”.

THE EUCHARIST: HEAVEN COMES DOWN TO EARTH

The Sunday Eucharist is a meeting with the risen Jesus; it is an experience of Easter, of the final victory of good over evil, of life over death. Nothing in the world could possibly be greater than this! St John of Cronstadt, a Russian saint, was right when he said that “the Eucharist is a permanent miracle” at which we should never cease wondering. The tradition of the Eastern Church recalls that the Sunday Eucharist is the “heaven” that comes down to earth and transfigures it, without ever being separated again, because the communion is total. And all those who believe in Christ are invited to enter. The Eucharist is therefore a gift of God to Man before being the work of Man, a gift which pulls us out of a state of sadness and death to place us, here and now, in the light and the joy of paradise. The Sunday Eucharist carries us off to heaven, and makes us “contemporaries” of the heavenly Eucharist which the Angels and the Saints celebrate, immersed in the very heart of the Trinity. The Sunday Eucharist is not one of the actions the Church performs, it *is* the Church, in the fullest sense of the term, in her eternal dimension. In the Sunday Eucharist, Jesus makes all men and women participants in his own mystery of life and eternity.

In the Sunday Eucharist, then, everything (the words, the actions, the place, the singing...) must all conspire to bring about the meeting with the Risen Jesus, everything must manifest the eternal feast being celebrated in heaven. Those attending Mass, the priests and ministers, the adults and the children, the elderly and the young – all must be led through the “rite” to experience the celebration of the communion of the Trinity. This being so, the eucharistic liturgy stands on a wholly different plane from that of a mere repetition of external actions; it cannot be a cold, clinical, abstract moment. But neither is it a moment for teaching, for catechesis, for admonishing, for explaining. The liturgy is not the place for explaining, but for celebrating the mystery of Our Lord’s passion, death and resurrection. This is why the Sunday Mass is not merely a matter of “recharging” the Christian life; it is rather the “summit and source” of the Christian life, as Vatican II tells us: it is the “pinnacle” of history.

The eucharistic liturgy is therefore very far from being an opportunity for the participants or the ministers to demonstrate their skills. The Mass is sacred. It is of God. It is God who admits us into his presence when we enter the eucharistic celebration. A great Eastern Bishop, the Patriarch Athenagoras, complained that in the liturgical celebrations one did not find even the things that occur when watching a play that touches the emotions and involves the audience: “Believe me when I say that most of our faithful [...] do not sense the wondering amazement of the supernatural – let us recall what St Peter exclaimed when confronted by the transfigured Christ, “it is well that we are here” – Alas! In our churches we so often find individual pietism or routine attitudes. [...] Yet the unique drama, of which all the others are mere reflections, the drama of the life, suffering, death, and the love that is more powerful than death, is played out precisely here, in the Church, when the Spirit shows us the Easter of our Lord. Everything is there. Everything”.¹⁵

¹⁵ O. CLÉMENT, *Dialoghi con Atenagora*, op. cit., 336 (Unofficial translation).

Yet – he went on – the faithful, and also often the priests, remain as strangers to the drama of Jesus being played out before their eyes:

“The Eucharist protects the world, and already enlightens it in secret. It is there that Man rediscovers his lost sonship, and dips his own life into the life of Christ, his faithful friend who shares with him the bread of need and celebration. And the bread is his body, the wine is his blood; and in this unity, nothing else can ever separate us from anything and from anyone”.¹⁶

THE EUCHARIST MAKES THE CHURCH

Vatican II reminds us that God wished to save humanity, not as individuals but by gathering them together into a single people. Now, the Sunday Eucharist is the main “building site” for building up the People of God; it is the highest moment in which all the scattered people are brought together as the one family of God. St. Thomas Aquinas used a beautiful expression when he described the Eucharist as the sacrament “*quo ecclesia fabricatur*” – the “building site” where the “People of God” is created. It is the Eucharist that makes the Church, and it does so in a particularly evident manner on the Lord’s Day. In *Dies Domini*, John Paul II says that among the many activities of a parish, “none is as vital or as community-forming as the Sunday celebration of the Lord’s Day and his Eucharist”.¹⁷ He then goes on to say that, “The Eucharist is not only a particularly intense expression of the reality of the Church’s life, but also in a sense its “fountain-head”. The Eucharist feeds and forms the Church... At Sunday Mass, Christians relive with particular intensity the experience of the Apostles on the evening of Easter when the Risen Lord appeared to them as they were gathered together”.¹⁸ And in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, he adds: “The

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, n. 35.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, nos. 32-33.

Sunday Eucharist which every week gathers Christians together as God's family round the table of the Word and the Bread of Life, is also the most natural antidote to dispersion. It is the privileged place where communion is ceaselessly proclaimed and nurtured. Precisely through sharing in the Eucharist, *the Lord's Day* also becomes *the Day of the Church*, when she can effectively exercise her role as the sacrament of unity".¹⁹

The Mass gathers together every individual into a mystical communion. This is what the ancient eucharistic prayer in the Didache says: "As this broken bread was scattered upon the mountains, but was brought together and became one, so may your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom, for yours is the glory and the power through Jesus Christ for ever". The Sunday eucharistic liturgy creates communion between different people, building up the Christian community, the parish, and the diocese. And they are not built up like a ghetto, or as an inward-looking group of people, but as the image of the Trinity, the full communion of love which knows no bounds. The Christian community cannot therefore be anything other than a eucharistic community. The decision to make the Sunday Mass the central moment of the life of the Christian community is extremely appropriate from the pastoral point of view, too. We know, of course, that the Sunday Mass is not the whole of the Church's liturgy (there are also the celebrations of the other sacraments and the Liturgy of the Hours, and all the other forms of prayer). But there is no doubt that, in a very specific way, the Sunday eucharistic liturgy defines the life of the Christian community, and indeed one can even say that it is from the way it lives the Sunday eucharistic liturgy that we can gauge the Gospel-based quality of a community.

The whole assembly must therefore serve the presence of the Lord in the liturgy, renouncing all forms of impersonal ritualism, and recovering the whole of the wealth and power of the liturgical language

¹⁹ JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 36.

through the singing, the actions, the incense, the proclamation of the Word of God and the human warmth of everyone present. The Eucharistic liturgy is the heart of Sunday because it is the special moment for building up the "family of God": it overcomes the ego-centric and scattered nature of so many of our communities that makes the whole of society bleak. This is why the Sunday Mass saves the community from banality, liberates it from a consumerist mentality, protects it from the obsession of a frenetic pace of life, frees it from the slavery of work, and restores to the city the beauty of a common celebration and the freshness of free-giving. The Sunday eucharistic liturgy is also a great act of love which believers offer to the world.

THE SUNDAY EUCHARIST AND THE "SPIRITUAL WORSHIP" OF THE WEEK

The Eucharist makes the Church. And the Church herself becomes the Eucharist: the bread that is "broken" and the blood "shed" for the salvation of the world. For this reason the Mass can never be an individual liturgical act, but neither is it a community act that remains enclosed in the place where it is celebrated. The community that celebrates the Sunday Eucharist, however small and poor it may be, becomes the body of Christ and therefore lives with the dimensions of Christ. The Mass therefore throws open the doors and gates of the world to the Christian community. Throughout the 20th century the missionary dimension of the Sunday Mass was frequently emphasised. Faced with the process of secularisation which is increasingly distancing society from God, the most perceptive minds tried to put forward once again the primacy of the Sunday Mass. Not infrequently the Sunday Mass had been seen merely as an act of personal piety, and as a precept to be obeyed, as quickly as possible. And perhaps the neglectful and slovenly way in which it was often celebrated, and the difficulty of understanding it (it used to be in Latin) also alienated many people from the Church. Those who embarked on liturgical renewal thought that re-proposing the centrality of the Word of God and the Eucharist

would make the Sunday Mass the most appropriate way of both curbing the numbers of the faithful who were lapsing, and of attracting others who had already abandoned the Church.

There is no doubt that we have to rediscover the missionary dimension of the Sunday Mass. It can be what the two disciples of John the Baptist experienced when they met Jesus. The Evangelist John tells us that after having heard John the Baptist speaking about Jesus, they decided to follow him. And when Jesus turned towards them and asked them what they were seeking, they asked him, "Where are you staying?", to which Jesus replied, "Come and see" (Jn 1:39). Our Christian communities could (and perhaps should) reply to those who are far away and those who, while not believing, are looking for a meaning in their lives: "Come next Sunday to the eucharistic celebration and you will see!". This is a challenge that we cannot evade.

In their document setting out the pastoral guidelines for the decade, the Italian bishops wrote the following:

"The Sunday eucharistic celebration, with at its heart the Christ who died for all and became the Lord of all humanity, must be conducted in such a way that by listening to the Word and communicating with the Body of Christ, the faithful can grow, and leave the Church walls with an apostolic mind, ready to share and to give account of the hope which is in all believers. In this way, the eucharistic celebration will occupy a truly significant place in the missionary education of the Christian community".²⁰

The document continues by emphasising the importance to many people of attending daily Mass and worshipping the Eucharist – particularly by the Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament – which gives continuity to their path of spiritual growth. Our Christian communities would do well to pay very close attention to this liturgical dimension which enters their daily lives. I will not touch explicitly here on atten-

²⁰ ITALIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCE, *Comunicare il Vangelo in un mondo che cambia*, n. 48.

dance at daily Mass, which many members of the laity consider to be a major source of spiritual food.

The missionary dimension of the Sunday Mass forms an integral part of a eucharistic spirituality. For by celebrating the Eucharist, the Christian community is united to Jesus, who dies for all, and who takes upon himself the joys, hopes and sufferings of the whole world. This is why the Church (and every individual believer) cannot remain satisfied merely with gathering together, while forgetting their fellow men and women, and the world. The Sunday “sacrifice”, cannot fail to continue every day thereafter, if it is truly a eucharistic sacrifice. The apostle Paul urged the Christians of Rome in the following terms: “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (*Rom* 12:1). Taking part in the Eucharist is inseparable from this “spiritual worship” of which the Apostle speaks.

“The altar is therefore found everywhere, on every street corner, in every square”, wrote Saint John Chrysostom, linking the Sunday Mass to everyday life. This linkage stems from a very profound truth: those who take part in the Mass are transformed into the very Body of Jesus. The consequence of this is that the believer must live and act as Jesus lived and acted: where there is darkness, believers must bring light; where there is suffering, they must be compassion; where there is sadness and distress, they must bring consolation and hope. In the Sunday eucharistic liturgy the quality of God’s love is demonstrated: it is an absolutely overwhelming love which ranges beyond all reasonableness. St Paul the apostle writes, “one will hardly die for a righteous man – though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us”. (*Rom* 5: 7). This type of love is given to believers in the eucharistic liturgy. It is the love of God himself, which is incomparable with human love. God’s love enables us to “come out of ourselves”, just as God himself, who so loved the world that he gave his only Son” (*Jn* 3: 16), came out of himself.

THE EUCHARIST, THE CHURCH'S "PRIMARY WORK"

A Russian writer, Soloviev, said that "Faith without works is dead, and prayer is the first work". One might say that the Sunday eucharistic liturgy is the Church's primary work, and the first work of every Christian community. The Sunday Eucharist is also the greatest gift which our Lord has given, and continues to give, to his Church. It is the testament that Jesus left to his disciples before going to his Father. Every Sunday, he continues to entrust it into the hands of his Church: "Do this in remembrance of me!" It must be celebrated for the salvation of believers and for the whole world. The Eucharist is therefore not our work: it is always a gift, a gift "for you and for all" as Jesus himself said, and as the celebrating priest repeats.

The whole pastoral life of the Christian communities must spring from the Sunday Eucharist. For it is from it that the Christian community's being and doing stems. In the Eucharist, the community is fashioned as the "Body of Christ", overcoming all individualism and all divisions. It is here that one finds the miracle of the Sunday Eucharist: it creates new men and new women who will act in a new way, with a new passion for life, with a new energy of love, with a new power of unity. This is why the Sunday Eucharist is not only a great gift for believers, but also becomes a great act of love for the world: Christians, men and women together, regenerated by God's love, become a visible sign of God's presence among us.

How can we fail to recall here the work of Mgr Oscar Romero, the Archbishop of San Salvador, who was murdered just as he was celebrating Mass: "It was the 24th of March 1980, and the Archbishop was celebrating Mass in the chapel at the hospital of Divine Providence. It was about six in the afternoon. The bullet struck him in the heart as he was beginning the offertory. I was present at the moment of his murder in the chapel; I was about 4 metres away from the altar. Just as the Archbishop was opening the corporal to begin the offertory, I heard the shot. Struck in the heart, he instinctively grabbed the altar and all the hosts fell onto him. He fell at the foot of the crucifix, in a pool of blood.

I saw this as if God was saying to him at that moment, ‘Now you are the victim, Oscar’. At that very moment, once again, the words of Jesus came true: “The good Shepherd gives his life for his sheep”. Archbishop Romero offered up his life at the Offertory. But he was no hero, just as the disciples were no heroes. He was also afraid of dying, and said so many times. Yet – and this is the power of his witness – he cherished the people whom the Lord had given to him, more than he loved his own life. And with Mgr Romero we should remember the numberless 20th century martyrs who, in concentration camps, gulags, and under torture, found their strength and their support in the Eucharist.

We might say that Mary is the image of the eucharistic mystery. Under God’s wonderful plan, before she was transformed into the “Body of Christ” she gave her own body to Jesus who became, to a certain extent, the flesh and blood of Mary. And Jesus and Mary were never more to be separated – in Bethlehem, in Egypt, during their life in Nazareth, during his public life, at the foot of the Cross, or today in Heaven. Jesus and Mary are united in the resurrection of the body. She was therefore the first above all other believers to give herself wholly to God, and she stands before us today so that we also can give the whole of our life, and the whole of our body, to the Lord. Yes, to a certain extent, Jesus still needs our “flesh” today, just as he needed the body of Mary. The Sunday eucharistic liturgy is the most evident “Marian way” to live our relationship with Jesus and to show the world the beauty of being part of the “Body of Christ” and the strength that flows from it.

The Lord's Day: the Eucharistic Assembly, the Heart of Sunday

ANOUK MEYER

INTRODUCTION

One often hears people saying today, “I am a Catholic, I am a believer, but I don’t practise”. Doesn’t this suggest a failure to understand what the life of faith is all about? And it is illogical. One would like to ask, “Have you ever met a non-practising smoker? Have you ever met a non-practising footballer (a footballer who has never played the game, and is only a spectator)? Would you want to be treated by a non-practising doctor? Or be defended by a non-practising lawyer?” And one could go on. But where is the error?

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The error lies simply in the fact that faith is reduced to practice. Yet faith is life. And if it is lived, it is practised, too. The reason I have given this example, which might appear somewhat simplistic, is that to many people, practising the faith just means attending Sunday Mass!

But for every Christian, attendance at Sunday Mass is anything but an option. It is not an add-on. It is an essential. This is why it is necessary – and now I shall try to share this with you – for a Christian family to organise its Sunday around the Mass, and attend Mass joyfully.

THE SUNDAY ASSEMBLY IS TIME GIVEN OVER TO GOD

The Sunday assembly, the heart of Sunday, is the “organ” which enables the family’s heartbeat to synchronise with God’s. Two years

ago, Mgr Léonard told us that when a married couple receive communion their two hearts beat in time with God's. That is the life of faith. It is a reality, truth, and Christian couples cannot and must not deprive themselves of it. Once they have experienced this heart-to-heart relationship with God, they will want to hand it on to their children, and they will be anxious to go, every Sunday, to the appointment which the Lord has given them. And so, as the days pass, in the heart of the family there will also be a place for God's heart.

The Sunday assembly is essential because it enables the family to give time its true value.

For I believe that one of the first difficulties that arises is the time factor. In today's frenzied society it is difficult to take one's own time, and people very often ask why they should devote time to something which gives them nothing in return. We find it hard to use our time for something that does not have an immediate pay-back, as we see it. Yet, who of us has not often wasted time on futile things? Sunday, the day of the week set aside for rest, is a day in which we have time to do exactly as we like. It is a day that enables us to discover as a family that our time is not only free time, leisure time, but can also be time that is given, and given freely.

The time we give to God by going to Mass is earned time. It develops our deepest being and it shows us that *being* is more important than *having*. We return with our hearts enriched if we have been to Mass rather than to the supermarket! The time given to Jesus is never time wasted. Basically, it only amounts to giving one hour a week to God, when God has given us all the time in the world.

The time spent at the Eucharistic gathering is a very particular time. It is simultaneously the time of each member of the congregation, and the time of the community. During Mass, we gather together, as a family, with other families, before Jesus. We therefore devote our time to meeting this God, who is the Lord of time, to take up the weekly appointment he gives us. Do not let us "adjust" the Mass so that we can say later that we have got it over and done with. Let us go to Mass joyfully, and take part in it seriously. But to do this it takes training! I can guarantee that. In a family not everyone acts in unison, and one or other

member may hold back. That is quite normal. But it is not normal to give up. It means that we have to talk about it, and together find out why, and then try to show that the good of each member depends on that Sunday appointment.

Lastly, the time given to God leads us to spread what we have received to share it with all those around us. The Christian family does not go to Mass as if it were going to see a film or a show. Everyone in the family will discover what God wants for each of them, from one Sunday to the next, each according to his or her own measure. The Holy Father tells us that every time we attend the Eucharist we discover “the deepest sense of our work in the world in favour of development and peace, and we receive from it the energy we need to commit ourselves to this mission with ever-increasing generosity. By so doing, we build up a new civilisation: the civilisation of love”.¹

Let me give you a few examples: one of our children discovered, at the age of seven, that there exists a logic of love: you cannot do everything and the opposite of everything. Leaving Mass one Sunday, he was deep in thought and looked worried. Eventually he said his father, “Daddy I have a problem: I want two things. I want to be a priest and also a cowboy, but I suppose that when I say Mass I shall have to put my gun down!”.

Another son may decide to go out and visit an elderly neighbour, and another may decide to run an errand, or another family may discover that they can adopt a baby from the Third World at a distance, etc.

To sum up, then, we can say that the time we give to God on Sunday is a time which enriches the heart, it enriches the family, and it helps us to reach out and open up to others.

HOW TO ENTER INTO THE MYSTERY

Our greatest desire is for our own children to discover the importance of Sunday Mass, when few of their friends have had that experience. For many families, Sunday is a day of rest, which means a care-

¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Homily to the Eucharistic Congress*, Lima, 15 May 1988.

free morning at leisure. This is understandable; but we want to give our children more than that. And we know that our family can live as Christians if we go to Mass on Sunday, because that is the moment in which the whole family goes to gather strength and to thank God for everything it is and all its experiences.

But that is just where the difficulty lies: the Mass is a mystery!

We are tiny before this mystery, but even the disciples who had lived with Jesus, and had witnessed the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, and the stilling of the storm, found it hard to believe, and many of them left him and went away. So should we be discouraged? By no means! The challenge is huge, but as we try to teach our children how to enter into the mystery of the Mass, let us always bear clearly in mind that we are only instruments, and we must place our trust in God. We sow the seed, and it is God who acts and gathers in.

THE TWO DOORS

I always say that in order to enter into the mystery of the Eucharist, that we have to learn to open two doors.

The first door is prayer. Entering into prayer means opening a door to enter into dialogue with God, so that God can open the door of our hearts and come to us. Before opening the church door, children must learn to pray at home, to familiarise themselves with Jesus. We could give many examples of how prayer in the family has influenced whole lives. In one of his books, Pope John Paul II has told us how the example of his father in prayer was a kind of school of prayer for him. Our children must learn to mix with Jesus, in their hearts, at home. When Zacchaeus tried to catch a glimpse of Jesus, Jesus's reply was something he could hardly believe: 'I must stay at your house today!' (cf. *Lk* 19:5). Learning to pray means speaking to God, and allowing God to speak to us.

The second door is forgiveness. In the sacrament of Reconciliation we open our hearts to God's mercy, and God, by forgiving us, opens up our heart and lifts us above our poverty.

Prayer and forgiveness are therefore the two “doors” that we have to learn to open. They are doors which can be opened, unless we are reluctant to open them, doors through which all can enter, at no charge, that we have to learn to push open, and above all not to be afraid to push.

From their earliest years, our children can learn to pray, and very soon to forgive. And when they reach the age of reason they can receive the sacrament of forgiveness. They will know from their own experience that God is already present in their lives and will therefore be ready to receive the Eucharist joyfully: they will yearn for it.

We do not usually think about how deep the life of faith is in a child. A little girl who was preparing to receive her First Communion was so excited that she could scarcely stay still. ‘Why are you so excited?’, her mother asked her. And she replied, ‘Because Jesus will be coming into my heart!’ She went to bed but couldn’t fall asleep. She got up again, and went to her mother’s room and said, ‘Do you think Jesus is as excited about it as I am?’ Now, that is a genuine experience of love.

The first preparation, and the best, is simply personal prayer and family prayer, then. That makes Christ part of our family life. We pray to him, we offer him our day, we thank him for all his gifts, we say grace before meals, and we fill the day with thanksgiving etc. We ask forgiveness for our shortcomings, and when we have to take decisions we first refer to him. He is our friend at every moment of the day. And above all, we do not push him aside when he irks us. It therefore becomes natural for us to go out to meet him.

When this is done, the Sunday Mass is no longer a kind of compulsory ritual, but a meeting, an encounter, which we continue to experience throughout the week. But if our Sunday meeting is not backed up by a life of prayer throughout the week, it very soon becomes like visiting a distant relative, a courtesy visit to pay our respects to an outsider.

EDUCATIONAL QUESTIONS

As you know, parents have a very grave responsibility to hand on to their children the sense and meaning of the Sunday Mass obligation. It

is the way they perform this responsibility that will have the greatest influence on their children, and hence on the whole family. What is really at stake here is handing on the “taste” for Mass to our children, which means, first and foremost, not turning them off. Handing on the pleasure of going to Mass is one way of explaining it to them. But then they have to understand that they must prepare for this great event of meeting Jesus, and that until they have made their First Communion they are not obliged to go to Mass every Sunday, but only afterwards. When my children were small I found myself having to tell one or other of them that their behaviour at Mass showed they were not yet ready for it, and that they would have to wait a few more Sundays before going back to Mass again. And little by little they tried to make the effort so that they could come with me.

Under other circumstances, parents may decide to go to Mass at different times rather than return home from the celebration upset because the children have misbehaved.

When parents attend Mass with their children they should help them follow the celebration by giving them booklets and other aids to help them, and by simply explaining what is taking place as the ceremony proceeds. We can also help them sensitively to give thanks. For some, it can be a very edifying experience, as it was for the father who asked his eight-year old son, ‘Did you pray for your very sick friend? And have you prayed for mummy?’, and was told, ‘Of course I did, but now I am only saying prayers. Jesus finds the intentions on his own!’

Children also have the wonderful opportunity of being able to become servers at Mass. It is there that they can feel very close to the mystery.

But parents are creative, and can find many other ways of making the Mass more accessible to their children. I do not want to list all the many difficulties that may arise, but I can tell you from my own experience that it is sometimes very difficult to teach our own children, and it is not always easy to know whether we ought to harp on certain things, or just let them pass. I would like to tell you a secret about this: a few years ago our family had the joy of assisting at the Holy Father’s

private Mass for several days in succession. You can imagine what joy that was! Everyone up in the morning at six o'clock, making great preparations, with great excitement. Our youngest daughter who was five, was really tired and sleepy. After the first Mass she hugged the Pope with great verve and said in total earnestness, 'I love you'. She was very well-behaved during the liturgy, but at the second Mass she said at the end 'You know, mummy, I love Jesus very much. I love the Pope very much, but Mass is always the same: standing up, sitting down, kneeling down, lying down!' The reason she mentioned 'lying down' was that she was really so sleepy that she lay across my lap, sometimes sucking two fingers! Yes, it is hard trying to get up at six in the morning, and she found it very difficult. And so I and my husband decided that we would not take her the next day. You can imagine how upset we were, but we did not want to force her.

But the day before we were due to fly home to Paris, she said she wanted to see the Pope for the last time and wanted to come to Mass with us once again. And that morning something happened that I shall never forget. When the Holy Father entered the chapel he went over to her, hugged her and said very affectionately, holding her in his arms, 'I didn't see you here yesterday. Where were you?' I shall never forget it for two reasons: the first is that since we have seven children, I would never have imagined for one moment that the Holy Father had even noticed the little missing lamb; and secondly, I believe that the question he asked our little girl is the same one that God puts to all of us, particularly on Sunday: 'Where are you?' And if we have not been to Mass, 'Where were you?'

The Lord is patient, waiting and gently letting us know that he is begging for our love. And this is what we have to try to hand on to our children: God comes out to look for us, and we must also go out and look for him, in order to find him. And in answer to God's question, 'Where are you? Are you of your world or are you with me?', each of us must answer, 'Lord, I am here. Lord I am here at your sacrifice; I commit my life to you; Lord, thank you for what you give me; quite simply, thank you with all my being; Lord, I want your will to be my will,

and it is to do your will better that I come to this appointment with you every week”.

Going to Sunday Mass, as I said at the beginning, requires training in the family, it is true. But we cannot answer for our children, once they have grown up. And there is no doubt that parents are delighted when their children decide, of their own free will, to go to Mass.

CONCLUSION

Let us try to show our children that all of us are like Zacchaeus; we are all very small, but unlike what happened to him, it is not a crowd of people who are preventing us from seeing Jesus, but a crowd of things to do, a crowd of thoughts, that we find more attractive. And that is why Jesus once again says to us, ‘Where are you?’ And like Zacchaeus, we have to climb up a tree, or rather rise up above all our pleasures and our concerns, to try to catch sight of Jesus. Now, to enable us to see him he gives us an appointment at Mass. It is less difficult to go to Mass than to climb up a sycamore tree! And we already know that if we go out to meet Jesus in the Eucharist, Jesus will come to us and say, ‘I must stay at your house today’.

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