

CHAPTER FOUR

Eucharist

In its *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (SC), Vatican II described the Eucharist as the source and summit of Catholic life (10). Let's take a closer look at why.

Pope John Paul II has said that the liturgical renewal promoted by the Second Vatican Council should be “the prime agent of the wider renewal of Catholic life.” He has also stressed that the root of any new evangelization must be a personal encounter with Jesus Christ. Where do we most intimately encounter Christ? We find Him in the Scriptures and prayer, of course, but John Paul II also points to the unique presence of Jesus in the Liturgy, and especially to His real presence in the Blessed Sacrament (*Church in America*, 12).

Encountering Jesus by making the Eucharist the center of our lives may be a bigger challenge than we suspect. Many Catholics, sometimes even among the clergy, tend to take the Eucharist for granted. Yet, only through a deeper understanding of—and reverence for—the Eucharist can we enter into the joy of the Lord which the Great Jubilee celebrated. Moreover, leading others to this great encounter with the Lord is at the heart of our mission as believers.

Vatican II wanted to make Christians enthusiastic again about living their faith and bringing it to the whole world. That's why the Council Fathers reformed the Liturgy in the first place. They understood that the goal of all apostolic work is to bring women and men together in the Church to praise God: "to take part in the Sacrifice and to eat the Lord's Supper" (SG10). They also taught that, through the Liturgy, God's grace poured out on us "as from a fountain," so that all Church activity could be accomplished with great fruitfulness. Yet, for the Liturgy to be fully effective, the faithful needed to worship with the right heart. Herein lay the greatest pastoral challenge and the reason for all the conciliar reforms of external practice: *to help the faithful lift up their hearts*. Often in Church history, we've been guilty of overemphasizing liturgical externals, but the duty of all those who have pastoral responsibility regarding the Liturgy was spelled out by the Council Fathers: "to ensure that the faithful take part [in the Liturgy] *fully aware* of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite and enriched by it" (11).

Awareness, engagement, and enrichment are matters of the heart. Dealing with the human heart is a sensitive and great responsibility. So often sorrow, doubt, or anxiety weighs down the soul. This is why, at the preface of the Eucharistic Canon, the celebrant calls the assembly to "lift up your hearts." When the assembly responds, "We lift them up to the Lord," the People of God remind themselves that in the face of the darkness that sometimes surrounds them, Christ has won the victory of good over evil. This involves a great act of faith and love. Mere sentiment cannot meet the heart's needs. A person's deepest longings can only be met by *possessing the truth in love*.

The Desert Fathers said that the battle for the heart is waged in the mind. This reminds us of our need to provide our people with much better teaching about the Liturgy.

The Second Vatican Council called for a full, conscious, and active participation by all Catholics in the Liturgy. What does it mean to “participate” in the Liturgy—not just for priests, deacons, and other ministers, but also for the whole assembly? Today, too many Catholics assume that taking part in the Liturgy almost requires us to be involved in a liturgical ministry of one kind or another. Some presume that if we’re not involved in a formal ministry, we’re more of a spectator than a participant. Others feel frustrated because they see in the norms guiding participation a lack of spontaneity, and along with it, a lack of authenticity. Some even change or ignore uncomfortable parts of a ritual in a misguided attempt to “improve” participation.

We need to remember that the Liturgy is the Church at prayer: a perfect prayer offered through Christ to the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit. But why should we join in the worship? Do we do it for God or for ourselves, the People of God? The answer depends on our perspective.

From God’s side, the Eucharistic Liturgy is a moment of communion and mission with and for His people. The Liturgy becomes a place where He can give Himself—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—to His people so that they can possess and enjoy Him. In this possession and enjoyment, He empowers them and then sends them out to bring His love to the world until the end of time. From the human point of view, the Liturgy is worship that we offer God. This may seem presumptuous. God

doesn't need us to tell Him that He's God. Nonetheless, we believe that limited and selfish creatures like ourselves are empowered to offer God something of eternal value. We can do so because we participate in Christ's work of redemption, which not only saves us from sin but also raises us to divine life. Through the Liturgy, we become godly instruments of praise: revealing, magnifying, and extending God's glory and the greatness of His love.

Therefore, the purpose of Mass is the praise of God and the sanctification of the human person. Again, God doesn't "need" our praise, but as Augustine teaches in the *Confessions*, He created us so that we would find our happiness in praising Him. This praise is an intimately *personal* work for each one of us, but, as we saw earlier, it is not *private*. A crucial difference exists here. "Personal" and "private" do not mean the same thing. Catholics are not rugged individualists when it comes to faith. We worship together, in relationship to others, through the Church. This means we're called to participate in the Liturgy *together*, genuinely united in our hearts and minds.

Similarly, our sanctification is not a "private" thing. God sanctifies us together, in the Church, so that all our relationships become holy. What's the nature of this holiness? For Christians, holiness consists of charity—the friendship and love of God. That same love which is exchanged among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is given to us, to make us holy. The more God sanctifies us, the more we feel the simultaneous need to be in union with Him, and in right relationship with all those He has created along with us. To participate fully in the Mass means to submit our whole human experience to God, worshipping together with

the people of God, in a way that takes up our full intelligence, our full freedom, and our whole heart.

The entire assembly is called to take part in the Eucharist. To ensure this participation, the Holy Spirit created different ministries in the Church. These ministries all serve the royal priesthood which all of us—lay, religious, and ordained—share. Each of us receives the royal priesthood at Baptism, and we each have it strengthened at Confirmation. Through this royal priesthood, the baptized are joined to the prayers of Jesus in the heavenly Liturgy, so that their prayers are united to His before the Father. Through the prayer and adoration offered by the royal priesthood, the Church cooperates in Christ’s work of redemption and brings it to bear on the real-life situations of God’s people today. Accordingly, in 1 Peter we read that “you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (2:9).

The royal priesthood is served in a uniquely important way by the *ministerial* priesthood, the priesthood bestowed on those who receive the Sacrament of Orders as priests and bishops. The roles of the royal priesthood and the ministerial priesthood are fully equal in dignity, but *complementary in nature*—in other words, they’re distinct by God’s design, and never purely functional or interchangeable. The better we understand this truth, the better it will help us to participate in the Liturgy.

The ordained priest, through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, is configured permanently to Christ. This empowers him to act in the person of “Christ the head,” and this further enables him to lead the assembly, the body of Christ, into a sacred banquet,

a feast of sacrificial love. He does this not by an arbitrary imposition of his own will but by following a plan revealed by the Holy Spirit to the Church. This plan is called a ritual, and the celebrant knows how to follow it, because of the norms and rubrics it contains. Local bishops can, of course, culturally adapt this plan, but they must also ensure that the plan's integrity is never compromised. The *purpose* of the ritual is to protect the unity of worship of the whole Church, through every culture, in every part of the world. Ritual leads the celebrant, other ministers, and the assembly to freely perform their complementary roles. As Catholics, we believe the rituals we celebrate in our liturgies are the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. This is why we have confidence when lifting up our hearts in the manner called for by the Church. Sacred ritual helps humanity grow accustomed to divine things—and it teaches each person how to join his or her heart and mind with those of others.

Of course, our worship of God requires much more than just following ritual. Full participation in the Liturgy means that the whole assembly needs to take the joys, sorrows, and anxieties of daily life and join them to the prayer of Jesus Christ before the Father. Plenty of things get in the way. More often than not, the obstacles to worship lie deep in our own hearts. Anything that weighs down our hearts can prevent us from raising them up. Only repentance, ongoing conversion, prayer, fellowship, and catechesis can overcome the barriers to our participation in the Liturgy. The secret to participating fruitfully in our worship has less to do with external changes than it does with interior transformation. Again, a personal return to penance and reconciliation is the vital first step to recovering the riches offered to us in

the Eucharist. Ritual, rubrics, and pious practices take their proper place only when lived by a contrite people. People who have forgiving and forgiven hearts know that the struggle to lay down their lives for one another lies at the core of the Christian life—and they find in their rituals the freedom to worship in love.

Worshiping in love requires that we contemplate Jesus' presence when we celebrate the Eucharist. To contemplate Christ means to behold Him with the eyes of faith. This is especially important today, because so many of those who leave the Church do so because they've been discouraged and do not see Jesus Christ. The disciples on the road to Emmaus knew the same discouragement. When Jesus came to them, they didn't recognize Him. He questioned them about their discouragement, and instead of recognizing Him, they spoke of defeat and death. So, very gently, He admonished them, explaining to them the Scriptures. Still, they didn't recognize Him—but they did invite Him to share a meal. With that invitation, He transformed their table into a Eucharist, and they recognized Him in the breaking of the bread. From this recognition—this contemplation of Christ and intimately personal experience of His love—they immediately went forth to proclaim the Good News. In like manner, Catholics can be delivered from the discouragement that prevents us from proclaiming the Good News only if we can really see Jesus Christ in the Liturgy.

The reason for this is simple. Beholding Christ leads us to take part in His great mystery of sacrificial love. In the Mass, Jesus is present as our head in the person of the priest, gathering us together and uniting our hearts and our gifts with His.

Christ's body is present in the entire assembly gathered in prayer, revealing the unity of love Christ has with the Father through the assembly's unity in words and actions. Jesus the eternal Word is present when the Scriptures are proclaimed and the demands of the covenant are preached. Yet, in a real, special, and very powerful manner, He is also present in the Eucharist as the perfect sacrifice, the medicine of immortality, and the antidote for death.

After the priest says the words of institution, our gifts of bread and wine truly become Jesus' Body and Blood, soul and divinity. In the Eucharistic Prayer, Jesus Christ present on the altar offers Himself to our Father in heaven, so that the work of redemption accomplished at Calvary will bear fruit in our lives today. Through the sacrifice of Jesus, our prayers and the prayers of the entire assembly are made fruitful, so that they have a real effect in the world we inhabit. At the same time, the Father truly delights in our praise. So, at Mass, heaven and earth literally touch. Our praise, because it's been purified and united to Christ, is pleasing to God, and it anticipates the praise and glory of heaven.

In the Eucharist, this gift of Christ's presence is given to us not only so we can offer Jesus to the Father. It's also provided to us as real food—spiritual nourishment that sustains us on our earthly pilgrimage. The Communion rite is an especially beautiful moment in the Eucharistic liturgy. The sacred character of this moment is revealed best by the prayer we offer together just before approaching the altar: *“Lord, I am not worthy to receive you, but only say the word, and I shall be healed.”* This phrase echoes the words of the centurion who petitioned Christ for the healing of his servant. Jesus *marveled*

at this extraordinary expression of faith, which allowed Him to reveal “*the immeasurable riches of His grace.*”

The Church asks us to have exactly the same reverent faith whenever we receive our Lord’s Body and Blood. Today the faithful come to Communion far more frequently than in the past, which is a very good thing. Yet I often wonder if we really understand the reverence and interior preparation for which receiving the Eucharist calls. Again, this is why a regular, personal devotion to the Sacrament of Penance always leads to a deeper experience of the Eucharist.

John Paul II has said that “In the Sacrament of the Eucharist the Savior, who took flesh in Mary’s womb twenty centuries ago, continues to offer Himself to humanity as the source of divine life.” Our mission today is the same as it has always been: to bring Jesus Christ to those who need Him most. This mission includes building a whole civilization of love—which has, at its center, a culture of life and a respect for human dignity and rights. Part of that task is to engage our secular contemporaries in a morally compelling way. In the United States, the rugged individualism embedded in our pioneer spirit needs to be reexamined. We should also recognize that many people in our society are already secretly weary of consumerism. They know that they won’t—and can’t—find the meaning of life in acquiring more things. It’s useful here to remember the timeless words of Augustine, speaking about fifth-century Rome.

The only joy which they attained had the fragile brilliance of crystal, a joy far outweighed by the fear that it would be shattered in an instant.

Fear and isolation threaten the modern heart because, deep down, people are hungry for a more authentic experience of life. We yearn for the truth about our purpose in the world. We long for the deeper life that Jesus in the Eucharist makes possible. Yet, at the same time, the most serious challenge to our faith is subtler than anything in our culture. Rather, it's *our own* lack of zeal, *our own* discouragement and doubt. Why aren't we more vigorous in preaching and teaching the faith? It's because the task of taking up the cross of Christ can be arduous and embarrassing. We can evade the mission God gives us, and we often do. We can distract ourselves with toys, career, travel, and entertainment. In the process, though, we become spectators. We learn to watch life rather than live it.

Spectators don't contribute. They merely consume. Too often, in recent decades, we've carried this consumer attitude into the Liturgy. Instead of losing ourselves in worship of the Trinity and love for one another, we're preoccupied by what we *are* or *aren't* "getting out" of the Mass. We expect—and even train—musicians and other ministers to entertain us, rather than lead us in prayer. In the process, we've too often lost our sense of awe, our reverence for Jesus in the Eucharist, and our Christ-centered service to one another. In our spiritual sleep, vital moments of grace pass us by, while the young, lonely, and poor of our world suffer a new crucifixion, alone and without our support. The words of the great Eastern Father, John Chrysostom, speak to us very powerfully today, just as they did fifteen hundred years ago:

You have tasted the Blood of the Lord, yet you do not recognize your brother.... You dishonor this table when you do not judge worthy of sharing your food, someone judged worthy to take part in this meal.... God freed you from all your sins and invited you here, but you have not become merciful.

The Eucharist is infinitely more than just a symbol, or memory, or pious ritual. Christ in this sacrament is real and present. The *living, tangible, flesh-and-blood presence* of Jesus in the Eucharist commits us to the poor and wounded of our world. Their hunger and thirst must become our hunger and thirst. Only a whole civilization of love can provide for these kinds of needs. The engine by which such a civilization can be built is the Liturgy, which is the source and summit of God's love for us. Only the love that comes from God and goes to God is powerful enough to heal the wounds of our brothers and sisters, in this and every age. If we truly believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, *and we act on it*, then others will clearly see and want the joy that is ours. If we enter more deeply into the solidarity of love that the Holy Spirit offers us in the Liturgy, then God will use us to sanctify the world.

As believers, our task in the Liturgy involves working to recover *the right focus and the proper reverence* in our worship. The Mass is not a show, or a performance, or a kind of entertainment. The Eucharist is about God. It should focus our worship and our hearts where they belong—on Him, not on us. We're important, because Jesus died for us, but we're secondary in the act of

worship. Thus, our musicians, liturgists, acolytes, lectors, and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion—all the wonderful people who serve in these roles—need to become transparent, humble, and deeply faithful to the Liturgy that the Church defines, so that nothing distracts us from our encounter with God.

An English Russian Orthodox bishop, Anthony Bloom, once used an image that we should take to heart. He said that the best surgeon's gloves are those that are so transparent and flexible that they're neither seen nor felt. If so, then the surgeon can work marvelous things through them. If the gloves are opaque, soiled, or rigid, they get in the way. They hinder the surgeon rather than help him. So, too, with our worship, our pastoral service, and our daily lives. The more unselfish we are, the greater the work Jesus will accomplish through us. In the Liturgy and in our lives of service, we need to become *less* so that Jesus will become *more*. We need to become invisible, so that God will become ever more visible.