

## Healing in the Eucharistic Assembly

Jesus Christ, who died, who was raised from the dead, who is seated at the right hand of God, and who intercedes for us, is present in many ways in his Church. Indeed, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1373) summarizes the ways in which Jesus is present in his Church.

Jesus is present in his Word; it is he himself who speaks to us whenever we read the sacred Scriptures or hear them proclaimed. In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus tells us he is also present in the poor, the sick, and the imprisoned whom he has entrusted to our care. Jesus gave us the seven sacraments, in each of which he is present in a special way conferring his grace upon us. Jesus also told us he is present whenever we gather with others to praise and worship him: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20, NAB).

Of those occasions when we gather with others to praise and worship God, the sacrifice of the Mass surpasses them all. When Christians come together to celebrate the Mass, Christ himself is at its head, presiding over every celebration, with the bishop or priest representing him. And as we have already seen, Christ

is present to each and every one of us individually in receiving the eucharistic species. But he is also present in the prayerful assembled community. The earthly liturgy we celebrate at Mass is but a foretaste of the heavenly liturgy that awaits us.

For this reason, it is important to examine the Mass more closely. Since our eucharistic encounter with Christ generally occurs within the context of the liturgical celebration with other believers, the Eucharist is not only a one-to-one encounter but a societal encounter, where God's transforming power is available to us both individually and corporately.

The *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery* (3a), which was a fruit of the Second Vatican Council, reminds us that the Mass, even in its communitarian aspect, has four dimensions:

*The Mass is a sacrifice.* It is the sacrifice of Calvary reenacted, but *not repeated*, because Hebrews 9:27 tells us Christ died once and he can die no more. It is a symbolic reenactment of the death of Christ, but not a real death. There is a real Person present after the consecration, but not a real death. It is a sacrifice because of the words of consecration that Jesus used: "This is my body, which will be *given* for you...; this is my blood which will be *shed* for you." It is a sacrifice because Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:26 (NAB), "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you *proclaim the death of the Lord* until he comes" (emphasis added). This is why we refer to the Mass as the Holy *Sacrifice* of the Mass. Many people do not like to refer to the Mass in this way because they would prefer to downplay the sacrificial element. But Scripture tells us otherwise in at least

three places, and it is reaffirmed by Vatican II (*The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 47).

It is interesting to note that the word “host,” which is often used to refer to the Blessed Sacrament, comes from our belief that the Mass is a true and unbloody renewal of Calvary on our altars. It is derived from the Latin word *hostia*, meaning victim. The victim, of course, is Jesus Christ. He was offered on the altar of the cross for our salvation; today the consecrated bread is changed into Christ’s real presence, the sacramental presence of the Victim slain for our sins. It was during the Middle Ages that the word “host” was used to refer to the consecrated altar breads used in Communion and exposed for the adoration of the faithful.

*The Mass is a meal.* Every time we go to Mass, we are attending a communal meal, and we often refer to this meal as the Lord’s Supper. The first Mass was also a meal, the Passover meal; we commonly refer to it as the Last Supper. The words that were spoken then and now are “Take and eat...; take and drink...” This leaves no doubt that the Mass is a meal in which we consume food and beverage and derive sustenance from them. However, this is a meal like no other meal, because it is a foretaste of the eternal banquet that heaven offers.

*The Mass is a memorial.* Jesus instructed us, “Do this in memory of me” (Lk 22:19). We no longer celebrate this meal as the Passover meal in memory of Moses, the great rescuer of the Israelites. At the Last Supper Passover meal, Jesus proclaimed that henceforth it was to be celebrated in memory

of himself, the new Rescuer, the new Redeemer, who was to perform the redeeming act a few hours later on Good Friday. A short prayer that immediately follows the consecration, called the Anamnesis (“Remembrance”) Prayer, refers to this memorial dimension.

*The Mass is an act of thanksgiving.* In early Greek, the word *eucharistia*, from which we get the word Eucharist, means *good gift*. In later Greek it meant, by connotation, *thanksgiving for a good gift*. Jesus took the bread, broke it, and *gave thanks* (Lk 22:19). That is, he said grace. In the Mass, we give thanks to God for his many favors in the prophetic spirit of the psalmist: “I will lift up the cup of salvation ... I will sacrifice a thank offering in the presence of all his people” (see Ps 116:13-18).

Thus we have the four elements that characterize the Mass: a sacrifice, a meal, a memorial, and a thanksgiving. Using these four elements, we can construct a definition: “The Mass is a sacrificial, memorial meal of thanksgiving.” If we omit any one of these four elements, a dimension of eucharistic spirituality is missing. Such an omission would also violate the theology of the Eucharist as described by the Council of Trent and the Second Vatican Council. By recognizing all four elements and capitalizing upon them in our own spiritual life, we are maximizing the effects of the Eucharist, both in terms of personal sanctification and in terms of physical and emotional healing. With this very minimal amount of catechetical knowledge, and with enough good will to bring about devotion or fervor (which is responding to grace), we have all we need to enhance

our physical, emotional, and spiritual lives in the fullest way possible. For this reason, the Eucharist is the most effective means of healing known to mankind.

## **Touching the Healer in the Eucharist**

We all know there are many ways in which healing can occur. For example, many people are healed when they are anointed with holy oil, particularly in the sacrament of the anointing of the sick. “Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint [him] with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven” (Jas 5:14-15, NAB). We also know that many people are healed through the laying on of hands. Jesus said, “These signs will accompany those who believe...; they will lay hands on the sick, and they will recover” (Mk 16:17-18).

In Matthew 8:5-13 and in Luke 7:1-10, we see how Jesus healed the centurion’s servant without being physically present with the boy, and he exorcised the daughter of the Canaanite woman from a distance (see Matthew 15:22-28 and Mark 7:25-30). Remarkably, if we have deep faith in Jesus, we are empowered to heal just as he did (see John 14:12).

Nonetheless, in spite of the avenues of healing by anointing, laying on of hands, prayers of petition, and intercession, healing through the Eucharist is by far the greatest way healing can occur. The Eucharist is a healing sacrament because, in receiv-

ing this sacrament, we are touching Jesus, the Healer himself, and he is touching us. If we fail to focus on Christ, and if this focus is not a primary dynamic in our spiritual life, our prayer will be flaccid and inefficacious. To understand this spiritual principle, we need only to recall the episode in Matthew 14:22-26 and Mark 6:45-56, when the disciples left Jesus on the shore to pray one evening, while they went on ahead of him to Bethsaida in their boat. In the middle of the night, they saw Jesus walking toward them on the sea and were terrified. "It is a ghost," they cried out in fear. But Jesus reassured them: "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

The passage in Matthew recounts how Peter then said, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." So Jesus commanded him to come. Peter stepped out of the boat and walked on the water, just as he saw Jesus do. He was fine until a squall suddenly set the water into a turbulence. Realizing how strong the wind was, he became frightened and began to sink. He took his eyes off Jesus; he was no longer focused on Christ. He focused on the problem rather than on the problem-solver. As a result, he began to sink. Jesus reached down and pulled him back to the surface of the water with a handclasp. "O you of little faith! Why did you doubt?" he asked.

When we take our eyes off Jesus, and when we stop having that Christ-centered focus in our spirituality—especially in our eucharistic spirituality—we will find ourselves swamped with the churning waters of our problems. Consequently, we become far more concerned with our problems than with encountering the One who can solve them. It is so difficult to "seek first the kingdom of God" and to focus on the Lord when we are preoccu-

pieced with our petty little problems. We learn from this passage in Matthew that we must make it our priority to focus on Christ rather than looking at the waves, the turbulence, and the issues of life around us. The easiest way to focus on and encounter him is by a personal devotion to him in the Eucharist.

Jesus says, “Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest” (Mt 11:28, NAB). Do we accept this invitation? Do we really come to him? There are many ways we can come to Jesus, such as through prayer. But to come to him in a personal, physical, and sacramental way, and at the same time to encounter him in his corporate presence in the liturgical assembly, is something totally different. Every time we celebrate Mass together and receive Holy Communion, we are coming to Jesus in these very special ways. This is the premiere form of encountering Christ, the form with remarkable effects. We should cultivate these forms of union with him in a devout way, lest the Mass become ritualistic, routine, or mechanical. We have to be on guard that our eucharistic devotion does not deteriorate. Indeed, we must make every effort to preserve a union with the Healer in which healing can take place in the ambience of his love, *within* us and *among* us.

This means learning how to relax in God’s arms, or in the words of Jesus, “to abide” in him. He abides in us when he comes into our hearts at Communion. But do we abide in him? Do we relax in his arms? Do we let ourselves be hugged into holiness and wholeness? All we have to do is surrender in *love*.

It can be said that, in some way, this Eucharistic liturgy is the answer to all of life’s problems. We can encounter love in its most pristine form in Jesus—love personified in the assembly

spiritually, and in Communion physically, the one who loves the Father and who is beloved by the Father. Let us remember Jesus' promise to us: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; *abide in my love*" (Jn 15:9, RSV, emphasis added). Jesus communicates God's love to us through his humanity as well as his divinity. When we encounter him, we also encounter the Father (see John 14:7-10) and the Holy Spirit (see John 14:16-17). We are immersed in the very heart of the Trinity, in the very heart of God. "God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him" (1 Jn 4:16, RSV).