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THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

First Lenten Sermon 2022

Among the many evils that the Covid pandemic is causing to humanity, there has been at least one positive effect from the point of view of faith. It made us aware of the need we have for the Eucharist and the emptiness that its lack creates; it helped us not to take it for granted. During the most acute period of the pandemic in 2020 I was strongly impressed - and with me I think many others - by what it meant to watch on television the Holy Mass celebrated by Pope Francis in Santa Marta every morning.

Some local and national churches have decided to dedicate the current year to a special catechesis on the Eucharist, in view of a desired Eucharistic revival in the Catholic Church. It seems to me an opportune decision and an example to follow, mentioning perhaps some less considered aspect of it. I therefore thought of making a small contribution to the project, dedicating the reflections of this Lent to a reflection on the Eucharistic mystery.

The Eucharist is at the center of every liturgical season, of Lent no less than of other times. It is what we celebrate every day. Every little progress in its understanding translates into progress in the spiritual life of the person and of the ecclesial community. However, it is also, unfortunately, the most exposed thing, due to its repetitiveness, to expire in routine, to be taken for granted. St. John Paul II, in the letter “Ecclesia de Eucharistia”, written in April 2003, says that Christians must rediscover and always keep alive "the Eucharistic amazement". For this purpose our reflections would serve: to rediscover the Eucharistic wonder.

Speaking on the Eucharist in times of pandemic and now with the horrors of the war on our eyes doesn’t mean turning away our eyes from the dramatic reality we are experiencing, rather a help to look at it from a higher and less contingent point of view. The Eucharist is the presence in the history of the event that has forever reversed the roles between victors and victims. On the cross, Christ made the victim the real winner: *"Victor quia victima"*, Saint Augustine defines him: winner because victim. The Eucharist offers us the true key to interpretation of history. It assures us that Jesus is with us, not only intentionally, but “really” in this world of ours that seems to slip out of our hands at any moment. He repeats to us: "Have courage: I have conquered the world!" (Jn 16:33).

*The Eucharist in the History of Salvation*

What is the place the Eucharist has in the history of salvation? The answer is that it has no particular place – it is the whole thing. The Eucharist is coextensive with the history of salvation. Just as on a clear morning the whole sky is reflected in a dewdrop on a bush so the Eucharist reflects the whole of history of salvation.

The Eucharist, however, is present in the history of salvation in three different ways at distinct times, or stages: it is present in the Old Testament as a *figure*, in the New Testament as an *event*, and in our time, the time of the Church, as a *sacrament*. The figure anticipates and prepares the event; the sacrament on the other hand “prolongs” the event and actualizes it.

In the Old Testament, I said, the Eucharist is present as a “figure”. One of these figures was the Manna; another was the sacrifice of Melchizedech, yet another Isaac’s immolation. In the Hymn *Lauda Sion* composed by St. Thomas Aquinas for the feast of “Corpus Domini” we sing:

Shewn in Isaac's dedication,

In the manna's preparation:

In the Paschal immolation,

In old types pre-signified.

It was due to their function as figures of the Eucharist that St. Thomas called the rituals of the Old Testament “sacraments of the Old Law”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

With the coming of Christ and his mystery of death and resurrection, the Eucharist is no longer present as a figure, but as an *event*, as a reality. We call it an "event" because it is something that historically happened, a unique event in time and space, which took place only once (*semel*) and unrepeatable: Christ "once, in the fullness of time, appeared to cancel sin through the sacrifice of himself "(Heb 9:26).

Finally, in the time of the Church, the Eucharist, I said, is present as a *sacrament*, that is, in the sign of bread and wine, instituted by Christ. It is important that we understand well the difference between the event and the sacrament: in practice, the difference between history and the liturgy. We let Saint Augustine help us:

We know and believe with very certain faith that Christ died only once for us, the just one for sinners, the Lord for the servants. We know perfectly well that this has happened only once; and, nevertheless, the sacrament periodically renews it, as if what history proclaims to have happened only once were repeated over and over again. Yet event and sacrament are not in conflict with each other, as if the sacrament is fallacious and only the event is true. In fact, of what history claims to have happened, in reality, only once, of this the sacrament often renews (*renovat*) the celebration in the hearts of the faithful. History reveals what once happened and how it happened, the liturgy ensures that the past is not forgotten; not in the sense that it makes it happen again (*non faciendo*), but in the sense that it celebrates it (*sed celebrando*).[[2]](#footnote-2)

Specifying the link that exists between the single sacrifice of the cross and the Mass is a very delicate thing and has always been one of the points of greatest dissension between Catholics and Protestants. Augustine uses, as we have seen, two verbs: to *renew* and to *celebrate*, which are perfectly correct, provided that they are understood one in the light of the other: the Mass renews the event of the cross by celebrating it (not reiterating it!), and celebrates it by renewing it (not just recalling it!). The word, in which the greatest ecumenical consensus is achieved today, is perhaps the verb (also used by Paul VI, in the encyclical *Mysterium fide*i) *to represent*, understood in the strong sense of re-presenting, that is, to make present again[[3]](#footnote-3). In this sense, we say that the Eucharist "represents" the cross.

According to history, there was, therefore, only one Eucharist, the one carried out by Jesus with his life and death; according to the liturgy, on the other hand, that is, thanks to the sacrament, there are as many Eucharists as have been celebrated and will be celebrated until the end of the world. The event took place only once (*semel*), the sacrament took place "every time" (*quotiescumque*). Thanks to the sacrament of the Eucharist we mysteriously become contemporaries of the event; the event is present to us and we at the event.

Our Lenten reflections will have as their object the Eucharist in its present stage, that is, as a sacrament. In the ancient Church there was a special catechesis, called mystagogic, which was reserved for the bishop and was given after, not before, baptism. Its purpose was to reveal to neophytes the meaning of the rites celebrated and the depths of the mysteries of faith: baptism, confirmation or anointing, and in particular the Eucharist. What we intend to do is a little mystagogical catechesis on the Eucharist. To remain anchored as much as possible to its sacramental and ritual nature, we will closely follow the development of the Mass in its three parts - Liturgy of the word, Eucharistic liturgy (the Canon, or Anaphora), and Communion -, adding at the end a reflection on Eucharistic worship outside the Mass.

*The Liturgy of the Word*

In the earliest days of the Church the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist were not celebrated in the same place and at the same time. The disciples participated in the worship services at the Temple. There they heard readings from the Bible and recited psalms and prayers together with other Jews, and afterward they went off to their homes where they gathered for “the breaking of bread,” that is, to celebrate the Eucharist (see Acts 2:46).

Soon, however, it became impossible for them to keep up this practice because they experienced hostility from the Jewish community, and because the Scriptures had taken on a new meaning for them that was entirely aligned with Christ. Therefore, they no longer went to the Temple or the Synagogue to read and listen to Scripture but instead introduced it into their own places of Christian worship, and so it became the Liturgy of the Word that leads into the Eucharistic Prayer.

In the second century, St. Justin wrote a description of the Liturgy of the Eucharist in which we already find all the essential elements of the present Mass. Not only was the Liturgy of the Word an integral part of it, but in addition to the readings from the Old Testament there were what St. Justin called “memoirs of the Apostles,” that is, the letters and the Gospels of the New Testament[[4]](#footnote-4).

When we listen to biblical readings in the liturgy, they take on a meaning that’s new and stronger than they would have for us in some other context. When we read Scripture at home or study it in a course, it serves to help us know the Bible better. But when we read it in the Liturgy, it serves to help us know better the One who makes himself present in the breaking of bread, and each time it brings to light an aspect of the mystery we are about to receive.

This is what stands out in the very first Liturgy of the Word that took place with the risen Christ and the two disciples of Emmaus. As they listened to his explanation of the Scripture, their hearts began to soften in such a way that they were able to recognize him when he later broke the bread.

Not only are the words of the Bible spoken and its stories retold at Mass, they’re also relived in such a way that what’s remembered becomes real and present. Whatever it was that happened “at that time” is happening “at this time”—“today” (*hodie*), as the liturgy loves to say. We’re not only hearers of the word, passive recipients as it were, but we ourselves are the ones who are spoken to and who act. We’re called to put ourselves in the place of the people in the story.

Some examples will help us grasp this. When at Mass the first reading tells us how God spoke to Moses in the burning bush (see Ex 3), we realize that we are in fact the ones who are actually standing in the presence of the true burning bush. When we read about Isaiah whose lips were touched by a burning ember to purify him for his mission (see Is 6), a sudden awareness comes upon us: we are the ones who are about to receive on our lips the true burning ember, the One who came to set the earth on fire (see Lk 12:49). When we read how Ezekiel was told to eat the scroll and feed his stomach with it (Ez 2:8–3:3), a light strikes us: we are the ones who are about to eat the “scroll”, the Word-made-flesh and now made bread.

Moving from the Old Testament to the New, from the first reading to the Gospel passage, the point becomes even clearer. If the woman who suffered a hemorrhage was sure that she would be healed if only she would touch the hem of Jesus’ cloak, how much more is it the case for us who are about to touch much more than just the hem of his cloak?

I remember once hearing the Gospel story about Zacchaeus and suddenly it became so “real” for me. I was Zacchaeus. It was to me that Jesus was saying, “Today I must stay at your house”. And when I received communion I could say in utter truth, “He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner”, and Jesus, in turn, said to me, “Today salvation has come to this house” (see Lk 19:5-9).

The same is true every time the Gospel is proclaimed at Mass. How could we not help but identify with the paralytic to whom Jesus says, “Your sins are forgiven”, “Rise … and go home” (Mk 2: 5.11)? Or with Simeon who embraced the infant Jesus in his arms (Lk 2:27-28)? Or with Thomas who, trembling, reached out to touch his wounds (Jn 20:27-28)?

On the second Sunday of Ordinary Time of the current liturgical cycle there is the Gospel passage in which Jesus says to the man with the paralyzed hand: "Hold out your hand! He stretched it out and his hand was healed "(Mk 3,5). We do not have a paralyzed hand; however, we all have, some more or less, paralyzed souls, withered hearts. It is to the listener that Jesus says at that moment: “Stretch out your hand! Spread out your heart in front of me, with the faith and readiness of that man!

When proclaimed during the liturgy, Scripture acts in a way that is above and beyond any human explanation. It reflects how sacraments act. These divinely inspired texts have a healing power. Once the Gospel passage has been read, the Church invites the minister to kiss the book and say, “Through the words of the Gospel may our sins be wiped away.” (*Per evangelica dicta deleantur nostra delicta*).

Over the course of the history of the Church, some epoch-making events took place as a direct result of listening to the readings during Mass. One day a young man heard the Gospel passage where Jesus said to the rich man, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (Mt 19:21). He sensed that this word was being addressed so personally to himself that he went home, sold everything he had, and withdrew into the desert. The man’s name was Anthony, and that’s how the monastic movement began in the Church.

Many centuries later, in Assisi, a newly-converted young man and his friend went to church. The Gospel for that day had Jesus saying to his disciples, “Take nothing for the journey, neither walking stick, nor sack, nor food, nor money, and let no one take a second tunic” (Lk 9:3). Immediately he turned to his companion and said, “Did you hear that? This is what the Lord wants us to do.” And thus began the Franciscan Movement.

The Liturgy of the Word is the best resource we have to make the Mass a new and engaging celebration each time we celebrate it, thereby avoiding the great danger of monotonous repetition that young people find especially boring. For this to happen, however, we have to invest more time and prayer in the preparation of the homily. The faithful should be able to see how the word of God addresses their real life situations and provides answers to their existential demands.

There are two ways of preparing a homily. You can sit down and, relying on your own knowledge and based on your personal preferences, you can choose the themes and craft the words. And then, once your talk is prepared, you can kneel down and ask God to give power to your words, to add his Spirit to your message. That’s a good method, but it isn’t prophetic. To be prophetic, you have to do just the reverse. First, kneel down and ask God for the word he wants to say. God has in his heart a special word for any and every occasion, and he never fails to reveal that word to the minister who asks him humbly and insistently. Initially, there’s nothing more than an almost imperceptible change of heart: a little light that flashes in your mind, a word from the Bible that catches your attention and sheds light on a situation. It may seem like only a tiny seed, but it contains everything we need.

Afterward, you sit at your table, open your books, consult your notes, gather your thoughts, and consult the Fathers of the Church, the teachers, the poets, but now it’s no longer the word of God at the service of your learning, but your learning at the service of the word of God. And only then does the word of God release all its power.

*Through the work of the Holy Spirit*

But one thing must be added: all the attention given to the word of God alone is not enough. "The power from on high " must descend on it. In the Eucharist, the action of the Holy Spirit is not limited only to the moment of consecration, to the epiclesis that is recited before it. His presence is equally indispensable for the liturgy of the word and, as we will see, for communion.

The Holy Spirit continues, in the Church, the action of the Risen One who, after Easter, "opened the minds of the disciples to understanding the Scriptures" (cf. Lk 24:45). Scripture, says the *Dei Verbum* of the Second Vatican Council, "must be read and interpreted with the help of the same Spirit through which it was written" (DV, 12). In the liturgy of the word the action of the Holy Spirit is exercised through the spiritual anointing present in the speaker and listener.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,

because he has anointed me

to bring glad tidings to the poor. (Lk 4:18)

Thus Jesus indicated where the announced word draws its strength. It would be a mistake to rely only on the sacramental anointing that we have received once and for all in priestly or episcopal ordination. This enables us to perform certain sacred actions, such as governing, preaching, and administering the sacraments. It gives us, so to speak, the authorization to do certain things, not necessarily the authority to do them; it ensures apostolic succession, not necessarily apostolic success!

But if the anointing is given by the presence of the Spirit and it is his gift, what can we do to have it? We must first of all start from a certainty: "We have received the anointing from the Saint", St John assures us (1 Jn 2:20). That is, thanks to baptism and confirmation - and, for some, priestly or episcopal ordination - we already have the anointing. Indeed, according to Catholic doctrine, it has imprinted on our soul an indelible character, like a mark or a seal: "It is God himself - writes the Apostle - who conferred the anointing on us, he imprinted the seal on us and has given the deposit of the Spirit in our hearts "(2 Cor 1, 21-22).

This anointing, however, is like a perfumed ointment enclosed in a jar: it remains inert and does not give off any perfume if it is not broken and the jar is not opened. This is what happened to the alabaster jar broken by the woman of the Gospel, whose perfume filled the whole house (Mk 14: 3). This is where our part about the anointing comes in. It does not depend on us to create it, but it depends on us to remove the obstacles that prevent its radiation. It is not difficult to understand what it means for us to break the alabaster vase. The vase is our humanity, our self, sometimes our arid intellectualism. Breaking it means putting yourself in a state of surrender to God and resistance to the world.

Fortunately for us, not everything is entrusted to ascetic effort. In this case, faith, prayer and humble imploration can do much. Therefore, ask for the anointing before setting out on a preaching or an important action in the service of the Kingdom. As we prepare for the reading of the gospel and the homily, the liturgy makes us ask the Lord to purify our hearts and our lips in order to be able to declare the gospel worthily. Why not say sometimes (or at least think within yourself): "Anoint my heart and my mind, Almighty God, that I may proclaim your word with the sweetness and power of the Spirit"?

The anointing is not only necessary for preachers to effectively proclaim the word, it is also necessary for listeners to welcome it. The evangelist John wrote to his community: "You have received the anointing from the Saint, and you all have the knowledge ... The anointing you have received from him remains in you and you do not need anyone to instruct you" (1 Jn 2, 20.27).

Not that any human training is useless, but it isn’t enough “It is the interior teacher who truly instructs, it is Christ and his inspiration who instruct. When his inspiration and his anointing are lacking, external words only make a useless noise ”. Let us hope that even today Christ himself has instructed us with his interior inspiration and my talking has not been a “useless noise”.

P. Raniero Cantalamessa

“TAKE AND EAT: THIS IS MY BODY”

Second Sermon Lent 2022

The object of our mystagogical catechesis today is the central part of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer, or the Canon, which has consecration at its center. We make two types of consideration on it: one liturgical and ritual, the other theological and existential.

From a ritual and liturgical point of view, today we have a new resource that the Fathers of the Church and medieval doctors did not have. The new resource we have is the rapprochement between Christians and Jews. From the earliest days of the Church, various historical factors led to accentuate the difference between Christianity and Judaism, to the point of contrasting them with each other, as Ignatius of Antioch already does[[5]](#footnote-5). Distinguishing oneself from the Jews - on the date of Easter, on fasting days, and in many other things - becomes a kind of password. An accusation often leveled against one's adversaries and heretics is that of "Judaizing".

The tragedy of the Jewish people, the *Shoa*, and the new climate of dialogue with Judaism, initiated by the Second Vatican Council, have made possible a better understanding of the Jewish matrix of the Eucharist. Just as the Christian Passover cannot be understood if it is not considered as the fulfillment of what the Jewish Passover foretold, so the Eucharist is not fully understood if it is not seen as the fulfillment of what the Jews did and said in the course of their ritual meal. A first important result of this turnaround was that today no serious scholar advances the hypothesis that the Christian Eucharist is explained in the light of the dinner in vogue at some mystery cults of Hellenism, as has been tried for over a century.

The Fathers of the Church retained the Scriptures of the Jewish people, but not their liturgy, which they no longer had access to, after the separation of the Church from the Synagogue. They therefore used the figures contained in the Scriptures - the paschal lamb, the sacrifice of Isaac, that of Melchizedek, the manna - but not the concrete liturgical context in which the Jewish people celebrated all these memories, that is the ritual meal celebrated, once a year in the Passover supper (the *Seder*) and weekly in the synagogue worship. The first name with which the Eucharist is designated in the New Testament by Paul is that of "meal of the Lord" (*kuriakon deipnon*) (1 Cor 11:20), with evident reference to the Jewish meal from which it now differs for the faith in Jesus. The Eucharist is the sacrament of continuity - not of the opposition - between the Old and New Testaments, between Judaism and Christianity.

*The Eucharist and the Jewish Berakah*

This is the perspective that Benedict XVI also takes in the chapter on the institution of the Eucharist in his second book on Jesus of Nazareth. Following the prevailing opinion of scholars today, he accepts the Johannine chronology according to which Jesus’ Last Supper was not a Passover meal but a solemn farewell meal. With Louis Bouyer, he holds in addition that one can “trace the development of the Christian eucharistic liturgy [that is, of the canon] from the Jewish *berakah*.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

Because of various cultural and historical reasons, from the time of scholasticism onwards, theology attempted to explain the Eucharist in the light of philosophy, in particular using the Aristotelian notions of substance and accidents. This too was a way of placing the new understanding of their time at the service of faith and thus of imitating the methodology of the Fathers. In our day, we need to do the same with our new knowledge—in our case, historical and liturgical knowledge rather than philosophical knowledge. In the context of some research already begun in this direction, especially by Louis Bouyer, I would like to show the bright light that is falling on the Christian Eucharist when we consider the Gospel accounts of its institution against the background of what we know about the Jewish ritual meal. The innovation of Jesus’ action will not be diminished but will be highly enhanced.

The link between the old and the new rite is given by the *Didachè*, a writing of the apostolic era that we can consider the first sketch of a Eucharistic anaphora. The synagogal rite was composed of a series of prayers called "Berakah" which in Greek is translated as "Eucharist". At the beginning of the meal, each in turn took a cup of wine in his hand and, before bringing it to his lips, repeated a blessing that the current liturgy makes us repeat almost verbatim at the moment of the offertory: "Blessed be you, Lord, our God, King of the ages, you have given us this fruit of the vine…".

But the meal officially began only when the father of the family, or the head of the community, had broken the bread that was to be distributed among the diners. And, in fact, Jesus takes the bread, recites the blessing, breaks it and distributes it saying: "This is my body which will be given up for you." And here the rite - which was only a preparation - becomes reality. The *figure* becomes the *event*.

After the blessing of the bread, the usual dishes were served. When the meal is about to end, the diners are ready for the great ritual act that concludes the celebration and gives it the deepest meaning. Everyone washes their hands, as in the beginning. Having finished this, having in front of him a cup of wine mixed with water, he intones the three prayers of thanksgiving: the first for God the Creator, the second for liberation from Egypt, the third because he continues his work at the present time. At the conclusion of the prayer, the cup passed from hand to hand and everyone drank. This, the ancient rite performed so many times by Jesus in life.

Luke says that Jesus, after having eaten, takes up the chalice and says, “This chalice which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20). Something decisive occurs at the moment when Jesus adds these words to the formula of the prayer of thanksgiving, that is, to the Jewish *Berakah*. That ritual was a sacred feast in which people celebrated and thanked God as their Savior for having redeemed his people in order to form a covenant of love with them that was sealed by the blood of a lamb. Now, at the very moment in which Jesus, as the true Lamb of God, decides to give his life for his own, he declares that the Old Covenant that they were all celebrating liturgically has been concluded. At that moment, with a few simple words, he makes the new and eternal Covenant in his Blood.

By adding the words “do this in memory of me,” Jesus gives a lasting significance to his gift. From the past, the gaze is projected towards the future. Everything he has done so far in the supper is placed in our hands. By repeating what he did, that central act of human history which is his death for the world is renewed. The *figure* of the paschal lamb which becomes an *event* on the cross is given to us in the supper as a *sacrament*, that is, as a perennial memorial of the event.

*Priest and victim*

This, I said, with regard to the liturgical and ritual aspect of the consecration. Let us now move on to the other consideration, that of a personal and existential kind, in other words to the role that we, priests and faithful, play at that moment of the Mass. To understand the role of the priest in consecration, it is of vital importance to know the nature of the sacrifice and of the priesthood of Christ because it is from them that the Christian priesthood derives, both the baptismal one common to all, and that of ordained ministers.

We are no longer, in reality, "priests according to the order of Melchizedek"; we are priests "according to the order of Jesus Christ"; at the altar we act "in persona Christi", that is, we represent the High Priest who is Christ. The Symposium on the priesthood, held in this Hall last month, said infinitely more on this topic than I can say in my brief reflection (prepared, by the way, before that date), but it is necessary say something here for the understanding of the Eucharist.

The Letter to the Hebrews explains in what the novelty and uniqueness of Christ's priesthood consists: "He entered the sanctuary once and for all, not by the blood of goats and calves, but by virtue of his own blood, thus obtaining an eternal redemption" (Heb 9: 12). Every other priest offers something external to himself, Christ offered himself; every other priest offers victims, Christ offered himself a victim! St. Augustine summed up in a few words the nature of this new kind of priesthood in which priest and victim are the same person: "*Ideo sacerdos quia sacrificium"*, priest because victim.[[7]](#footnote-7) The French scholar René Girard defined this novelty of Christ's sacrifice as "the central fact in the religious history of humanity", which put an end forever to the intrinsic alliance between the sacred and violence.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In Christ it is God who becomes victim. It is no longer human beings who offer sacrifices to God to appease him and make him favorable; it is God who sacrifices himself for humanity, delivering his only-begotten Son to death for us (cf. Jn 3:16). Jesus did not come with the blood of others, but with his own blood; he did not put his sins on the shoulders of others - animals or human creatures - but he put the sins of others on his shoulders: "He carried our sins in his body on the wood of the cross" (1 Pt 2, 24). All this means that in the Mass we must be priests and victims at the same time.

In light of this, let us reflect on the words of the consecration: "Take, eat: this is my body offered as a sacrifice for you". On this regard I should like to share my little experience, that is, how I came to discover the ecclesial and personal significance of the Eucharistic consecration. This is how I lived the moment of consecration in Holy Mass the first years of my priesthood: I closed my eyes, I bowed my head, I tried to estrange myself from everything around me to identify with Jesus who, in the Upper Room, pronounced those words for the first time: «*Accipite et manducate:* Take and eat…». The liturgy itself instilled this attitude, making the words of the consecration pronounced in a low voice and in Latin, bent over the species.

Then there was the liturgical reform of Vatican II. Mass began to be celebrated while watching the assembly; no longer in Latin, but in the language of the people. This helped me to understand that my attitude did not express the full meaning of my participation in the consecration. That Jesus of the Cenacle no longer exists! The risen Christ now exists: the Christ, to be exact, who was dead but now lives forever (cf. Rev 1:18). But this Jesus is the "total Christ", Head and Body inseparably united. Therefore, if it is this total Christ who pronounces the words of the consecration, I too pronounce them with him. Yes, I pronounce them "in persona Christi", in the name of Christ, but also "in first person", that is, in my name.

From that day when I understood this, I began to no longer close my eyes at the moment of consecration, but to look - at least sometimes - the brothers in front of me, or, if I celebrate alone, I think of those I have to meet during the day and to whom I have to dedicate my time, or I even think of the whole Church and, turning to them, I say with Jesus: "Take, eat all of you: this is my body that I want to give for you ... Take, drink: this is my blood that I want to shed for you ».

Later St. Augustine came to remove all doubts from me. "In what the Church offers she offers herself", he writes in a famous passage from De civitate Dei: *In ea re quam offert, ipsa [Ecclesia] offertur* [[9]](#footnote-9). Closer to us is the Mexican mystic Concepcion Cabrera de Armida, called Conchita, who died in 1937 and was beatified in 2015. To her Jesuit son, about to be ordained priest, she wrote: "Remember, my son, when you hold in your hands the Holy Host, you will not say: ‘Behold the Body of Jesus and Behold His Blood,’ but you will say: ‘This is my Body, This is my Blood, that is, there must be worked in you a total transformation, you must lose yourself in Him, to be ‘another Jesus."[[10]](#footnote-10)

All this applies not only to ordained bishops and priests, but to all the baptized. A famous text of the Council puts it this way:

The faithful, by virtue of their royal priesthood, contribute to the oblation of the Eucharist ... By participating in the Eucharistic sacrifice, source and summit of all Christian life, they offer the divine Victim to God and themselves with it; so everyone, both with the oblation and with Holy Communion, fulfills their part in the liturgical action, but not equally, but some in one way and some in another [[11]](#footnote-11).

There are two bodies of Christ on the altar: there is his real body (the body "born of the Virgin Mary", dead, risen and ascended to heaven) and there is his mystical body which is the Church. Well, his real body is really present on the altar and his mystical body is mystically present, where "mystically" means: by virtue of his inseparable union with the Head. There is no confusion between the two presences, which are distinct but inseparable.

Since there are two "offerings" and two "gifts" on the altar - the one that is to become the body and blood of Christ (the bread and the wine) and the one that is to become the mystical body of Christ - there are also two "epiclesis" in the Mass, that is, two invocations of the Holy Spirit. In the first it is said: "Now we humbly pray to you: send your Spirit to sanctify the gifts we offer you, so that they become the body and blood of Jesus Christ"; in the second, which is recited after the consecration, it is said: «Give the fullness of the Holy Spirit so that we become one body and one spirit in Christ. May the Holy Spirit make us a perennial sacrifice pleasing to you ».

This is how the Eucharist makes the Church: the Eucharist makes the Church, making the Church a Eucharist! The Eucharist is not only, generically, the source or the cause of the holiness of the Church; it is also its "form", that is, its model. The holiness of the Christian must be realized according to the "form" of the Eucharist; it must be a Eucharistic holiness. The Christian cannot limit himself to celebrating the Eucharist, he must be a Eucharist with Jesus.

*The Body and the Blood*

Now we can draw the practical consequences of this doctrine for our daily life. If in the consecration it is we too who, turning to our brothers and sisters, say: «Take, eat: this is my body. Take and drink: this is my blood ”, we must know what “body” and “blood” mean, to know what we offer.

The word "body" does not indicate, in the Bible, a component, or a part, of man which, combined with the other components which are the soul and the spirit, form the complete human being. In biblical language, and therefore in that of Jesus and Paul, "body" indicates the whole of a person, insofar as he or she lives his or her life in a body, in a corporeal and mortal condition. "Body" therefore indicates the whole of life. By instituting the Eucharist, Jesus left us his whole life as a gift, from the first instant of the incarnation to the last moment, with everything that concretely filled that life: silence, sweat, toil, prayer, struggles, humiliations. ...

Then Jesus says: "This is my blood". What does he add with the word "blood" if he has already given us his whole life in his body? He adds death! After giving us life, he also gives us the most precious part of it, his death. In fact, the term "blood" in the Bible does not indicate a part of the body, that is, a part of a part of a person; indicates an event: death. If blood is the seat of life (so it was thought then), its "pouring" is the plastic sign of death. The Eucharist is the mystery of the Lord's body and blood, that is, of the Lord's life and death!

Now, coming to us, what do we offer, offering our body and our blood, together with Jesus, in the Mass? We too offer what Jesus offered: life and death. With the word "body", we give everything that concretely constitutes the life we lead in this world: time, health, energy, skills, affection, maybe just a smile. With the word "blood", we too express the offer of our death. Not necessarily definitive death, martyrdom for Christ or for the brothers. All that in us, right now, prepares and anticipates death: humiliations, failures, diseases that immobilize, limitations due to age, health, all that, in a word, "mortifies" us.

All this requires, however, that we, as soon as we come out of Mass, do our best to realize what we have said; that we really strive, with all our limitations, to offer to our others and sisters our "body", that is, time, energy, attention; in a word, our life. It is therefore necessary that, after having said: "Take, eat", we really let ourselves "be eaten" and let ourselves be eaten above all by those who do not do it with all the delicacy and grace that we would expect. St. Ignatius of Antioch, going to Rome to die there as a martyr, wrote: "I am Christ's wheat: may I be ground from the teeth of the beasts, to become pure bread for the Lord".[[12]](#footnote-12) Each of us, if you look carefully around, has these sharp teeth of fairs that grind it: they are criticisms, contrasts, hidden or open oppositions, differences of views with those around us, diversity of character.

Let's try to imagine what would happen if we celebrated Mass with this personal participation, if we all really said, at the moment of consecration, some aloud and some silently, according to the ministry of each one: "Take, eat". A parish priest and, even more so, a bishop, celebrates his Mass in this way, then goes: he prays, preaches, confesses, receives people, visits the sick, listens, teaches... His day is also a Eucharist. A great French spiritual teacher, Pierre Olivaint (1816-1871), used to say: “In the morning, at Mass, I am the priest and Jesus the victim; throughout the day, Jesus is the priest and I the victim ». Thus a priest imitates the "good Shepherd", because he really gives his life for his sheep.

*Our signature on the gift*

I would like to summarize, with the help of a human example, what happens in the Eucharistic celebration. Let's think of a large family in which there is a son, the firstborn, who admires and loves his father beyond measure. For his birthday he wants to give him a precious gift. Before presenting it to him, however, he secretly asks all his brothers and sisters to put their signature on the gift. This therefore arrives in the hands of the father as a sign of the love of all his children, without distinction, even if, in reality, only one has paid the price for it.

This is what happens in the Eucharistic sacrifice. Jesus admires and loves the Heavenly Father endlessly. He wants to give him every day, until the end of the world, the most precious gift that one can think of, that of his own life. In the Mass he invites all his brothers and sisters to put their signature on the gift, so that it reaches God the Father as the indistinct gift of all his children, even if only one has paid the price for this gift. And what a price!

Our signature are the few drops of water that are mixed with the wine in the chalice. They are nothing but water, but mixed in the cup they become a single drink. The signature of all is the solemn Amen which the assembly pronounces, or sings, at the end of the doxology: “Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, forever and ever”. “AMEN!”

We know that those who have signed a commitment then have the duty to honor their signature. This means that, leaving Mass, we too must make our lives a gift of love to the Father for the good of our brothers and sisters. We, I repeat, are not only called to celebrate the Eucharist, but also to make ourselves a Eucharist. May God help us with this!

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COMMUNION WITH THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST

Third Sermon, Lent 2022

In our mystagogical catechesis on the Eucharist - after the Liturgy of the Word and the Consecration - we have reached the third moment, that of communion.

This is the moment of the Mass that most clearly expresses the unity and fundamental equality of all the baptized, below any distinction of rank and ministry. Till this moment the distinction of the ministry is present: in the liturgy of the Word, the distinction between the teaching Church and the learning Church; in consecration, the distinction between ministerial priesthood and universal priesthood. At communion there is no distinction whatsoever. The communion received by the simple baptized is identical to that received by a priest or a bishop. Eucharistic communion is the sacramental proclamation that *koinonia* comes first in the Church and it is more important than the *hierarchy*.

Let us reflect on the Eucharistic Communion starting from a text of St. Paul:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a communion with the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a communion with the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. (1Cor 10:16-17)

The word "body" occurs twice in the two verses, but with a different meaning. In the first case ("the bread that we break, is it not a communion with the body of Christ?"), body indicates the real body of Christ, born of Mary, died and risen; in the second case ("we are one body"), body indicates the mystical body, the Church. It could not be said in a clearer and more synthetic way that Eucharistic communion is always communion with God and communion with the brothers and sisters; that there is a vertical dimension in it, so to speak, and a horizontal dimension. Let's start with the first.

*Communion with Christ*

What kind of communion is established between us and Christ in the Eucharist? In John 6:57 Jesus says: "As the Father, who has life, sent me and I live for the Father, so also he who eats me will live for me". The preposition "for" (in Greek, *dià*) has a causal and final value here; it indicates both a movement of origin and a movement of destination. It means that whoever eats the body of Christ lives "from" him, that is, because of him, by virtue of the life that comes from him, and lives "for" him, that is, for his glory, his love, his Kingdom. As Jesus lives of the Father and for the Father, so, by communicating ourselves to the holy mystery of his body and his blood, we live of Jesus and for Jesus.

In fact, it is the strongest vital principle that assimilates the less strong one to itself, not vice versa. It is the vegetable that assimilates the mineral, not vice versa; it is the animal that assimilates both the vegetable and the mineral, not vice versa. So now, on the spiritual level, it is the divine that assimilates the human to itself, not vice versa. So that while in all other cases the one who eats assimilates what he eats, here it is the one who is eaten who assimilates to himself whoever eats it. To the one who approaches to receive him, Jesus repeats what he said to Augustine: "It will not be you who will assimilate me to you, but it will be I who will assimilate you to me".[[13]](#footnote-13)

An atheist philosopher said: "Man is what he eats" (F. Feuerbach), meaning that in man there is no qualitative difference between matter and spirit, but that everything boils down to the organic and material component. An atheist, without knowing it, gave the best formulation of a Christian mystery. Thanks to the Eucharist, the Christian is truly what he eats! Saint Leo the Great wrote a long time ago: "Our participation in the body and blood of Christ tends to make us become what we eat"[[14]](#footnote-14).

In the Eucharist, therefore, there is not only communion between Christ and us, but also assimilation; communion is not just the union of two bodies, of two minds, of two wills, but it is assimilation to the one body, the one mind and will of Christ. "Whoever unites himself with the Lord forms one Spirit with him" (1 Cor 6:17).

That of nutrition - of eating and drinking - is not the only analogy we have of Eucharistic communion, even if it is irreplaceable. There is something that it cannot express, just as the analogy of the communion between the vine and the branch cannot: they are communion between things, not between people. They communicate, but without knowing it. I would like to insist on another analogy that can help us understand the nature of Eucharistic communion as a communion between people who know and want to be in communion.

The Letter to the Ephesians says that human marriage is a symbol of the union between Christ and the Church: "This is why a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his woman and the two will form one flesh. This mystery is great. I say this in reference to Christ and the Church! " (Eph 5: 31-33) The Eucharist - to use a bold but true image - is the consummation of the marriage between Christ and the Church. Therefore Christian life without the Eucharist is marriage which has been ratified, but not consummated. At the moment of Communion the celebrant says: “Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb” (*Beati qui ad coenam Agni vocati sunt*), and the book of Revelation, from which the expression is taken, says even more explicitly: “Blessed are those called to the *nuptial* *supper* of the Lamb.” (Rev 19:9) .

Now - again according to St Paul - the immediate consequence of marriage is that the body (that is, the whole person) of the husband becomes the wife's and, vice versa, the wife's body becomes the husband's (cf. 1 Cor 7: 4). This means that the incorruptible and life-giving flesh of the Incarnate Word becomes "mine", but also my flesh, my humanity, becomes Christ's, is made his own by him. In the Eucharist we receive the body and blood of Christ, but Christ also "receives" our body and our blood! Jesus, writes Saint Hilary of Poitiers, “assumes the flesh of him who assumes his.” [[15]](#footnote-15) He says to us: "Take, this is my body", but we too can say to him: "Take, this is my body".

Let's try to understand the consequences of all this. In his earthly life, Jesus did not have all possible and imaginable human experiences. To begin with, he was a man, not a woman: he did not experience the condition of half of humanity; he was not married, he did not experience what it means to be united for life with another creature, to have children, or, worse, to lose children; he died young, he did not know old age ...

But now, thanks to the Eucharist, he has all these experiences. He leaves the feminine condition in the woman, the sickness in the sick, the old age in the elderly, the precariousness in the emigrant, the terror in the bombed...

There is nothing in our life that does not belong to Christ. No one should say, "Ah, Jesus doesn't know what it means to be married, to be a woman, to have lost a child, to be sick, to be old, to be a black person!" What Christ was unable to live "according to the flesh", he lives and "experiences" now "according to the Spirit", thanks to the spousal communion of the Mass. St. Elizabeth of the Trinity understood the profound reason for this when she wrote to her mother: “The bride belongs to the bridegroom. My Bridegroom has taken me. He wants me to be an added humanity for him ".[[16]](#footnote-16)

What an inexhaustible reason for amazement and consolation at the thought that our humanity becomes the humanity of Christ! But also what responsibility from all of this! If my eyes have become the eyes of Christ, my mouth that of Christ, what reason not to allow my gaze to linger on lascivious images, my tongue not to speak against my neighbor, my body not to serve as an instrument of sin. "Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?" St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor 6:15).

And yet, that's not all yet; the most beautiful part is missing. The bride's body belongs to the bridegroom; true, but the body of the bridegroom belongs in his turn to the bride. From giving one must pass immediately, in communion, to receiving. Receive none other than Christ's holiness! Where will that “marvelous exchange” (*admirabile commercium*) of which the liturgy speaks of will actually take place in the life of the believer, if it is not carried out at the moment of communion?

There we have the opportunity to give Jesus our dirty rags and receive from him the "mantle of righteousness" (Is 61, 10). Indeed, it is written that "through the work of God he became wisdom, justice, sanctification and redemption for us" (cf. 1 Cor 1:30). What he has become "for us" is destined for us, belongs to us. “Since - writes Cabasilas - we belong to Christ more than to ourselves, having bought us back at a high price (1 Cor 6:20), inversely what belongs to Christ belongs to us more than if it were ours”.[[17]](#footnote-17) We only need to remember one thing: we belong to Christ by right, he belongs to us by grace!

It is a discovery capable of giving wings to our spiritual life. This is the daring blow of faith and we should pray to God not to allow us to die before we have achieved it.

*Communion with the Trinity*

Reflecting on the Eucharist is like seeing ever wider horizons opening up in front of oneself as one advances, as far as the eye can see. In fact, the Christological horizon of communion that we have contemplated up to now opens onto a Trinitarian horizon. In other words, through communion with Christ we enter into communion with the whole Trinity. In his “priestly prayer”, Jesus says to the Father: “May they be one as we are. I in them and you in me "(Jn 17:23). Those words: "I in them and you in me" mean that Jesus is in us and that the Father is in Jesus. Therefore, one cannot receive the Son without also receiving the Father with him. The word of Christ: "Whoever sees me sees the Father" (Jn 14: 9) also means "whoever receives me receives the Father".

The ultimate reason for this is that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one and inseparable divine nature, they are "one". In this regard, Saint Hilary of Poitiers writes: "We are united with Christ who is inseparable from the Father. While remaining in the Father, he remains united with us; thus we too arrive at unity with the Father. In fact, Christ is connaturally in the Father, insofar as he is generated by him; but, in a certain way, we too, through Christ, are connaturally in the Father. He lives by virtue of the Father and we live by virtue of his humanity "[[18]](#footnote-18)

In the Eucharist there is a sacramental replica of what happened historically in the earthly life of Christ. At the moment of her earthly birth, it is the Holy Spirit who gives Christ to the world (Mary conceived by the work of the Holy Spirit!); at the moment of death, it is Christ who gives the world the Holy Spirit (by dying, he "sent forth the Spirit"). Similarly, in the Eucharist, at the moment of consecration it is the Holy Spirit who gives us Jesus (it is by the action of the Spirit that the bread is transformed into the body of Christ!), at the moment of communion it is Christ who, coming into us, he gives us the Holy Spirit.

Saint Irenaeus (eventually Doctor of the Church!) says that the Holy Spirit is "our very communion with Christ"[[19]](#footnote-19). In communion Jesus comes to us as the one who gives the Spirit. Not as the one who one day, long ago, gave the Spirit, but as the one who now, having consummated his bloodless sacrifice on the altar, again "emits the Spirit" (cf. Jn 19:30). All I have said about the Trinity and the Eucharist is visually summarized in Rublev's icon of the three Angels around the altar. The whole Trinity gives us the Eucharist and is given to us in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not only our daily Easter; it is also our daily Pentecost!

*Communion with one another*

From these dizzying heights, let us now return to earth and pass to the second dimension of Eucharistic communion: communion with the body of Christ which is the Church. Let us recall the words of the Apostle: "Since there is only one bread, we, although many, are one body: in fact, we all share in the one bread".

Developing a thought already sketched in the *Didache*, St. Augustine sees an analogy in the way in which the two bodies of Christ are formed: the Eucharistic and the ecclesial. In the case of the Eucharist, we have the wheat first scattered on the hills, which threshed, ground, mixed in water and cooked over the fire becomes the bread that reaches the altar; in the case of the Church, we have the multitude of people who, united by evangelical preaching, ground by fasting and penance, kneaded in water in baptism and cooked in the fire of the Spirit, form the body which is the Church.[[20]](#footnote-20)

In this regard, the word of Christ immediately comes to meet us: "Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Mt 5, 23-24). If you go to receive communion, but you have offended a brother and you are not reconciled, you have a grudge, you resemble - St. Augustine said to the people - to a person who sees a friend arriving whom he has not seen for years. He runs to meet him, gets up on tiptoe to kiss him on the forehead… But in doing this he doesn't notice that he's stepping on his feet with nailed boots.[[21]](#footnote-21) The brothers and sisters are the feet of Jesus who still walks the earth.

*Communion with the Poor*

This is especially true with regard to the poor, the afflicted, the marginalized. He who said of the bread: “This is my body”, also said it of the poor. He said it when, speaking of what was done for the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoner and the naked, he solemnly declared: "You did it to me!". This is like saying: "I was the hungry, I was the thirsty, I was the stranger, the sick, the prisoner" (cf. Mt 25, 35 ff.). I have remembered other times the moment when this truth almost exploded inside me. I was on a mission in a very poor country. Crossing the streets of the capital I saw everywhere children covered by a few dirty rags, running after the garbage trucks to look for something to eat. At a certain moment it was as if Jesus was saying to me: “Look carefully: that is my body!”. It was breathtaking.

The sister of the great philosopher Blaise Pascal relates this fact of his brother. In his last illness, he was unable to retain anything of what he ate and for this reason they did not allow him to receive the viaticum that he insistently asked for. Then he said: "If you cannot give me the Eucharist, at least let a poor person into my room, so that if I can't communicate with the Head, I want to at least communicate with his body ".[[22]](#footnote-22)

The only impediment to receiving communion that St. Paul explicitly names is the fact that, in the assembly, "one is hungry and another is drunk": " When you meet in one place, then, it is not to eat the Lord’s supper, for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry while another gets drunk."(1 Cor 11: 20-21). Saying "this is not eating the Lord's Supper" is like saying: yours is no longer a true Eucharist! It is a strong statement, even from a theological point of view, to which we perhaps do not pay enough attention.

Nowadays, the situation in which one is hungry and another bursts with food is no longer a local problem, but a global one. There can be nothing in common between the Lord's supper and the rich man's lunch, where the master feasts lavishly, ignoring the poor Lazarus outside the door (cf. Lk 16:19 ff.). The concern to share what one has with those in need, near and far, must be an integral part of our Eucharistic life.

There is no one who, willingly, cannot, during the week, perform one of those gestures of which Jesus says: "You did it to me". Sharing does not simply mean "giving something": bread, clothing, hospitality; it also means visiting someone: a prisoner, a sick person, an elderly person alone. It is not only giving of one's money, but also of one's time. The poor and the suffering need solidarity and love, no less than bread and clothing, especially in this time of isolation imposed by the pandemic.

Jesus said: "For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me" (Mt 26:11). This is also true in the sense that we cannot always receive the body of Christ in the Eucharist and even when we do, it only lasts a few minutes, while we can always receive it in the poor. There are no limits here, it just requires that we want it. We always have the poor at hand. Whenever we meet someone who suffers, especially if we are dealing with certain extreme forms of suffering, if we are attentive, we will hear, with the ears of faith, the word of Christ: "This is my body!".

I conclude with a little story that I read somewhere. A man sees a malnourished girl, barefoot and shivering with cold, and almost angrily shouts to God: "Oh God, why don't you do something for that little girl?". God replies: “Of course I did something for that little girl: I made you!

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THE REAL PRESENCE OF CHRIST IN THE EUCHARIST

Fourth Sermon, Lent 2022

After our mystagogical catecheses on the three main parts of the Mass – the Liturgy of the Word, Consecration and Holy Communion – we shall reflect today on the Eucharist as the real presence of the risen Christ in the Church.

How can we deal with such a deep and incomprehensible mystery? Memories of the numerous theories and discussions on it, the dissensions between Catholics and Protestants, between the Latin and Orthodox Churches, which filled our theology books at one time, assail us. All of which makes it seem impossible to add anything to this mystery that might edify our faith and warm our hearts, without inevitably slipping into interdenominational polemics.

And yet this is the wonder being worked by the Holy Spirit today among all Christians. He is prompting us to admit to what extent our Eucharistic disputes were based on the human presumption that this mystery could be enclosed in a theory, or even in a word, and on the will to prevail over our adversaries. He is prompting us to repent for having reduced the supreme pledge of love and unity left to us by Our Lord to our favorite topic of discussion.

The way to Eucharistic ecumenism is the way to mutual recog­nition, the Christian way of *agape,* or sharing. We are not asked to ignore the real differences that exist or to break faith with any point of authentic Catholic doctrine. It is a question of bringing together the positive aspects and authentic values in every tradi­tion so as to form a “mass” of common truths that will gradu­ally lead us to unity.

It is unbelievable how some Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant points of view on the real presence ap­pear to be so divergent and destructive whenever they are seen in contrast or as alternatives, and how they appear wonderfully convergent when they are carefully brought together. We must therefore set about making a synthesis. We must, as it were, sift the great Christian traditions to take out what is not good and, as St. Paul exhorts us, to “hold fast what is good” (cf. 1 Thess 5:21).

*The Catholic tradition: a real but hidden presence*

In this spirit, let us now take a close look at the three main Eucharistic traditions — Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant — to be edified by the treasures they contain and unite them in the common treasure of the Church. As a result we shall find that our understanding of the mystery of the real presence is richer and more vivid.

In Catholic theology and liturgy, the consecration is the in­disputable heart of the Eucharist, from which we have Christ’s real presence. At the consecration, Jesus himself acts and speaks. St. Ambrose wrote:

The bread is bread before the sacramental words are pronounced. . . Which words make the consecration effective and whose words are they? They belong to the Lord Jesus! Everything said before that moment is said by the priest who praises God, prays for the people, for the king and others. But when it is time for the vener­able sacrament to be effected, the priest no longer uses his own words, but Christ’s. Therefore, it is the words that work (*conficit)* the sacrament. . . . See how efficacious (*operatorius*) are Christ’s words. The body of Christ was not present before the consecration but after it the body of Christ is present. For he spoke and it came to be, he commanded and it stood forth (cf. Ps 33:9).[[23]](#footnote-23)

From the Western Catholic viewpoint we can talk of a *Christological realism.* “Christological” because attention is centered on Christ seen both in his historical and incarnate state and as the Risen One. Christ is both the object and subject of the Eucharist, and that is to say, he is fulfilled in the Eucharist and he fulfills the Eucharist. “Realism” because Jesus is not seen as present on the altar simply in a sign or symbol but in truth and in his reality. This Christological realism is clear, for example, in the hymn “*Ave Verum,*” com­posed for the elevation of the Host. It says:

Hail to thee! true body, sprung From the Virgin Mary’s womb!

The same that on the cross was hung,

And bore for man the bitter doom.

Thou whose side was pierced and flow’d

Both with water and with blood. . . .

Later on, the Council of Trent gave a more precise explana­tion of this approach to the real presence. Three adverbs were used: *vere, realiter, substantialiter.* Jesus is *truly* present and not simply through image or form, he is *really* present, and not only subjectively through the faith of believers; he is *substantially* pres­ent, that is, in his profound reality, which cannot be seen by the senses, and not in the appearances which remain that of bread and wine.

It is true that the risk of falling into a “crude” or exaggerated realism existed. The remedy to this risk is to be found in tradition itself. St. Augustine made it clear, once and for all, that the presence of Jesus in the Eu­charist is “in the sacrament.” In other words, it is a sacramental and not a physical presence, mediated by signs, and precisely, by bread and wine. However, in this case the *sign* does not exclude the *reality* but makes it present to us, in the only way in which the risen Christ, living “in the Spirit,” can be present to us as long as we are on this earth.

Another great master of Western Eucharistic spirituality, St. Thomas Aquinas, says the same thing when he talks about Christ’s presence “in substance” under the species of bread and wine.[[24]](#footnote-24) In fact, to say that Jesus is substantially present in the Eucharist, is to say that he is present in his true reality which nourishes us only through faith. In the hymn *Adoro te devote,* attributed to the same St. Thomas, we sing:

Sight, touch, and taste in thee are each deceived;

The ear alone most safely is believed.

Jesus is therefore present in the Eucharist in a totally unique way. No single word can suitably describe this presence, not even the adjective “real.” The word real is derived from *res* (thing) and means, as a thing or an object. But Jesus is not present in the Eucharist as a “thing” or an object, but as a person. If we really want to name this presence, it would be better to simply say “Eucharistic” presence, because it occurs only in the Eu­charist.

*The Orthodox Tradition: the action of the Holy Spirit.*

The Western theology is very rich but it is not, nor could it be, exhaustive. In the past, at least, the importance due to the Holy Spirit and essential to an understanding of the Eucharist was neglected. And so we turn to the East to see what the Orthodox tradition has to offer us. However, our attitude today is different; we are no longer worried about the differences but grateful for what is offered to help complete our own views.

In fact, the Orthodox tradition has always given great importance to the ac­tion of the Holy Spirit in Eucharistic celebration. Since Vatican Council II, this sharing has already shown results. Up to then, the Roman Canon of the Mass only mentioned the Holy Spirit incidentally in the final doxology: “Through him, with him, in him ... in the unity of the Holy Spirit . . . .” Now, instead, all the new canons have a double invocation to the Holy Spirit: one on the gifts before the consecration and another on the Church after the consecration.

Oriental liturgies have always attributed the actual real pres­ence of Christ on the altar to the particular action of the Holy Spirit. In the “anaphora of St. James,” in use in the Antiochian Church, the Holy Spirit is invoked with these words:

Send forth upon us and upon these gifts, your most Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life, who reigns with you, God the Father, and with your only Son. He reigns con- substantially and co-eternally; he spoke through the law and the prophets and the New Testament; he descended in the form of a dove upon our Lord Jesus Christ in the river Jordan, he de­scended upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost, in the form of tongues of fire. Send, O Lord, your thrice Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts, so that by his holy, gracious and glori­ous coming, he may sanctify this bread and make it into the sa­cred Body of Christ (Amen), and sanctify this chalice and make it into the precious Blood of Christ (Amen).

This is much more than a simple addition to the invocation to the Holy Spirit. It is a wide-ranging and penetrating look at the history of salvation that opens a new dimension on the Eucharis­tic mystery. Starting with the words of the Nicene Constantinople Creed which define the Holy Spirit as “Lord and giver of life . . . who spoke through the prophets,” the perspective then widens to outline a real “history” of the action of the Holy Spirit.

The Eucharist brings this series of wonderful events to fulfill­ment. The Holy Spirit, who at Easter bursts into the sepulcher, touches Christ s Body and gives him life again, repeats this wonder in the Eucharist. He comes upon the dead elements of bread and wine and gives them life; he makes them into the Body and Blood of the Redeemer. Truly, as Jesus himself says of the Eucharist, “it is the Spirit that gives life” (John 6:63). Theodore of Mopsuestia, a master of Eastern Eucharistic tra­dition, wrote:

By virtue of the liturgical action, it is as if Our Lord were risen from the dead and pours his grace on all of us, through the Holy Spirit. . . . When the priest declares that the bread and wine are the Body and Blood of Christ, he affirms that this has come about through the Holy Spirit. It is the same as what happened to Christ’s natural body when it received the Holy Spirit and his unction. At the moment the Holy Spirit comes, we believe that the bread and wine receive a special unction of grace. And from then on we believe they are the Body and Blood of Christ, immortal, incorruptible, impassible and immutable by na­ture, like the Body of Christ at the resurrection.[[25]](#footnote-25)

However, we must not lose sight of one fact which shows that also the Catholic tradition has something to offer to the Orthodox brothers. The Holy Spirit does not act independently of Jesus; he acts within his words. Jesus says of the Spirit: “He will not speak on his own author­ity, but whatever he hears he will speak. ... He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13-14). That is why we must not separate the words of Jesus (“This is my Body”) from the epiclesis (“May the Holy Spirit make this bread into the Body of Christ”).

The call to unity, for both Catholic and Orthodox faithful, springs from the very heart of the Eucharistic mystery. Even if, for obvious reasons, the memorial of the institution and the invocation to the Holy Spirit take place at two distinct moments (mortals cannot express the mystery at just one instant), their action is, nevertheless, simultaneous. Its effectiveness undoubtedly comes from the Spirit (and not from the priest or the Church), but it works within and through Christ’s words.

I have said that the effectiveness that makes Jesus present on the altar does not spring from the Church but neither does it take place without the Church. The Church is the living channel through which and with which the Holy Spirit acts. It is the same for the coming of Jesus on the altar as it will be for the final coming in glory: The Spirit and the Bride (the Church) say to Jesus: Come! (cf. Rev 22:17). And he comes.

*Protestant spirituality: the importance of faith.*

The Roman tradition highlights “who” is present in the Eucharist, Christ; the Orthodox tradition highlights “by whom” this presence is effected, the Holy Spirit; Protestant theology highlights “on whom” this presence is effective; in other words, the conditions that make the sacrament really effective in those that receive it. The conditions are many but they can be summed up under one heading: faith.

Let us not concern ourselves immediately and exclusively with the negative aspects which have been criticized at certain times in the Protestant principle that the sacraments are only “signs of faith.” Let us forget misunderstandings and controversies and we shall find that this energetic recall to faith is beneficial to saving the sacrament and preventing it from becoming just another “good work,” or something that works mechanically or magically as it were, almost without human knowledge. In the end, it is a question of discovering the profound meaning of the exclamation that re-echoes in the liturgy at the end of the consecration and which was once placed at the center of the consecration formula, as if to emphasize that faith is intrinsic to the mystery: *“Mysterium fidei,”* mystery of faith!

Faith doesn’t “make” the sacrament but it “receives” it. Only Christ’s words repeated by the Church and rendered effective by the Holy Spirit “make” the sacrament. But what would a sacra­ment “made” and not received avail? Concerning the incarna­tion, men like Origen, St. Augustine and St. Bernard said: “What advantage is it to me that Christ was born of Mary in Bethlehem if he is not born through faith in my heart too?” We can say the same of the Eucharist; what advantage is it to me that Christ is really present on the altar, if to me he is not present? Faith was necessary even when Jesus was physi­cally present on this earth; otherwise — as he himself repeated many times in the gospel — his presence was of no use, if not to condemn: “Woe to you Chorazin, woe to you Capernaum!” (Matt 11:21f.).

Faith is essential to make the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist not just “real” but “personal,” a one-to-one presence. “Being there” is one thing, “being present” another. Presence presup­poses someone present to someone else; it presupposes recipro­cal communication, an exchange between two free persons who are aware of and open to each other. There is much more involved, therefore, than simply staying in a given place.

Such a subjective and existential dimension of the Eucharistic presence does not annul the objective presence that precedes human faith, it actually presupposes it and gives it value. Luther, who raised the role of faith to such heights, was also one of the staunchest defenders of the doctrine of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist. In the course of a debate on the subject with other Reformers, he stated:

I cannot interpret the words ‘This is my Body’ differently from how they sound. It is up to others, there­fore, to prove that, where the words ‘This is my Body’ are said, Christ’s Body is not present. I do not want to hear explanations based on reason. In front of such clear words, there can be no question; I refuse logical reasoning and plain common sense. I to­tally refuse practical demonstrations and analytical argumentation. God is above all kinds of mathematical certainties and we must adore the Word of God in wonder.[[26]](#footnote-26)

This quick look at the wealth of riches contained in the various Christian traditions is sufficient to see the immense gift that unfolds for the Church when the various Christian denominations accept to unite their spiritual assets, as the first Christians did, who “had all things in common” (Acts 2:44). This is the true *agape*, encompassing the whole Church, which the Lord makes us want to see realized, for the glory of our common Father and the good of his Church.

*The sentiment of the presence*

We have now terminated our little Eucharistic pilgrimage through the different Christian denominations. We have collected a few baskets of crumbs from the big multiplication of bread in the Church. But we cannot conclude here our reflections on the mystery of the real presence. It would be like collecting the crumbs and not eating them. Faith in the real presence is a wonderful thing, but it is not enough; at least, faith taken in a certain way is not enough. It is not enough to have an exact and theologically perfect idea of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist. Many theologians know all about the mystery, yet they do not know the real presence. In bibli­cal terms you “know” something only when you have experienced it. To know fire, you would have to have been, at least once, so close to a flame to risk being burnt.

St. Gregory of Nyssa left us an amazingly profound expres­sion of this higher kind of faith; he speaks of a “sentiment of the presence *(aesthesis parousias)[[27]](#footnote-27)* . This happens when a person is seized by God’s presence and has a certain perception (not just an idea) that God is there. It is not a natural perception; it is the fruit of grace. There is a strong analogy between this and what happened when, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to someone. It was something sudden that unexpectedly and abso­lutely changed the person’s state of mind.

One day after the resurrection the apostles were fishing in the lake; a man stood on the beach. He started talking from a distance: “Children, have you any fish?” and they answered him, “No!” But then, in a flash of understanding, John cried out: “It is the Lord!” Every­thing is different after this recognition and everybody hurries ashore (cf. John 21:4f.). The same thing happened, even if in a quieter way, to the disciples of Emmaus. Jesus was walking with them, “but their eyes were kept from recognizing him”; finally, when he broke the bread, “their eyes were opened and they recog­nized him” (Luke 24:13ff.). The same thing happens when a Christian, who has received Jesus in the Eucharist numerous times, one day, finally, through grace, “recognizes” him.

From faith and the “sentiment” of the real presence, rever­ence must spring spontaneously, and, indeed, a sense of tender­ness for Jesus in the Sacrament. This is such a delicate and personal sentiment that words might even destroy it. St. Francis of Assisi has something to tell us at this point. His heart overflowed with the sentiments of reverence and tenderness. He was overcome with pity before Jesus in the Sacra­ment, just as he was moved before the Child in Bethlehem. He saw him so helpless, so entrusted to humanity, so humble. In his *Letter to all the Friars* he writes words of fire that we want to hear now as addressed to us at the end of our meditation on the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist:

Consider your dignity, brothers, priests, and be holy because He Himself is holy…  It is a great misery and a deplorable weakness when you have Him thus present to care for anything else in the whole world. Let the entire man be seized with fear; let the whole world tremble; let heaven exult when Christ, the Son of the Living God, is on the altar in the hands of the priest. O admirable height and stupendous condescension! O humble sublimity! O sublime humility! that the Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under a morsel of bread. Consider, brothers, the humility of God and "pour out your hearts before Him,  and be ye humbled that ye may be exalted by Him.  Do not therefore keep back anything for yourselves that He may receive you entirely who gives Himself up entirely to you.

P. Raniero Cantalamessa, ofmcap

“I HAVE GIVEN YOU AN EXAMPLE”

Fifth Sermon, Lent 2022

Our meditation today starts with a question: Why, in the account of the Last Supper, John does not speak of the institution of the Eucharist, but speaks instead of the washing of the feet? And this after he had dedicated an entire chapter of his Gospel to preparing the disciples to eat his flesh and drink his blood!

The underlying reason is that in everything concerning Easter and the Eucharist, John wants to emphasize the *event* more than the *sacrament*, that is, more the meaning than its sign. For him, the new Passover does not begin so much in the Upper Room, when the rite that must commemorate it is instituted (we know that John's Last Supper is not an "Easter supper); rather it begins on the cross when the fact that it is to be commemorated is fulfilled. It is at that moment that the passage from the old Passover to the new one takes place. On the cross “they did not break his legs”, to fulfill what was prescribed for the paschal lamb in Exodus, “not a bone of it will be broken.” (Jn 19: 33-36; Ex 12:46).

*The meaning of the washing of the feet*

It is important to understand the meaning John attaches to the washing of the feet. The recent apostolic constitution *Praedicate Evangelium* mentions it in the Preamble, as the very icon of service that must characterize all the work of the Roma Curia. It helps us to understand how a Eucharist can be transferred into life and thus we "imitate in life what we celebrate on the altar". We are facing one of those episodes (another is the episode of the piercing of the side), in which the evangelist makes it clear that there is a mystery underneath that goes beyond the contingent fact that could, in itself, seem negligible.

Jesus says, “I have given you the example". What did he give us the example of? How should the brothers' feet be physically washed every time we sit at the table? Certainly not only this! The answer is in the Gospel: “Whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all. For the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many." (Mk 10: 44-45).

In the Gospel of Luke, precisely in the context of the Last Supper, there is a word of Jesus that seems to have been pronounced at the end of the washing of the feet: "Who is greater, who is at the table or who serves? Isn't he the one who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as one who serves "(Lk 22:27). According to the evangelist, Jesus said these words because a discussion had arisen among the disciples about whom of them could be considered the greatest (cf. Lk 22:24). Perhaps it was precisely this circumstance that inspired Jesus to do the washing of the feet, as a kind of parable in action. While the disciples are all busy discussing animatedly among themselves, he silently gets up from the table, looks for a basin of water and a towel, then goes back and kneels before Peter to wash his feet, understandably throwing him into a great confusion: "Lord, do you wash my feet?" (Jn 13, 6).

In the washing of the feet, Jesus wanted to summarize the whole meaning of his life, so that it would remain well impressed in the memory of the disciples: "What I am doing now you do not understand, but you will understand after "(Jn 13: 7). That gesture tells us that the whole life of Jesus, from beginning to end, was a washing of feet, which is, serving humanity.

Before the incarnation, there is the *pre-existence* of Christ, after the incarnation the *pro-existence* of Christ, that is, an existence lived in favor of others. Jesus gave us the example of a life spent for others, a life made "bread broken for the world". With the words: "Do you too as I did", Jesus therefore institutes the *diakonía*, that is, service, elevating it to a fundamental law, or, better, to a lifestyle and model of all relationships in the Church. As if he were saying, also about the washing of the feet, what he said in instituting the Eucharist: "Do this in memory of me!".

A short personal remark before going on. An ancient Father, the blessed Isaac of Nineveh, gave this advice to those who are forced, by duty, to talk about spiritual things, which they have not yet reached with life: "Speak about it - he said - as one who belongs to the class of disciples and not with authority, after humbling your soul and making yourself smaller than any of your listeners”. This, venerable fathers, brothers and sisters, is the spirit with which I dare to speak of service to you who live it day by day.

I remember the observation that the prefect of the Congregation of the Faith, Cardinal Franjo Šeper, once made to us members of the International Theological Commission: "You theologians - he said smiling - have not finished writing something that you immediately put your name and surname on it. We in the Curia must do everything anonymously ”. This comes closer to the nature of evangelical service and it is a reason for me to admire and be grateful to the many anonymous servants of the Church who work in the Roman Curia, in the Episcopal Curias and in the Nunciatures.

But back to our theme. The doctrine of charisms is entirely oriented to service; service appears as the soul and purpose of every charism. Saint Paul affirms that every "particular manifestation of the Spirit" is given "for the common good" (cf. 1 Cor 12: 7) and that the charisms are bestowed "to make the brothers suitable to perform the service" (*diakonía*) (Eph 4, 12). Even the apostle Peter, recommending hospitality, writes: "Each one lives according to the grace (*chárisma*) received, putting it at the service (*diakonía*) of others" (1 Pt 4, 10). The two things - charisma and ministry, charisma and service - always appear vitally connected to each other. The Church is charismatic to serve!

*The spirit of service*

We must closely examine the significance of “service if it is not to remain just a mere word in our lives. In itself, service is not a virtue; in no list of virtues or fruits of the Holy Spirit, as the New Testament defines them (Gal 5:22), do we find the word *diakonia,* service. Actually, mention is made of a service to sin (cf. Rom 6:16) or to idols (cf. 1 Cor 6:9) which is, undoubtedly, not good. Service is neutral in itself: it indicates a way of living or a way of relating to others in one’s work; being at the dependence of others. It can even be negative if done under constraint (slavery), or simply out of interest.

Service is much discussed today: every­one is in service: a shopkeeper serves his customers; anyone who works is said to be in service. Evidently the gospel speaks of a very different kind of service, even if it doesn’t necessarily ex­clude or disqualify service in worldly terms. The difference lies in the reason for the service and in the inner attitude with which it is carried out.

Let us read once more the account of the wash­ing of the feet to see with what spirit Jesus did it and what prompted him to do it: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (John 13:1). Service is not a virtue but it springs from virtue, especially from charity; actu­ally it is the greatest expression of the new commandment. Serv­ice is a manifestation of the *agape,* or of a love that “does not insist on its own interests” (cf. 1 Cor 13:5), but on that of others; it does not consist in self-seeking but in giving. It is, all told, participating in and imitating God’s way of acting who, because he is “Good, all Good and the supreme Good,” cannot but love and help us freely and disinterestedly.

This is why evangelical service, unlike that of the world, is not recommended to those who are inferior, to the needy and the poor but to those who have much, those in high places, the rich. Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required where service is concerned (cf. Luke 12:48). That’s why Jesus says that in his Church, the *leader* must become *one who serves* (Luke 22:26) and whoever is *first* must become *the slave of all* (Mark 10:44). My professor of New Testament in Fribourg, Ceslas Spicq, used to say that the washing of the feet is “the sacrament of Christian authority”.

Besides gratuity, service is the expression of another aspect of divine *agape:* humility. The words Jesus said, “You also ought to wash one another’s feet,” mean: you must offer one another the service of humble charity. Charity and humility together form evangelical service. Jesus once said: “Learn from me for I am gentle and humble of heart” (Matt 11:29). What had Jesus done to call himself “humble”? Had he, perhaps, thought lowly of him­self or spoken unassumingly about himself? He had done quite the opposite! During the actual washing of the feet he proclaimed him­self “Teacher and Lord” (cf. John 13:13).

What had he done, therefore, to call himself “humble”? He humbled himself; he came down from heaven to serve! And from the moment of the incarnation he continued to come down to the point of kneeling down to wash his apostles’ feet. How the angels must have shud­dered to see the Son of God humble himself so, he upon whom they do not even dare to look (cf. 1 Pet 1:12). The Creator kneel­ing before his creatures! “Proud ashes, blush with shame. God humbles himself and you exalt yourself!” St. Bernard used to say to himself.[[28]](#footnote-28) Seen like this — as humbling oneself to serve — humility is indeed a regal way of being like God and of imitating the Eucharist in our lives.

*Discernment of spirits*

The fruit of this meditation should be a courageous examina­tion of our lives (our habits, position, schedule, distribution and use of our time) to see if it is really a service and if love and humility are part of it. The important thing to know is whether we are serving our brothers and sisters or whether, instead, they are serving our purposes. We make others serve our purpose or we take advantage of them, perhaps even when we are doing our utmost for them, if we are not disinterested and are, in some way, seeking approval, applause or the satisfaction of having a clear conscience, of being the benefactor. The gospel requirements are extremely radical on this point: “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matt 6:3). Everything we do “to be noticed by others” is lost. “Christ did not please himself!” (Rom 15:3): this is the rule of service.

To have a “discernment of spirits” or of our intentions in doing service, we should be aware of what we do willingly and what we do our best to shirk. We should see if our heart is ready to abandon a noble, prestigious service, if required, for a humble unappreciated one. The surest service we can give is that which is hidden from the eyes of all except the Father’s, who sees into our secret hearts. Jesus raised the washing of feet, one of the most humble acts of his time as it was usually done by slaves, to a sym­bol of service. St. Paul warns us: “Do not be haughty, but as­sociate with the lowly” (Rom 12:16).

The opposite to a spirit of service is the wish to domineer, the habit to enforce our wills, our points of view and ways, on others. In a word, authoritarianism. Often a person of tyrannical dispo­sition doesn’t even realize the suffering he causes and is almost amazed at how little his “concern” and efforts are appreciated. He even becomes the victim. Jesus told his apostles to be like “lambs among wolves,” but such a person is like a wolf among lambs. Much of the suffering that families and communities are often subjected to is due to the presence of an authoritarian and despotic person who tramples on others with nailed boots, as it were, and under the pretext of “serving” others, actually takes advantage of them.

This “someone” might possibly well be us! If we have the slight­est doubt about this, we should sincerely consult those we live with and give them the opportunity to express themselves frankly. If it results that our way of behaving makes life difficult for someone, we should humbly accept the fact and reflect on our service.

In another way, being too attached to our habits and comfort also goes against the spirit of service — a spirit of laxness, as it were. It is not possible to seriously serve others if we are con­stantly intent on pleasing ourselves, making an idol out of our rest, our free time, our schedule. The rule of service is always the same: “Christ did not please himself.”

We have seen that service is the virtue of those in charge. Jesus left it as a treasure to the pastors of his Church. We have seen that all the charisms are given for the purpose of service, but par­ticularly the charism of “pastors and teachers” (cf. Eph 4:11), the charism of authority. The Church is “charismatic” to serve and it is also “ministerial” to serve!

*Service of the Spirit*

If, for all Christians, to serve means “living no longer for them­selves” (cf. 2 Cor 5:15), for pastors it means: “not feeding them­selves”: “Ho, shepherds of Israel, who have been feeding themselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? (Ezek 34:2). Nothing appears more natural and right to people than that who­ever is lord (*dominus*) should “dominate,” act, as it were, as lord. But this is not the way” for the disciples of Jesus; whoever is lord must serve. “Not that we lord it over your faith,” writes St. Paul, “we work with you for your joy” (2 Cor 1:24).

The Apostle Peter recommends the same thing to pastors: “Do not domi­nate over those in your charge but be an example to the flock” (cf. 1 Pet 5:3). It is not easy in pastoral ministry to avoid the mentality of being a lord of the faith, which became part of the concept of authority very early on. In one of the most ancient documents on episcopal authority (the Syriac *Didascalia*), we find the idea that a bishop is like a monarch, in whose Church nothing can be undertaken without his consent.

Where pastors are concerned and in so far as they are pastors, this point is often the decisive factor in conversion. How strong and sad the words Jesus uttered after the washing of the feet sound: “I, your Lord and Master . . . !” “Jesus did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped” (Phil 2:6), and that is to say, he wasn’t afraid of compromising his divine dignity, of fostering people s disrespect by disregarding his own privileges and appearing as one among us. Jesus led a simple life; sim­plicity has always been the beginning and the sign of a genuine return to the gospel. We must imitate God’s way of acting. Noth­ing, Tertullian wrote, better portrays God’s way of acting so much as the contrast between the simplicity of the ways and means with which he works and the magnificence of the spiritual results ob­tained.[[29]](#footnote-29)

The world needs a great display to act and impress, but God doesn’t. There was a time when the dignity of bishops was seen in insignia, titles, castles, armies. They were, so to speak, prince-bishops, and sometimes much more prince than bishop. Today seems like a golden time for the Church in comparison. I knew a bishop years ago who found it natural to pass a few hours in an old people’s home, helping them to dress and eat; he took the washing of feet literally. Personally, I have received won­derful examples of simplicity in my life from prelates.

It is necessary, however, to maintain a sense of evangelic free­dom on this point too. Simplicity necessitates that we do not place ourselves above others but neither should we obstinately always place ourselves beneath them to somehow keep our distance, but that, in the things of ordinary routine we accept to be like others. Manzoni makes a sharp observation when he says there are those who have all the humility necessary when it comes to placing them­selves beneath others but not when it is a question of being their equals.[[30]](#footnote-30) At times, the best service is not in serving but in accept­ing to be served, like Jesus who, at the right moment, knew how to sit at table and let another wash his feet (cf. Luke 7:38) and who willingly accepted the provisions made for him on his jour­neys by the generous and loving women (Luke 8:2-3).

Where pastoral service, or pastors, are concerned we must not forget that service to the brethren, no matter how important and holy, is not the first or essential thing; service to God comes first. Jesus is first and foremost the “Servant of God and then the servant of humanity. He even reminds his parents of this when he says: “Did you not know that I must be about my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49). He never hesitated to delude the crowds that had gathered to hear him and be healed of infirmities when he unexpectedly withdrew to the wilderness to pray (cf. Luke 5:16).

Today, even evangelical service is endangered by the risk of secularization. It can all too easily be taken for granted that all service to humanity is God’s service. St. Paul speaks of a serv­ice of the Spirit *(diakonia Pneumatos*) (2 Cor 3:8), to which the ministers of the New Testament are destined. In pastors, the *spirit of service* must be expressed in *service of the Spirit!*

Those, like priests, who are called by vocation to a “spiritual” service, do not serve their brethren by doing all sorts of things for them and then neglecting the only thing the brethren rightfully expect from them and which only they can render. It is writ­ten that a priest “is appointed to act on behalf of people in relation to God” (Heb 5:1). When this problem arose for the first time in the Church, Peter solved it like this: “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. . . . We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:2-4).

In fact, there are pastors who have taken up serving tables again. They busy themselves with all sorts of problems, whether they be problems of money, administration or even agriculture, that exist in their communities (even when these could quite easily be seen to by others), and they neglect their real ministry, which cannot be delegated. The ministry of the Word requires hours of reading, study and prayer.

Immediately after explaining to the apostles the meaning of the washing of the feet, Jesus said to them: "Knowing these things you will be blessed if you do them" (Jn 13:17). We too will be blessed, if we are not satisfied with knowing these things - namely that the Eucharist pushes us to service and sharing -, but if we put them into practice, possibly starting today. The Eucharist is not only a mystery to be consecrated, received and adored, but also a mystery to be imitated.

Before concluding, however, we must recall a truth that we have emphasized in all our reflections on the Eucharist: namely the action of the Holy Spirit! Let's be careful not to reduce the gift to duty! We have not only received the command to wash the feet and serve our brothers and sisters: we have received the grace of being able to do so. Service is a charisma and like all charisms it is "a particular manifestation of the Spirit for the common good", says St. Paul (1 Cor 12: 7); "Each one must live according to the gift (*charisma*!) received, putting it at the service of others", adds St. Peter (1 Pt 4:10). The gift precedes duty and makes its fulfillment possible. This is "the good news" - the Gospel - of which the Eucharist is the consoling daily memory.

Holy Father, venerable fathers, brothers and sisters, thank you for your patient listening, and best wishes for a blessed Holy Week and a Happy Easter!

P. Raniero Card. Cantalamessa, ofmcap

Pilate said to him, “What is truth?”

Good Friday Sermon 2022

In his account of the Passion, the Evangelist John gives particular importance to the dialogue of Jesus with Pilate, and it is on this that we want to reflect for a few moments before proceeding further with our liturgy.

It all begins with Pilate's question: "Are you the king of the Jews?" (Jn 18:33) Jesus wants to make Pilate understand that the question is far more serious than he thinks, and that it has meaning only if he does not simply repeat an accusation from others. Therefore, he asks in turn: "Do you say this on your own, or have others told you about me?".

He tries to lead Pilate to a higher plane. He speaks to him of his kingdom, a kingdom that "is not of this world". Pilate understands only one thing: that it is not a question of a political kingdom. If the accused wants to talk about religion, he doesn't want to get into these kinds of problems. He therefore asks with a touch of irony: "Then you are a King?" Jesus replied: “You say that I am a king" (Jn 18:37).

By claiming to be king, Jesus exposes himself to the danger of death; but instead of clearing himself by denying it, he strongly affirms it. He reveals his superior origins to him: "I came into the world ..." He says, therefore, mysteriously, that he existed before his earthly life, he comes from another world. He came to earth to be a witness to the truth.

Jesus treats Pilate as a soul who needs light and truth, and not as a judge. He is interested in the destiny of the man Pilate more than in his own destiny. With his appeal to receive the truth, he wants to prompt him to come to his senses, to look at things with different eyes, to place himself above the momentary dispute with the Jews.

The Roman Procurator understands Jesus' invitation to him, but he is skeptical and indifferent about this kind of higher speculation. The mystery he glimpses in Jesus' words frightens him and he prefers to end the conversation. Muttering to himself "What is truth?", he leaves the Praetorium.

\* \* \*

What a relevant page from the gospel for today! Even today, as in the past, man asks himself: "What is truth?". But, as Pilate did, he casually turns his back on the one who said, "I came into the world to bear witness to the truth". "I am the Truth!" (Jn 14: 6).

Through the Internet I have followed countless debates on religion and science and on faith and atheism. One thing struck me: hours and hours of dialogue, without ever mentioning the name of Jesus. And if the believing party sometimes dared to mention his name and his resurrection from the dead, they immediately tried to close the discussion as an irrelevant digression. Everything happens *"etsi Christus non daretur"*: as if in the world there had never been a man called Jesus Christ

What is the result? The word "God" becomes an empty vessel for everyone to fill at will. But it is precisely for this reason that God took care to give content to his name. "The Word became flesh". Truth became flesh! Hence the staunch effort to leave Jesus out of the discourse on God; he removes from human pride any pretext for deciding himself what God should be like!

“Oh sure: Jesus of Nazareth!”, some may say. "But if people even doubt that he ever existed!" A well-known English writer of the last century - known to the general public for being the author of the series of novels that later became films "The Lord of the Rings", J.R.R. Tolkien - in a letter, gave this answer to his son who mentioned the same objection to him:

It takes a fantastic will to unbelief to suppose that Jesus never really ‘happened’, and more to suppose that he did not say the things recorded all of him – so incapable of being ‘invented’ by anyone in the world at that time: such as ‘before Abraham came to be *I am*’ (Jn 8:58). ‘He that hath seen me hath seen the Father’ (Jn 14:9)[[31]](#footnote-31).

The only alternative to the truth of Christ, adds the writer, is that “he is a fraud” and the Gospels “garbled accounts of a demented megalomaniac”. Could such a case, however, withstand twenty centuries of relentless historical and philosophical criticism and produce the fruits it has produced?

Today, we go beyond Pilate's skepticism. There are those who think that one should not even ask the question "What is truth?", because the truth simply does not exist! “Everything is relative, nothing is certain! Thinking otherwise is intolerable presumption!" There is no longer any place for "the great narratives about the world and reality", including those about God and Christ.

Dear brother and sister atheists, agnostics or those still searching for truth (if there are any listening): the words I am about to address to you are not those of a poor preacher like me; they are from one of your own, one that many of you admire, of whom much is written and of whom, perhaps, many also consider themselves, in some way, disciples and followers: Søeren Kierkegaard, the founder of existential philosophy!

So much is said –he writes - about human suffering and poverty…So much is said about wasted lives. But only that man’s life is wasted who… has never realized, because he has never, in the deepest sense, intuited that there is a God, and that he, he himself, his own self, stands in this God’s presence”[[32]](#footnote-32)

Some say: there is too much injustice, too much suffering in the world to believe in God! It's true, but let's think for a moment how much more absurd and hopeless the evil that surrounds us becomes without faith in a final triumph of truth and good. The Resurrection of Jesus from the dead, which we will celebrate the day after tomorrow, is the promise and the sure guarantee that this is what will happen because it has already begun with him.

If I had the courage of St. Paul, at this point I too would have to shout: "We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” (2Cor 5:20). Do not "waste" your life! Do not leave this world as Pilate left the Praetorium, with the unanswered question: "What is truth?" It is too important: It is a question of knowing whether we live for something, or in vain!

\* \* \*

However, Jesus' dialogue with Pilate also offers the occasion for another reflection, addressed, this time, to us believers and men of the Church, not to those outside. "Your people and the chief priests have handed you over to me!", says Pilate: *Gens tua et pontifices tradiderunt te mihi* (Jn 18:35). People of your Church, your priests have abandoned you, they have discredited your name with horrendous misdeeds! And should we still believe in you?

Also, to this terrible objection I would like to respond with the words Tolkien addressed to his son:

Our love may be chilled and our will eroded by the spectacle of the shortcomings, folly, and even sins of the Church and its ministers, but I do not think that one who has once had faith goes back over the line for these reasons (least of all anyone with any historical knowledge)… It is convenient because it tends to turn our eyes away from ourselves and our own faults to find a scapegoat… I think I am as sensitive as you (or any other Christian) to the scandals, both of clergy and laity. I have suffered grievously in my life from stupid, tired, dimmed, and even bad priests.

Such a poor result was, moreover, to be expected. It began before the first Easter with the betrayal of Judas, the denial of Simon Peter, the flight of the Apostles ... Cry, then? Yes - Tolkien recommended to his son -, but for Jesus, for what he must endure, before for us. Cry –we must add today - for the victims and with the victims of our sins.

\* \* \*

A conclusion for everyone, believers and non-believers alike. This year we celebrate Easter not to the joyful sound of bells, but with the noise in the ears of bombs and explosions not far from here. Let us recall how Jesus responded one day to the news of blood shed by Galileans due to Pilate, and to the victims of the collapse of the Tower of Siloam: "If you do not repent, you will all perish in the same way! (Lk 13:5). If you do not beat your swords into plowshares, your spears into pruning hooks (Is 2:4), and your missiles into factories and homes, you will perish in the same way!

One thing of which these events have suddenly reminded us. The structures of the world can change from one day to another. Everything passes, everything ages; everything - not only "the blissfulness of youth" - wanes. There is only one way to escape the current of time that drags everything with it: to pass on to that which does not pass! To put our feet on firm ground! Easter, Passover, means passage: let us all aim to experience a real Easter this year, Venerable Fathers, brothers and sisters: let us pass on to the One who does not pass. Let us pass on now with our heart, before passing on one day with our body!

1. Thomas Aquinas, S.Th. III, q. 60,a.2,2 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Augustine, Sermo 112 (PL 38,643) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paul VI, *Mysterium fidei* (AAS 57, 1965, p. 753 ss). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Justin, *Apologia*, 67, 3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Magnesians*, 10,3. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth, Part II: Holy Week: From the Entrance to Jerusalem to the* *Resurrection* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 311, and see all of ch. 5, pp. 103-144. See also Louis Bouyer, *Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayer* (1966; University of Notre Dame Press, 1989). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Augustine, Confessions, X, 43 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. R. Girard, *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* , Grasset, Paris 1978. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Augustine, De civitate Dei, X, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Conchita. *A Mother’s Spiritual Diary*, ed. by M.-M. Philipon, New York, Alba House 1978, p. 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Lumen gentium,10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Romans*, 4,1. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. See Augustine, *Confessions,* VII, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Leo the Great, *Sermo 12 on the Passion,* 7 (CCL 138A, p. 388). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Hilaire of Poitiers, *De Trinitate*, 8, 16 (PL 10, 248): “Eius tantum in se adsumptam habens carnem, qui suam sumpserit”. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Elisabeth of the Trinity, Letter 261, to her mother [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. N. Cabasilas, Vita in Christo, IV, 6 (PG 150, 613 [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Hilaire of Poitiers, *De Trinitate,* VIII, 13-16 (PL 10, 246 ss). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ireneus, *Adversus haereses,* III, 24, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Augustine, Sermo Denis 6 (PL 46, 834 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. See. Augustine, *On the First Letter of John*, 10,8. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Life of Pascal, in B. Pascal, Oeuvres complètes, Parigi 1954, pp. 3 f. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *De sacramentis,* IV, 14-16 (PL 16, 439 ss). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Cf Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* III, q. 75, a. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Theodorus of Mopsuestia, *Catechetical homilies,* XVI, 11 s. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf Acts of the colloquy of Marburg of 1529 (Weimar Ed., 30, 3, p. 110 ss). [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Canticle,* XI, 5, 2 (PG 44, 1001) *.* [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Laudes to the Virgin,* I,8. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Tertullian, *On the Baptism*, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. A. Manzoni, *The Betrothed*, chap. 38. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. *From the Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*, ed. Humphrey Carpenter, with Christopher Tolkien, Houghton Mifflin 1981. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Søren Kierkegaard, *The sickness unto Death,* 2,1,1 (Oxford University Press 1941). [↑](#footnote-ref-32)