

THE THEOLOGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Introduction

The Second Vatican Council states in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy that the Eucharist is the true *center of the whole Christian life* for both the universal Church and the local congregation of that Church. It equally sustains that it is *the summit* of both the action by which God sanctifies the world in Christ, and *the worship* which Christians offer to Christ and which through him they offer to the Father in the Spirit¹. Maintaining such a claim means that the Eucharist is really important for our life as Christians. In that sense, to deepen the theology that is behind the sacrament of the Eucharist is, on the one hand, to let ourselves be embedded in the mystery of Christ, our Passover and living bread in which we discover the full manifestation of his boundless love. On the other hand, it leads us to draw our strength and energy from the source of Christ himself so that we come to the true adoration of his presence among us in the sacrament for which we are ministers.

I. The Eucharist as a Mystery of Faith

What we celebrate in the Eucharist is not an event we can apprehend with our merely human senses; it is a mystery of faith. St Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11, 23-26: **“FOR I RECEIVED FROM THE LORD WHAT I ALSO HANDED ON TO YOU, THAT THE LORD JESUS, ON THE NIGHT HE WAS HANDED OVER, TOOK BREAD, AND AFTER HE HAD GIVEN THANKS, BROKE IT AND SAID, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me”. IN THE SAME WAY ALSO THE CUP, AFTER THE SUPPER SAYING, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me”. FOR AS OFTEN AS YOU EAT THIS BREAD AND DRINK THE CUP, YOU PROCLAIM THE DEATH OF THE LORD UNTIL HE COMES.**

According to these words of St Paul, the Eucharist is profoundly marked by the event of the Lord’s passion and death, of which it is not only a *reminder* but the sacrament of *re-presentation*. This truth is well expressed by the words of the priest after the consecration when he says, “This is the mystery of faith”. To which the assembly responds, “We announce your death, O Lord...”

The Church has received the Eucharist from the Lord Jesus as the gift par excellence of himself, of his person in his sacred humanity, as well as the gift of his saving work. When the Letter to the Hebrews (13, 8) says, **“JESUS CHRIST IS THE SAME YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND FOREVER”**, it reminds us that what Christ has done by leaving us the Eucharist is perpetually present in time as an expression of his saving act for the salvation of the world. If so, the Eucharist is not confined to the past; it is not just something that is related to a remembrance of a past event. It is a making present, right now, of an event that historically speaking took place a thousand of years ago. The Eucharist transcends all times and makes us participate – any time it is celebrated – in the divine eternity.

¹ S. C., # 6

When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, which is the memorial of the Lord's death and resurrection, this central event of our salvation becomes really present and "the work of our redemption is carried out"². This sacrifice is so decisive for our salvation that Jesus offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as though we had been present there. It follows, then, that each member of the Christian community can take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits. This is the faith from which the generations of Christians down the ages have lived.

The following texts can provide us with some clues to understand what we mean when we talk about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharistic bread and wine. For instance **John 3, 1-21** describes the story of Nicodemus and how he went to see Jesus in the night and asked him a question about the outcome of eternal life. When Jesus told him he had to be born again, his reaction was immediate: how can an old man go back in the womb of his mother to be born again? Because, he misunderstood Jesus, the latter corrected him by telling him that it was about being born in the Spirit.

We have a similar case in **John 11, 1-44** about the death of Lazarus. In fact, Jesus who had previously received a message about the illness of Lazarus told his disciples that their friend was asleep. The disciples who thought it was about a real sleep reacted that he would be saved. Because there was a misunderstanding, Jesus told them openly that Lazarus was dead.

However, we see a different reaction from Jesus in **John 6, 22-59**. When he told the Jews that he was the bread of life from heaven and the bread he gives is flesh for the life of the world, these reacted negatively. Rather than to correct them as he did in the case of Nicodemus and Lazarus, he let them take it literally as they understood.

II. The Eucharist as the Memorial of the Sacrifice of our Lord Jesus

In instituting the Eucharist, Jesus did not simply say: "**THIS IS MY BODY**", "**THIS IS MY BLOOD**", but he went on to add: "**WHICH IS GIVEN FOR YOU**", "**WHICH IS Poured OUT FOR YOU**" (Lk 22, 19-20). By examining closely these words, it clearly appears that there is a link between the Last Supper and the sacrifice of the cross. As a matter of fact, Jesus did not simply state that what he was giving them to eat and drink was his body and blood; he also expressed its sacrificial meaning and made sacramentally present his sacrifice which would soon be offered on the cross for the salvation of the world.

It that sense we can say, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church sustains, that "the Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the *sacrifice* of the Cross is perpetuated, and the sacred *banquet of communion* with the Lord's body and blood"³. These two dimensions are bound up together and cannot be separated except for the reason of description. It is from this sacrifice that the Church constantly draws its strength. The Church approaches it not only through faith-filled remembrance, but also through a real contact, since this sacrifice is made present ever anew, sacramentally

² *Lumen Gentium*, # 3

³ *Catechism of the Catholic church*, # 1382

perpetuated, in every community which offers it at the hand of the consecrated minister to whom you are attached by delegation and by commission as Extraordinary ministers.

Why did Jesus die on the cross? John says in his Gospel that “**JESUS WAS GOING TO DIE FOR THE NATION, AND NOT ONLY FOR THE NATION, BUT ALSO TO GATHER INTO ONE THE DISPERSED CHILDREN OF GOD**” (Jn 11, 51c-52). As it can be seen, Jesus died in order to reconcile all the children of God into one family. The Eucharist, then, applies to men and women today the reconciliation won once for all by Christ for mankind in every age⁴. The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of Eucharist are one single sacrifice. In this regard St John Chrysostom says, :”We always offer the same Lamb, not one today and another tomorrow, but always the same one. For this reason the sacrifice is always one... Even now we offer that victim who was once offered and who will never be consumed”⁵.

The Mass makes present the sacrifice of the Cross; it does not add to that sacrifice nor does it multiply it. What is repeated is its memorial celebration, its commemorative celebration, which makes Christ’s one, definitive redemptive sacrifice always present in time. The sacrificial nature of the Eucharistic mystery cannot therefore be understood as something separate, independent of the cross or only indirectly referring to the sacrifice of Calvary.

In other words, by virtue of this close relationship to the sacrifice of Golgotha, the Eucharist is a sacrifice in the strict sense, and not only in a general way, as if it were simply a matter of Christ’s offering himself to the faithful as their spiritual food. The gift of his love and obedience to the point of giving his life is in the first place a gift to his Father. Of course it is a gift given for our sake and for the whole of humanity, and yet it is *first and foremost a gift to the Father*.

In giving his sacrifice to the Church, Christ has also made his own the spiritual sacrifice of the Church, which is called to offer herself in union with the sacrifice of Christ. That is what the Second Vatican Council teaches⁶.

III. The Eucharist as Participation in the Resurrection of our Lord Jesus

St Paul in his 1 Corinthians 15, 14 says, “**IF CHRIST HAS NOT BEEN RAISED, THEN EMPTY [TOO] IS OUR PREACHING; EMPTY TOO, YOUR FAITH**”. According to these words of St Paul, the resurrection of Jesus is the foundation of our faith and the proof of the life we hope for. It means also that we have to take for certain that Christ is alive in spite of his passion and death. In that sense Christ’s Passover includes not only his passion and death, but also his resurrection. The Eucharistic Sacrifice makes present not only the mystery of the Savior’s passion and death, but also the mystery of the resurrection which crowned his sacrifice. It is the living and risen One that Christ can become in the Eucharist “**THE BREAD OF LIFE**” (Jn 6, 35, 48), “**THE LIVING BREAD**” (Jn 6, 51).

⁴ Catechism of the Catholic Church, # 1367

⁵ *In Epistolam ad Hebraeos Homiliae, Hom. 17, 3, p. 63, 131.*

⁶ *Lumen Gentium, # 11.*

On this regard, St Ambrose reminded the newly-initiated that the Eucharist applies the event of the resurrection to their lives: “*Today Christ is yours, yet each day he rises again for you*”⁷. Saint Cyril of Alexandria also makes clear that that sharing in the sacred mysteries “*is a true confession and a remembrance that the Lord died and returned to life for us and on our behalf*”⁸.

Therefore, the sacramental re-presentation of Christ’s sacrifice which is crowned by the resurrection, and we celebrate in the Holy Mass, involves a real presence of Jesus. It is a most special presence which in – in the words of Paul VI – “is called ‘real’, but because it is a presence in the fullest sense: a substantial presence whereby Christ, the God-Man, is wholly and entirely present”⁹. This was also the teaching of the Council of Trent: “*The consecration of the bread and wine effects the change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. And the Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called this change **transubstantiation***”¹⁰.

Truly the Eucharist is a *mysterium fidei*, a mystery which surpasses our understanding and can only be received in faith, as is often brought out in the catechesis of the Church’s Fathers regarding this divine Sacrament: “Do not see” – Saint Cyril of Jerusalem exhorts – “in the bread and wine merely natural elements, because the Lord has expressly said they are his body and his blood: faith assures you of this, though your senses suggest otherwise”¹¹.

However, there remains the boundary indicated by **Paul VI** as he says that every theological explanation which seeks some understanding of the mystery, in order to be in accord with Catholic faith, must firmly maintain that in objective reality, independently of our mind, the bread and wine have ceased to exist after the consecration, so that the adorable body and blood of the Lord Jesus from that moment on are really before us under the sacrament species of bread and wine¹².

Let me illustrate what I am saying on the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist with a beautiful witness I take from Fr Barham. Fr Barham was born and educated in a protestant family. Thanks to God, he converted and became a catholic priest. Although, the whole of his family did not share his new religious belief, he stood firm in his catholic faith. He spent his life ministry in deepening the role of the Holy Spirit in the Church and was gifted with the charism of healing. In his ministry, he witnessed a lot of marvels the Lord operated through the power of the Eucharist. He says that one day as a possessed person was brought to him for healing. He put in a room the Blessed Sacrament and in another a no consecrated host. When the time for prayer came, he wanted to bring the possessed person where the Blessed Sacrament was exposed. The person reacted violently by saying he did not wish to be confronted with Jesus who was in that room. On the contrary, the demon did not recognize the presence of Jesus in the no consecrated host

⁷ *De Sacramentis*, V, 4, 26: CSEL 73, 70

⁸ In *Ioannis Evangelium*, XII, 20; PG 74, 726.

⁹ *Encyclical Letter Mysterium Fidei* (September 3, 1965), p. 764.

¹⁰ Session XIII, *Decretum de ss. Eucharistia*, Chapter 4 :DS 1642.

¹¹ *Mystagogical Catecheses*, IV, 6: SCH 126, 138.

¹² See *Encyclical Letter Mysterium Fidei* (September 3, 1965), p. 764.

that was in the other room. That episode was a compelling proof to Fr Barham about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist.

IV. The Eucharist as Banquet and Communion with our Lord

The saving efficacy of the sacrifice is fully realized when the Lord's body and blood are received in communion. The Eucharistic Sacrifice is intrinsically directed to our inward union with Christ through communion. We receive the very One who offered himself for us on the Cross and his blood which he "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Mt 26, 28). We are reminded of his words: "**AS THE LIVING FATHER SENT ME, AND I LIVE BECAUSE OF THE FATHER, SO HE WHO EATS ME WILL LIVE BECAUSE OF ME**" (Jn 6, 57).

Jesus himself reassures us that this union, which he compares to that of the life of the Trinity, is truly realized. The Eucharist is a true banquet, in which Christ offers himself as our nourishment. When for the first time Jesus spoke of this food, his listeners were astonished and bewildered, which forced the Master to emphasize the objective of his words: "**TRULY, TRULY, I SAY TO YOU, UNLESS YOU EAT THE FLESH OF THE SON OF MAN AND DRINK HIS BLOOD, YOU HAVE NO LIFE WITHIN YOU**" (Jn 6, 345). This is no metaphorical food: "**MY FLESH IS FOOD INDEED, AND MY BLOOD IS DRINK INDEED**" (Jn 6, 55).

Through our communion in his body and blood, Christ also grants us his Spirit. Saint Ephrem writes: "He called the bread his living body and he filled it with himself and his Spirit... He who eats it with faith, eats fire and Spirit... Take and eats this, all of you, and eat with it the Holy Spirit. For it is truly my body and whoever eats it will have eternal life"¹³. And in the Roman Missal the celebrant prays: "Grant that we who are nourished by his body and blood may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body and spirit in Christ"¹⁴. Thus by the gift of his body and blood Christ increases within us the gift of his spirit, already poured out in baptism and bestowed as a "seal in the sacrament of confirmation".

V. Eucharist as Anticipation of the Eschatological Fulfillment

The Eucharist is a straining toward the goal, a foretaste of the fullness of joy promised by Christ. It is in some way the anticipation of heaven, the "pledge of future glory". This eschatological thrust is already expressed in the celebration of the Eucharist, when we say in the acclamation following the consecration: "until you come in glory". As St Paul says, "**FOR AS OFTEN AS YOU EAT THIS BREAD AND DRINK THE CUP, YOU PROCLAIM THE DEATH OF THE LORD UNTIL HE COMES**" (1 Corinthians 11, 26). In the Eucharist, everything speaks of confident waiting "in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ".

Those who feed on Christ in the Eucharist need not wait until hereafter to receive eternal life: *they already possess it on earth*, as first-fruits of a future fullness which will

¹³ *Sermo IV in Hebdomadam Sanctam*: CSCO 413/Syr. 182, 55.

¹⁴ Eucharistic Prayer III

embrace man in his totality. For in the Eucharist we also receive the pledge of our bodily resurrection at the end of the world: **“HE WHO EATS MY FLESH AND DRINKS MY BLOOD HAS ETERNAL LIFE, AND I WILL RAISE HIM UP AT THE LAST DAY”** (Jn 6, 54). This pledge of the future resurrection comes from the fact that the flesh of the Son of Man, given as food, is his body in its glorious state after the resurrection. With the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the “secret” of the resurrection. For this reason **Saint Ignatius of Antioch** rightly defined the Eucharistic Bread as “a medicine of immortality, an antidote to death”.

The eschatological tension kindled by the Eucharist *expresses and reinforces our communion with the Church in heaven*. This is an aspect of the Eucharist which merits greater attention: in celebrating the sacrifice of the Lamb, we are united to the heavenly “liturgy” and become part of that great multitude which cries out: **“SALVATION BELONGS TO OUR GOD WHO SITS UPON THE THRONE, AND TO THE LAMB!”** (Rev 7, 10). The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth. It is a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey.

A significant consequence of the eschatological tension in the Eucharist is also the fact that it spurs us on our journey through history and plants a seed of living hope in our daily commitment to the work before us. Certainly the Christian vision leads to the expectation of **“NEW HEAVENS and A NEW EARTH”** (Rev 21, 1), but this increases, rather than lessens, *our sense of responsibility for the world today*.

Conclusion

Many problems darken the horizon of our time. Think about the urgent need to work for peace, justice, solidarity as well as the defense of human life from the moment of conception to its natural death. It is in this world that Christian hope must shine forth. For this reason too, the Lord wishes to remain with us in the Eucharist, making his presence in meal and sacrifice the promise of humanity renewed by his love.

Proclaiming the death of the Lord “Until he comes” (1 Corinthians 11, 26) entails that all who take part in the Eucharist be committed to changing their lives and making them in a certain way completely “Eucharistic”. It is this fruit of a transfigured existence and a commitment to transforming the world in accordance with the Gospel which splendidly illustrates the eschatological tension inherent in the celebration of the Eucharist and in the Christian life.

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