

THE HOLY MASS AND THE EUCHARIST

1. Words of eternal life

The desire to live forever is deeply inscribed in the human spirit. Although the tendency to cling to ephemeral pleasures can sometimes be very strong, the heart of man is made for immortal and everlasting life. This reality is echoed by a liturgical prayer of the Church that asks God Almighty “*te rectóre, te duce, sic bonis transeúntibus nunc utámur, ut iam possímus inhærére mansúris*. May we, supported and guided by you, use earthly goods in such a way that we may obtain the eternal ones.”¹

But, which are those eternal goods? Where can they be found? Is there anything permanent within our temporal condition? Universal history is made up of many great events that have marked its course in some way, and continue having some influence on the present. History is sometimes “objectivized” in celebrations held on the occasion of some anniversary, centenary or even a millennium. What is clear is that those events can be remembered but never repeated. The nostalgia provoked by their memory and commemoration have produced social trends or ways of thinking that tried to recover the canons of past times, considered as glorious or worth reliving. But even these attempts do not last.

Is there then no historical event that is permanent, even in an imperfect manner, which we can somehow get into with a real, not just a virtual, contact? Is there a historical character we can be contemporary with? Christian faith offers us an answer which is very clear: it is Peter’s confession to the question Jesus asks in the synagogue of Capernaum after his discourse on the bread of life that made many of those who were following him leave, after hearing the announcement on the Eucharist: “*will you also go away?*”² And Peter answered: “*Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*”³ And St John Paul II commented: “Only Jesus has words that stand the passage of time and remain for eternity. (...) It is important to realize that, among the questions we ask ourselves, the decisive ones do not refer to the “what”. The deepest question refers to “who”: “whom” to go to, “whom” to follow, “whom” to entrust our life to. (...) Only Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God and of Mary, the eternal Word of the Father, who was born two thousand years ago in Bethlehem of Judea, can satisfy the deepest aspirations of man’s heart. Peter’s question: to whom shall we go? already contains the answer about the path that should be taken. It is the path that takes us to Christ. And the divine Master is accessible personally; in fact, he is on the altar in the reality of his body and blood. In the Eucharistic sacrifice we can get in touch with his person, in a mysterious but real way, going to the inexhaustible source of his life as the Risen one.”⁴

¹ *Liturgy of the Hours*, 17th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Prayer.

² *Jn* 6:67.

³ *Jn* 6:68.

⁴ ST JOHN PAUL II, *Homily* in the Holy Mass closing ceremony of the XII World Youth Day, Rome, 20 August 2000.

2. *Contemporaneity with Christ: sacrament presence*

It is true then that there exists a Person with whom we can be truly contemporaries: Jesus Christ. There is a historical event that happened in the past but that will never cease to exist, and which is also present to us: the Paschal Mystery of the Son of God made Man, his redeeming sacrifice on the cross and his glorious resurrection and ascension to heaven, who in the institution of the Eucharist in the Cenacle “is as it were included, brought forward and concentrated forever. “In this gift, Jesus Christ gave his Church, the perennial actualization of the paschal mystery with which he instituted a mysterious contemporaneity between that *Triduum* and the passage of the centuries.”⁵

All Christians, and especially the priests, enter the Cenacle by their own right because the priesthood was born there, and the Church was manifested there. We can enter there with the trust of someone who knows he is at home.⁶ That is why it is impressive to read once again the words of Jesus in the gospel of St Luke: “*I ardently desired to eat this Passover with you, before I suffer.*”⁷

Jesus ardently desired to eat this Passover with His own, because in this Last Supper he is going to institute the Eucharist, a sacramental brought forward of his surrender on the Cross, which will mysteriously allow him to go to the Father and at the same time remain with us. In the Eucharist something impossible for us to understand is fulfilled. Jesus had to go so that the Holy Spirit could come, but at the same time he remains. He goes away and he remains. He does not leave us a photograph, as a remembrance, but he remains in person.⁸ He fulfills the promise he made before ascending into heaven. “*I am with you always, to the close of the age.*”⁹ Christ’s presence in the Eucharist, and therefore in the Church, makes this presence a permanent reality, a visible manifestation of Christ’s kingdom, that survives for centuries in the midst of the succession of civilizations and systems thanks to a power that can only come from God: “*Potestas eius potestas aeterna, quae non auferetur, et regnum eius, quod non corrumpetur.* His dominion is an everlasting dominion which shall not pass away and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.”¹⁰

3. *Sacrament, sacrifice and banquet*

The paschal event is made present again on our altars, for more than two millennia, every time we attend Holy Mass, where the unique sacrifice of Christ¹¹ is actualized in an unbloody manner, becoming food for us. That is why the Church teaches that the Mass is a sacrifice and a banquet at the same time.¹²

A sacrifice that, as the eucharistic liturgy says, is of praise, unblemished and universal: “*pópulum tibi congregáre non désinis, ut a solis ortu usque ad occásum oblátio munda offerátur nómini tuo.* You never cease to gather a people to yourself so that from the rising of the sun to its setting a pure sacrifice may be offered to your name.”¹³ The words of the consecration are not only a remembrance or a memorial, but above all a making-present, an actualization: the bread and the wine are transformed, are “transubstantiated” into the Body and Blood of Christ: a body given up and blood poured out for us, for the remission on sins, in the

⁵ ST JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 5.

⁶ ST JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to priests* on the occasion of Holy Thursday, Jerusalem, 23 March 2000, 3.

⁷ *Lk* 22:15.

⁸ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 83.

⁹ *Mt* 28:20.

¹⁰ *Dan* 7:14.

¹¹ “*Hoc enim fecit semel semetipsum offerendo*” [He did this once and for always, offering himself] (*Hb* 7:27; cf. *Hb* 9:28).

¹² Cf.. CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1356 y ss; 1382 y ss.

¹³ *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer III.

sacrifice of the Cross, where they acquired full meaning and fulfilled those words of Jesus: *unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.*¹⁴

The gospels recount on two occasions the marvel of the multiplication of the loaves.¹⁵ Besides the immediate meaning, this amazing gesture of Christ is a pre-figuring of the Eucharist, where that spreading is prolonged. “In the Holy Eucharist we receive the fruit of the dead grain of wheat, the multiplication of the loaves that continues until the end of the world and for all time.”¹⁶ Here one can appreciate how the Mass, besides being a sacrifice, is also a banquet, spiritual food. Jesus said that whoever does not eat his body and drinks his blood has no life in him, eternal life.¹⁷ As St Augustine explains, in communion the bread is not transformed into us, but we are the ones who are transformed into Christ.¹⁸ St Paul’s words are then verified in a very special way: *It is no longer I who lives but Christ who lives in me [...] who loved me and gave himself for me.*¹⁹

4. Transformative effectiveness

The Eucharist has, therefore, a transformative effectiveness. In Cana Jesus changed water into wine. In the Last Supper, he transforms bread and wine into his Body and Blood. And in this way he shows us that if we let him act, he can also transform our life and make something divine out of it. “Bread and wine are changed into his Body and Blood. When this point is reached, the transformation cannot stop; rather it is here that it should fully start. The Body and Blood of Christ are given to us so that we are also transformed. We should become Body of Christ, with his same blood, consanguineous. Adoration, as we have already said, becomes, in this way, union. God is not only before us as the totally Other. He is within us and we are in Him.”²⁰

This transformation changes our way of looking at reality, so that it is now supernatural. Perhaps sometimes a too human vision of things does not allow us to see the hand of God in certain situations; or, better still, it seems impossible for us to see him present in those circumstances. The reception and contemplation of the Eucharistic mystery, that is, where it seems impossible to find God (in a piece of bread), and yet he is actually there, will provoke in us an interior transformation that will lead us to learn to recognize the divine presence behind the circumstances we come across in our lives.

In that way, we will realize that Jesus remains so that we can go to him: “*Lord, whom shall we go to, You have words of eternal life?*”²¹ St Peter said. St Josemaría used to say that here we have our reason for living, that in the presence of God reasons are not needed: *the sacrifice that summarises all that Christ asks of us.*²² When we are close to the Eucharist all our existence acquires its true value and an unsuspected supernatural effectiveness. That is why he advised: *You have to make your life essentially, totally eucharistic!*²³

¹⁴ *Jn* 12:24.

¹⁵ Cf. *Jn* 6:1-15; *Mt* 15:29-39.

¹⁶ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily* on Palm Sunday, Rome 5 April 2009.

¹⁷ Cf. *Jn* 6:53-54.

¹⁸ “As if I heard a voice from above telling me: *I am food for adults: grow, and you will be able to eat me. And you will not transform me into your substance, as it happens with material food, but you will be transformed into me.* (ST AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, VII, 10, 16).

¹⁹ *Gal* 2:20.

²⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily* in the Marienfeld esplanade, Cologne, 21 August 2005.

²¹ *Jn* 6:68.

²² ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 88.

²³ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 826.

5. *Fount and Apex, centre and root*

The Church teaches that the Eucharist is “the fount and apex of the whole Christian life.”²⁴ The Second Vatican Council, addressing priests, used a couple of terms which are very meaningful: the Eucharistic sacrifice is manifested as “the root and centre of the whole life of a priest.”²⁵

St Josemaría applied the same expression to all Christians, specifying some points: “*Keep struggling, so that the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar really becomes the centre and the root of your interior life, and so your whole day will turn into an act of worship – an extension of the Mass you have attended and a preparation for the next. Your whole day will then be an act of worship that overflows in aspirations, visits to the Blessed Sacrament and the offering up of your professional work and your family life...*”²⁶

The centre is always an important point, as everything turns around it. For some people, the centre of their lives is perhaps a noble ambition (work, family) or less noble (money, desires for power and pleasure). It is good that during the day the Christian is aware of the centrality of the Mass and makes as much effort to concentrate as possible, even when he attends it very early in the day, when he may be tired, or distracted: as a matter of fact, the Mass is the key moment of the day where we enter into an intimate relationship with Jesus Christ who makes himself present on the altar. St Josemaría said once that he ended the celebration of the Mass exhausted, because for him the Mass was “*operatio Dei*”, a divine work.²⁷ It would be very good if we asked ourselves each day: is it noticeable that I have gone to Mass and received communion?

The Holy Mass should also be root, through which, as in a tree, food for the living being is produced, so that fruits appear later on. Everything we do can acquire value if we put it on the paten that the priest offers; in the same way as the drops of water that are added to the wine will be converted into the redeeming blood of Christ. In this way we can be sending to the Mass during the day the Norms of Christian piety, our work, family life, the contradictions and joys of the day, as their authentic root. We will not only *live* the Mass but we will *live from* the Mass. There will then become a reality the petition of the Eucharistic hymn: *praesta de te semper vivere, et te illi semper dulce sapere*; grant my soul to live on you and always to savour your sweetness.²⁸

6. *In union with the whole Church*

In the Holy Mass we have a treasure that we must not get used to: it is Heaven that opens up towards the earth for some minutes²⁹ (“St Josemaría longed that “all watches should stop at that time”³⁰) We should learn how to make good use of it, getting the most out of the texts, from the common prayers of the Mass which gather and compose many passages of the Scriptures literally, as well as the Bible readings which are proclaimed every day. In this respect, it may be of great help, as the fruit of experience, to use a Missal to follow the celebration, and for other moments of personal prayer.

²⁴ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Dog. Const. *Lumen gentium*, 11; CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1324-1327; BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, 3, 17, etc.

²⁵ SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 14.

²⁶ ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 69; cf. *Christ is passing by*, 87; 102.

²⁷ *After so many years, that priest made a marvelous discovery: he came to understand that the Holy Mass is real work: operatio Dei, God's work. That day when he celebrated Mass, he experienced pain, joy and tiredness. He felt in his flesh the exhaustion of a divine task* (ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Way of the Cross*, 11th station, 4).

²⁸ ST THOMAS AQUINAS, Hymn *Adoro te devote*, 5th stanza.

²⁹ “In the eucharistic celebration we are already united to the heavenly liturgy when God will be all in all” (cf. 1 Cor 15:28), CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1326; cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 89.

³⁰ Cf. ST JOSEMARÍA, *The Forge*, 436

The Holy Mass is a key moment to show and live our union with the head of the universal and the particular Church. That is why there is an explicit mention of the Roman Pontiff and the diocesan Bishop, or his equivalent, in the Eucharistic prayer. John Paul II taught in his last Encyclical that the Church lives from the Eucharist, meaning that the Church is built each day in and from the Eucharist.³¹ That is why the Mass that the Bishop celebrates, as head of the *portio populi Dei* (a part of the people of God) entrusted to him and to which the faithful are invited to live in communion and spiritual union, is of fundamental importance.³²

7. Adoration and conversion

Since the Eucharist is the greatest manifestation we know of God's omnipotence, we should be convinced that we can obtain anything with it. And as a consequence, without it we can do nothing. The martyrs of Abitina were convinced of it, as Benedict XVI recalled in one of his first homilies: *sine dominico non possumus!*,³³ we cannot live without the Sunday, that is, without the Eucharist. Any struggle, any problem or situation we may encounter should be sent to the Eucharist, uniting it to the Sacrifice of Jesus for us. This will give us a great security and make us feel the responsibility of being *teóforos* – as St Ignatius of Antioch defined at the end of his life – that is, carriers of God for all souls.³⁴

It also helps to practice the Christian custom of the Visit to the Blessed Sacrament, which can be done during the day, as a way of returning the visit to the One who came to meet us in Communion. That is why in churches and oratories where the Blessed Sacrament is kept there is always a burning light next to the tabernacle. As Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said, “a church without the eucharistic presence is somehow dead, although it may invite to pray. On the other hand, a church where a light next to the tabernacle is always burning is always something more than a simple stone building: Our Lord is always there waiting for me, calling me, wanting to make my own person “Eucharistic.”³⁵ St Josemaría saw the tabernacles as a re-editing of the house of Martha, Mary and Lazarus in Bethany,³⁶ a place where Our Lord may find friendly conversation and loving attention, where, in short, he could have a good time, be at home among friends.

Entering a church or oratory and looking at the tabernacle should be a call to conversion, an invitation from Jesus to leave behind our pride, our desire to be noticed or to show our talents, and hide ourselves with him so as to give ourselves to others, remembering those words of his: “whoever loves his life, loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will preserve it for eternal life.”³⁷ Benedict XVI said that these words of Jesus were a statement of “the fundamental law of human existence.” And he explained: “That is to say that whoever

³¹ Cf. ST JOHN PAUL II, Enc. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, chap. 2, 21-25.

³² Cf. *ibidem*, 39; BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, 15. In this last document the bishop is called “liturgo par excellence” (no. 39). Bishop Javier Echevarria, Prelate of Opus Dei, expresses it as follows: “It is very important for us to be united with the visible Head when we celebrate or participate in this holy Sacrifice! We all want to be very close to the Pope, the Head of the universal Church; you should be very united to the Bishops, the Heads of each particular Church, and very especially to this Father of yours whom our Lord has chosen to place as the visible Head and principal of unity in this ‘little part of the Church’ that is the Work” (JAVIER ECHEVARRÍA, *Pastoral Letter on the occasion of the Year of the Eucharist*, Rome, 6 October 2004).

³³ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily* at the closing ceremony of the Italian Eucharistic Congress, Bari 29 May 2005.

³⁴ ST IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH, *Letter to the Ephesians*

³⁵ JOSEPH RATZINGER, *The spirit of the liturgy*, Ignatius, San Francisco 2000.

³⁶ *For me the tabernacle has always been a Bethany, a quiet and pleasant place where Christ resides. A place where we can tell him about our worries, our sufferings, our desires, our joys, with the same sort of simplicity and naturalness as Martha, Mary and Lazarus. That is why I rejoice when I stumble upon a church in town or in the country; it's another tabernacle, another opportunity for the soul to escape and join in intention our Lord in the Sacrament.* (ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 154; cf. *The Way*, 322).

³⁷ *Jn* 12:25.

wants to have his life for himself, to live only for himself, have control of everything and exploit all his possibilities, this is precisely the one who loses his life. His life becomes tedious and empty. Only through abandonment of oneself, disinterested self-giving in favour of the you, saying “yes” to a greater life, the life of God, can our life be expanded and made greater. Thus, this fundamental principle that the Lord establishes is, in the final analysis, simply identical to the principle of love.”³⁸

* * *

Holy Mary was at the foot of the Cross and is, therefore, present, in an ineffable manner, each time the eucharistic sacrifice is renewed. “*Communicantes et memoriam venerantes, in primis gloriosae semper Virginis Mariae...* In communion with those whose memory we venerate, especially the glorious ever Virgin Mary ...”³⁹ That is why She is always mentioned in the Eucharistic prayer. Besides, it can be considered that the Blood of Christ is the same as the one running through the veins of his Most Holy Mother. We can have recourse to her with the prayer of the spiritual communion that St Josemaría learned from a Scolapian priest that he spread throughout the world, asking her that we may receive Our Lord each day with the same purity, humility and devotion with which she received him.⁴⁰

S. Sanz Sánchez
November 2009

Bibliography

CATECHISM OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH, 1322-1419

ST JOSEMARÍA, *Christ is passing by*, 83-94

ST JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 17 April 2003

BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis*, 22 February 2007

© ISSRA, 2016

³⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Homily on Palm Sunday*, Rome 5 April 2009.

³⁹ *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer I or Roman Canon

⁴⁰ Cf. ANDRÉS VÁZQUEZ DE PRADA, *The Founder of Opus Dei*, volume I, p. 50, note 96.