

The Eucharist and teaching ministry

presentation for faith formation evening
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Outline:

- Introduction: preliminary considerations on the Eucharist
 - Christ and the human mind
 - Being the light of the world
 - Conclusion: the mountain to which we return
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“The Eucharist is the gift that Jesus Christ makes of himself.” (the opening words to the introduction to *Sacramentum Caritatis* – SC, the Apostolic Exhortation released by Pope Benedict in February of this year, 2007). Indeed, Benedict is simply reiterating what the Christian community very quickly came to understand, and has continued to believe over the centuries. His statement is an example of Living Tradition, that is, of revelation received and lovingly “processed” by human hearts illumined by faith. Saint Ignatius of Antioch, whose heart received and lovingly processed this revelation, proclaimed in the year 107 – well before the Christian community had the Scriptures as we know and have them: “I hunger for the bread of God, the flesh of Jesus Christ. I long to drink of his blood, the gift of unending love.”

The Eucharist gives us *Jesus*, body, blood, soul & divinity, that is, the whole person of Jesus, the God-man, the Word made Flesh who, because of His “enfleshment” (a word I took liberties to invent!), can give Himself in this more tangible and more intimate way. In the old covenant, God did not give Himself in this way. There were wonders that were amazing signs: the burning bush, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna in the desert. And there was real intimacy (read Hosea and the Song of Songs). But God did not *bind* Himself to *matter* in this way, in such a way as to bring about a new presence. The Eucharist is more than a sign. It is a sign which *is* also that which it signifies.

The Eucharist is thus a presence, a very particular presence, a sacramental presence, a presence suggested and veiled by the tangible signs, but a presence nonetheless. It is a presence so real that it led Saint

Teresa of Avila (1582) to proclaim, “In the presence of Jesus Christ in the Holy Sacrament, we ought to be like the Blessed in Heaven before the Divine Essence.” Can you say, *intense*?

Christ and the human mind

If the Eucharist is Christ giving his entire self, then it is the gift of Christ in all that He is, in the various aspects of his person, and thus Christ as Light of the world, Christ as Truth. If the Eucharist gives us Christ in all that He is, then in the Eucharist we encounter Christ as He comes to meet us in our minds. “In this Sacrament, the Lord truly becomes food for us, to satisfy our hunger for truth.” (SC, p.1)

Why is this important to highlight and to state?

1. This is important for us to realize because we more spontaneously think of our encounter with Christ as more *loving* than *luminous*. We think of Christ as coming to fill our hearts and often ignore what Christ comes to do in our minds. Christ, however, comes to meet us in our minds. Hence the great commandment which Jesus reiterates to the scribe who interrogates him (Matthew 22:36): “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your *mind*.”
2. This is important for us to realize because each of us here, in one way or another, is called to encourage his or her brothers and sisters to seek the truth that is Christ,

by virtue of simply being a Christian *and/or*

by virtue of the more specific teaching ministry or the faith ministry that has been entrusted to us.

All of us, in one way or another, exercises the spiritual work of mercy that is “instruction”. Sounds old-fashioned and borderline condescending, huh? To exercise the spiritual work of mercy that is instruction is not to pity those whom we esteem “dumb”, to tolerate those who don’t *get* religion. To exercise a work of mercy – be it corporal or spiritual¹ – is to seek to be an instrument of Christ’s love, to seek to be an instrument of Christ

¹ *The corporal works of mercy* :

- To clothe the naked
- To harbour the harbourless
- To visit the sick
- To ransom the captive
- To bury the dead
- To feed the hungry

as He seeks to meet those whom we serve there where they are lacking. Such is mercy: love visiting deficiency, loving someone where they are missing something (health, freedom, peace, goodness). Mercy is thus, in a sense, an “excessive” love. Why? Because we are not normally drawn to deficiency. We are normally drawn to that which is healthy and full and blossomed and good. In our ministerial case, the lack is in the minds of those whom we serve. By the way, we are all in that boat! Until the Beatific Vision (when we will be able really to say with the psalmist – psalm 36, “In your light we see light”), we all lack in our minds. For each of us, there is so much more light to be received. In the Beatific Vision, the vision of God which beatifies, which fulfills with divine happiness, the human intellect is perfectly seized by the light of God, by the light that is God. Guess what: we’re not there yet! This does not mean, however, that the encounter between divine light and our minds is simply an affair for the after-life – as though, in the meantime, we just hobble along in our minds and learn how to make spaghetti and repair toasters and gargle with a few doctrinal points about God. Religious education, theology, faith formation, is not just filler while we await the Beatific Vision: “Well, we have to do something with our time here in church – might as well have a few classes”. Everything we do in terms of faith formation is really to open ourselves, our minds to whatever taste of God, who is light, that the Holy Spirit wishes to give to us. We will see how this is the case.

Being the light of the world

In the Eucharist, therefore, we encounter Christ who is truth, who is light, and we encounter Him *in faith*. And, as instructors, we hope to communicate Him – which is important to understand. Most properly and most deeply we are to be instruments of Christ. Education in the faith is not like education in math or in history

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- To give drink to the thirsty

The spiritual works of mercy :

- To instruct the ignorant
- To counsel the doubtful
- To admonish sinners
- To bear wrongs patiently
- To forgive offences willingly
- To comfort the afflicted
- To pray for the living and the dead

or in English. The content of what we teach is not simply the fruit of human inquiry. The content of what we teach is not simply the fruit of human understanding. Again, ultimately, we are seeking to lead minds to “the true light which enlightens everyone” (John 1:9).

There is, of course, doctrine which we navigate the best we can. Doctrine is the Church articulating, after prayer and reflection, what she has come to grasp of what she believes to be revelation about God and the world in relation to God. But the focus is always Christ. Indeed, the Roman Catechism (Council of Trent, 1545-1563) and quoting it, the Universal Catechism (1994), states:

“The whole concern of doctrine and its teaching must be directed to the love that never ends. Whether something is proposed for belief, for hope, or for action, the love of our Lord must be made accessible, so that anyone can see that all the works of Christian perfection spring from love and have no other objective than to arrive at love.”

Ours is an amazing yet daunting task, is it not? It is daunting, but we should be entirely at peace about it. Or perhaps we can say that any trembling can and should be accompanied by inner peace. Why peace? Because, ultimately it is about Christ and, in the end, it is *Christ* who draws into His light. It is not us by our pro-active, pronounced programs, our powerful power-point presentations, or our clever classes. What a relief! That is how *I* make it through the day (!): knowing that it is His deal; and knowing that He can even make use of my stuttering and my hesitations and my mistakes. If I receive a letter criticizing a sermon that I spent hours preparing, what do I do? Crawl into a hole? If I am seized with fear at the magnitude of a ministerial task, what do I do? Crawl into a hole? NO! I can say in all simplicity, “Here, Lord, it is yours.”

This does not relieve us of our responsibility to fine-tune the instruments, that is, to fine-tune our minds and our hearts. We must prayerfully probe doctrine. We must prepare well. We must learn from one another. We must research programs. We must learn how to be better public speakers. But it is still *His* deal. And if you believe, He can and will make use of you.

In the Eucharist, we encounter Christ who gives Himself to us, who enlightens and loves us, and who then sends us forth. “In the Eucharist, God’s own love comes to us bodily, *in order to continue His work in us and through us*” (Benedict XI, *Deus Caritatis Est* 2006). We are a Eucharistic people, that is, when we receive

Christ sacramentally, we become His body, the Mystical Body (SC page 13, #29), and thus, *de facto*, become instruments of light, instruments of mercy for the minds of one another. We are sent forth. We are sent forth from the celebration of the Eucharist, knowing that the Eucharist is the “culmination of God’s action sanctifying the world” (Catechism 1325). Hence the importance of staying until the end of Mass! The dismissal is not closure, but, rather, new opening. If we “eat and run”, we ignore the purpose of the Eucharist, and we do not allow Christ fully to make us Church. Mass is not a pit stop. Mass is not simply about getting strength for the journey. In other words, The Eucharist is not first about me and my needs – as spiritual as they may be. The Eucharist is about *Christ*, and the ambitions of His love. Christ wants to make us one body, His body. “May they be one”, he repeatedly beseeches the Father (John 17). The Eucharist makes us Church, i.e. binds us to one another and *sends us* to one another, and sends us together into the whole world. “We cannot approach the Eucharistic table without being drawn into the mission which, beginning in the very heart of God, is meant to reach all people” (SC, p.71).

- Hence the frequently used name for this sacrament:

Mass, from the Latin, *Missa*, from *missio*, meaning “sending forth”.

- Hence the Latin phrase at the “end” of the Mass is “Ita Missa est.”: “The Mass is”.

This is amazing but hard to understand. So hard that somebody decided to translate it, for our linear minds, i.e. for minds that think in terms of succession of events, “The Mass is ended”. Otherwise put, “Aw, what the heck, they won’t get it, just say it’s over”. It is as though to say, “The Mass is ended...Just breathe a sigh of relief and go home.” *Au contraire!* In a sense, in terms of its purpose, the Mass *begins*.

And so we are sent forth. Those of us entrusted with a particular teaching ministry are sent forth, amongst other things, as instruments of light for those whom we seek to serve. We are sent forth as the light of the world. Talk about *instrumentality!* We become the light of the world. If we really instruct someone in the way just described, we become the light of their world.

Now let me further play the Devil’s advocate. If, in the end, our instrumental purpose is to introduce others to Christ, the Light, then why the religion classes, the courses in catechism, the Bible studies, etc? Dogma (not the movie) is a little dry, and sometimes seemingly extrinsic, is it not? Why not just distribute

Bibles, and say, “Here, read this, accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, and all will be fine, because you will be saved”? Why is this not enough? Because revelation, i.e. God sharing Himself with our minds, is not clear. It is *sure*, but not *clear*. Faith does not entail God infusing clear, new concepts into our minds. Faith entails God raising our minds so that our minds touch Him – without seeing Him, and without “getting” Him. Intrinsic to this raising is an invitation to probe, ever so humbly, what God uses (in Scripture and Tradition) to reveal something of His mystery. There is a real cooperation of the mind with what we touch and and in faith. Faith seeks understanding. Jesus takes our minds very seriously. He loves and respects our minds. We have a responsibility to be adult in our faith, i.e., to probe prayerfully, and to try to see that the central truths of faith

- are not outrageous
- do not imply intellectual suicide
- are in fact supra-intelligent

Such cooperation is our way of opening ourselves, our minds to the light of Christ.

Our instruction, therefore, is amongst other things, an invitation to others to cooperate with the light of Christ. We are not offering pre-digested answers. Doctrine is not answers. *Christ* is not an answer. Christ is a *person*, a mysterious person. In instruction we try to open little windows. And know that we do not have to understand everything. We must *believe*, and be willing to seek, knowing that (and communicating that) faith is not based on understanding. Faith seeks understanding and is strengthened as it seeks understanding.

Conclusion: the mountain to which we return

“All ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate are bound up with the Eucharist and are oriented towards it” (Catechism 1324). The Eucharist leads to teaching and teaching leads back to the Eucharist. The second movement mirrors the order that we experience at Mass: the table of the Word leads to the table of the Eucharist. Teaching – all the catechism classes and religious education and Bible studies and marriage preparation – in a sense, echoes the pulpit experience through which Christ likes to speak to His children/friends/disciples gathered in a special way. Indeed, all “teaching” roads lead to the Eucharist. Words lead to gestures. Light leads to love...