

## ***Learning at Mass How to Draw Close to God***

### ***Reflections on the Liturgy of the Mass In Light of St. Josemaría's Writings***

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“The Blessed Trinity has fallen in love with man, raised to the level of grace and made ‘to God’s image and likeness’ (*Gen* 1:26). God has redeemed mankind from sin—from the sin of Adam, inherited by all his descendants, as well as from each one’s personal sins—and desires ardently to dwell in our soul: ‘If anyone love me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him’ (*Jn* 14:23).”<sup>1</sup> These words from a homily of St. Josemaría given on Holy Thursday in 1960, reflect his deep understanding of the Eucharistic mystery as an outpouring of the love of our triune God, who wants to draw close to mankind.

Each of us is called to be a dwelling place of God. This dream can become reality if we are transformed into Christ, if we live his life<sup>2</sup> and are made one with him. This identification is brought about in a singular way thanks to the Eucharist.<sup>3</sup> In St. Josemaría’s life and teachings we see a clear perception of the transforming power of the Eucharist, of the transcendent importance of the Mass for our Christian life. As we read in the same homily: “We may have asked ourselves, at one time or another, how we can correspond to the greatness of God’s love. We may have wanted to see a program for Christian living clearly explained. The answer is easy, and within reach of all the faithful: to participate lovingly in the Holy Mass, to learn how to draw close to God, since this Sacrifice summarizes all that he asks of us.”<sup>4</sup>

To learn at Mass how to draw close to God. The liturgical rites in the Eucharistic celebration have a special pedagogical value for believers.<sup>5</sup> This

1. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 84d.

2. See *Gal* 2:20.

3. In regard to how St. Josemaría understood this identification through the Eucharist, see Ángel García Ibáñez, “*Eucaristía*” in José Luis Illanes (coord.), *Diccionario de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, Editorial Monte Carmelo, Burgos, 2013, p. 463.

4. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 88b.

5. We see here the basic harmony between St. Josemaría’s thought and the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI: “What does celebrating the Eucharist properly mean? It is an encounter with the Lord, who strips himself of his divine glory for our sake, allows himself to be humiliated

shouldn't surprise us, since "it is in the Mass where we see so clearly that our response to God's self-giving has to be a total love, with all our heart, with all our strength, to the point of giving our life."<sup>6</sup>

In this article we will try to highlight St. Josemaría's deep conviction of the transforming power of the liturgy of the Mass for the ordinary faithful. His teachings on this topic are widespread and frequent throughout his writings. Therefore here we have chosen to center our attention especially on the homily *The Eucharist, Mystery of Faith and Love*.<sup>7</sup> Following the thread of the different parts of the Eucharistic celebration, St. Josemaría sets forth in this homily a number of practical consequences for the spiritual life of Catholics.

### 1. *Pedagogical Value of the Rites*

The founder of Opus Dei suggests a specific way of benefiting from the lessons in the school of life that is the Eucharist: "Let me remind you of what you have seen on so many occasions: the succession of prayers and action as they unfold before our eyes at Mass. As we follow them, step by step, our Lord may show us aspects of our lives in which each one of us must improve, vices we must conquer, and the fraternal attitude we should foster with all mankind."<sup>8</sup>

In a certain sense one can say that St. Josemaría prefers to speak about the Mass not "discursively," but in a way that liturgists sometimes call "mystagogical," based on the rites themselves.<sup>9</sup> This shouldn't surprise us, since the deep and broad spiritual effects of the Mass shouldn't be considered independently of the texts and rites of the celebration itself.<sup>10</sup>

Close attention to the meaning of the rites was frequently found in the teachings of the Church's Magisterium during the twentieth century. Pope Pius XII said in this regard: "The Liturgy is not just an external and physical part of divine worship or a ceremonial decoration; nor are those less mistaken who consider it as a mere collection of laws and precepts with which the [priest] goes to the point of death on the Cross and thus gives himself to each one of us. The daily Eucharist is very important for the priest. In it he confronts ever anew this mystery; ever anew he puts himself in God's hands, experiencing at the same time the joy of knowing that He is present, receives me, ever anew raises and supports me, gives me his hand, gives himself. The Eucharist must become for us a school of life in which we learn to give our lives." Benedict XVI, Homily at a priestly ordination, May 7, 2006.

6. Ernst Burkhardt – Javier López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría: Estudio de teología espiritual*, Rialp, Madrid, 2010, vol. I, p. 555.

7. As we said above, this homily was published in the book *Christ Is Passing By*, as nos. 83–94. For the history of its composition see pp. 485–490 of the *Edición crítico-histórica* by Antonio Aranda, Rialp, Madrid, 2013.

8. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no 88c.

9. See St. Josemaría *The Way: Critical-Historical Edition* (by Pedro Rodríguez), Scepter, London – New York, 2009, no. 529, note 10, p. 696.

10. See Jose Antonio Abad, "Liturgia y vida espiritual," in José Luis Illanes (coord.), *Diccionario de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, p.757.

ecclesiastical hierarchy arranges the fulfillment of the rites.”<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, as Vatican II’s Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* recalls, in the liturgy “Christ always associates the Church with himself in this great work wherein God is perfectly glorified and men are sanctified. The Church is his beloved Bride who calls to her Lord, and through him offers worship to the Eternal Father. Rightly, then, the liturgy is considered as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In the liturgy, the sanctification of man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members.”<sup>12</sup> St. Josemaría too emphasized, right from the beginning of his preaching, the sanctifying potential of the mystery of Christian worship.<sup>13</sup>

The liturgy is, therefore, “the privileged place of our encounter with God and with the one whom he sent, Jesus Christ.”<sup>14</sup> It is an encounter that “takes the form of a dialogue, through actions and words,”<sup>15</sup> under the visible signs used in the sacred liturgy, chosen by Christ or by the Church, which signify invisible divine realities.<sup>16</sup>

Thus the words and gestures of the liturgy have a special importance that requires the faithful’s interior participation. As no. 543 in *The Way* says: “You saw me celebrate the holy Mass on a plain altar, without any decoration behind it. Both Crucifix and candlesticks were large and solid, with wax-candles of graded height, sloping up towards the Cross. The frontal, of the liturgical color of the day. A sweeping chasuble. The chalice, rich, simple in line, with a broad cup. No electric light, nor did we miss it. And you found it difficult to leave the oratory: you felt at home there. Do you see how we are led to God, brought closer to him, by the rigor of the liturgy?”<sup>17</sup> Félix María Arocena comments on this point: “The text reflects the ‘mystagogical’ sensitivity of the author: the signs of Christ’s mystery lead us to him. Lived with authenticity, the celebration becomes the mediation and, at the same

11. Pius XII, Encyclical *Mediator Dei*, in Heinrich Joseph Dominicus Denzinger-Peter Hünermann, *El Magisterio de la Iglesia. Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, Herder, Barcelona, 2002, no. 3843.

12. Vatican II, Const. *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 7. The same idea has been included in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1070, 1089. It is interesting to note that the Latin text says: *Merito igitur Liturgia habetur veluti Iesu Christi sacerdotalis muneris exercitatio, in qua per signa sensibilia significatur et modo singulis proprio efficitur*. The antecedent of *qua* is *exercitatio*, and thus it is clear that liturgical actions are the exercise of Christ’s priesthood by means of sensible signs.

13. See Félix María Arocena, “*Liturgia: visión general*,” in José Luis Illanes (coord.), *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, p. 747.

14. Saint John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Vicesimus quintus annus*, December 4, 1988, no. 7.

15. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1153.

16. See Vatican II, Constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 33.

17. St. Josemaría, *The Way*, no. 543.

time, the most eloquent catechesis of his mystery.”<sup>18</sup>

## 2. *The Mass, a filial encounter of love*

The Mass, like any encounter, requires two sides: Christ truly present, and the participants in the celebration who, “Christified” by the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, recognize ourselves to be children of God, sons and daughters in the Son, with the right and duty of offering ourselves with Christ to the Father. It is a very special encounter: an encounter of love. Thus St. Josemaría describes the Mass as a “Trinitarian current of love,”<sup>19</sup> to which we strive to unite ourselves with “a filial love imbued with a priestly spirit.”<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, in the Eucharist “there is contained, truly and substantially, the Body and Blood, together with the Soul and Divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore the whole Christ.”<sup>21</sup> “Faith demands that we approach the Eucharist fully aware that we are approaching Christ himself. It is precisely his presence which gives the other aspects of the Eucharist—as meal, as memorial of the Paschal Mystery, as eschatological anticipation—a significance which goes far beyond mere symbolism. The Eucharist is a mystery of presence, the perfect fulfilment of Jesus’ promise to remain with us until the end of the world.”<sup>22</sup>

This marvelous reality shows us how close God is to us, his concern and love for all men and women. As the Prelate of Opus Dei said, St. Josemaría “taught us to put our whole heart into our faith in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist, so that our Lord will truly enter into our life and we into his. Thus we will look at him and contemplate him, with eyes of faith, as a person who is really present. He sees us, he hears us, he awaits us, he speaks to us, he draws close to us and seeks us out; he immolates himself for us in the Holy Mass.”<sup>23</sup>

Truly, in the Eucharist our Lord shows us a love that goes right “to the end” (*Jn* 13:1), a love that knows no bounds.<sup>24</sup> Thus the founder of Opus Dei understood it as a madness of love, and even made use of a daring comparison:

18. On the “mysteries” of Christ, also see *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 512 ff. Félix María Arocena, “*Liturgia: visión general*,” in José Luis Illanes (coord.), *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, p. 749.

19. See St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 85a.

20. Ernst Burkhardt – Javier López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría: Estudio de teología espiritual*, Rialp, Madrid, 2010, vol. 1, p. 556.

21. Council of Trent, Decree *De SS. Eucharistia*, can. 1: DH, 1651; see ch. 3: DH, 1641.

22. St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, October 7, 2004, no. 16.

23. Javier Echevarría, Letter, October 6, 2004, no. 5.

24. See St. John Paul II, Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, September 17, 2003, no. 11.

“No one in love says that they have no time to be together with the loved one, or that that they are in too much of a hurry. Our parents didn’t have problems of time to be always together, because they were in love.”<sup>25</sup> And he advised: “Please don’t take exception to my applying to the things of God the example of noble and clean human love. If we love God with our heart of flesh—and we have no other—we will not be in a hurry to finish this meeting, this loving appointment with him.”<sup>26</sup>

### 3. *Approaching the loving encounter with God*

If the Eucharist is a loving encounter, then our interior preparation is essential. And exterior as well, as the founder of Opus Dei recalled when presenting scenes from his childhood: “I remember how people used to prepare to go to communion. Everything had to be just right, body and soul: the best clothes, hair well combed—even physical cleanliness was important—maybe even a few drops of cologne... These were manifestations of love, full of finesse and refinement, on the part of manly souls who knew how to repay Love with love.”<sup>27</sup>

In *The Forge*, this external preparation becomes an image of what happens in the spiritual realm: “We should receive our Lord in the Eucharist as we would prepare to receive the great ones of the earth, or even better: with decorations, with lights, with new clothes... And if you ask me what sort of cleanliness I mean, what decorations and what lights you should bring, I will answer you: cleanliness in each one of your senses, decoration in each of your powers, light in all your soul.”<sup>28</sup>

On beginning the Mass, the awareness of being in the presence of the Blessed Trinity stirred up in St. Josemaría a love and awe that led him to put himself intensely into the liturgy. Each detail took on a particular significance for him. He went up to the altar with joy, “because God is here. It is the joy that is shown, together with love and gratitude, as the priest kisses the altar, symbol of Christ and reminder of the saints—a small surface, sanctified, because this is where the Sacrament of infinite worth is made present to us.”<sup>29</sup> And he said: “I kiss the altar passionately. I realize that there the Sacrifice of Calvary is renewed; and there, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit pour out on mankind their gifts. Fill yourselves with desires for love, for reparation, for sacrifice. He has given us his Love, and love is repaid with love. Let no one tell me that God is far off. He is deep inside each of us.”<sup>30</sup>

25. St. Josemaría, Notes taken during a family gathering, January 6, 1972.

26. St. Josemaría, “A Priest Forever,” in *In Love with the Church*, nos. 45.

27. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 91c.

28. St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, Scepter, London - New York, no. 834.

29. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no 88d.

30. Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría*, Rialp, Madrid, 2000, p. 226.

When approaching in the liturgy the encounter with God's immensity and infinite goodness, St. John Paul II stressed that "the only appropriate attitude is one imbued with reverence and a sense of awe, which springs from knowing that we are in the presence of God's majesty."<sup>31</sup> We stand face to face with God, called to be his sons and daughters, convoked into his presence to be transformed in the Son through the action of the Holy Spirit. Isn't it only right that we experience a desire to examine our own life, to ask for the gift of continual conversion?

The praying of the Confiteor, St. Josemaría says, "makes us aware of our unworthiness, not an abstract reminder of guilt, but the actual presence of our sins and weaknesses. That is why we repeat: *Kyrie, eleison, Christe, eleison*: Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy. If the forgiveness we need had to be won by our own merits, we would only be capable of a bitter sadness. But, because of God's goodness, forgiveness comes from his mercy, and we praise him—Gloria!—'for you alone are the Holy One, you alone O Jesus Christ are the most high, with the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father.'"<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. *A dialogue of love*

The collect prayer ends with words that St. Josemaría liked to savor since they reminded him that the whole Trinity is acting in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass: "Through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord," we say to the Father, "who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, God, forever and ever." Then the Liturgy of the Word begins, in a true discourse that expects and demands a response. This part of the celebration has a tone of both proclamation and dialogue. God speaks to his people, and they make their own this "divine word" through silence, and also song; they adhere to it by professing their faith in the Creed, and filled with trust present their petitions to God.<sup>33</sup>

"It was very impressive," recalled the Prelate of Opus Dei, a frequent witness of so many of the founder's Eucharistic celebrations, "to hear the tone with which he read the liturgical texts, with the clarity of someone saying them with both his lips and his heart. He put himself so fully into those texts, and specifically into the readings, that—if there were other people present—he couldn't contain himself and on finishing the Gospel he would give voice to his feelings in a homily."<sup>34</sup>

He really lived, then, his own words on this part of the Mass: "We now listen to the Word of Scripture, the Epistle and the Gospel—light from the

31. St. John Paul II, Address to a Plenary Meeting of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, September 21, 2001.

32. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no 88d.

33. See *Roman Missal*, "General Instruction for the Roman Missal, no. 55. Cited as GIRM below.

34. Javier Echevarría, *Memoria del Beato Josemaría*, p. 226.

Paraclete, who speaks through human voices so as to make our intellect come to know and contemplate, to strengthen our will and make our desire for action effective.”<sup>35</sup> Here we see the “performative dimension of the celebrated Word: the liturgy brings about the perfect actualization of the Biblical texts, and what the Word proclaims is carried out by the Sacrament.”<sup>36</sup>

“The first requirement for a good celebration,” Benedict XVI teaches, “is that the priest truly enter into this dialogue. In proclaiming the Word, he knows he is dialoguing with God. He is a listener to the Word and a preacher of the Word, in the sense that he makes himself an instrument of the Lord and seeks to understand the Word of God, which he must then transmit to the people. He is in a dialogue with God because the texts at Mass are not theatrical scripts or anything similar, but prayers, thanks to which, together with the assembly, we speak with God.”<sup>37</sup>

Thus *ruminatio* (repeating the words of Scripture in our heart and considering and reconsidering them) is connatural to St. Josemaría’s understanding of the liturgical texts, and especially of the Word of God proclaimed in the Liturgy of the Word, which becomes prayer and spills over into our life. “It shouldn’t surprise us then that his homilies and writings include abundant commentaries on the *lex orandi*, the liturgical prayer of the Church in her worship. The lively and vigorous nature of these commentaries stems from the depth of his personal experience as celebrant of the liturgy. In some passages, his style evokes the mystagogia of the Fathers of the Church, delving ever deeper into the meaning of the words read.”<sup>38</sup>

##### 5. *Encounter of love between Christ and his Church*

“Because we are one people, gathered together in the unity of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, we recite the Creed, affirming the unity of our faith.”<sup>39</sup> Identification with the sentiments of Christ’s heart brings about a progressive transformation in him through prayer. But how do we learn to pray? The answer is clear: by praying with others. In reality, we can never separate God the Father from his People: “Every time, then, that we cry out and say Abba! Father!, it is the Church, the whole communion of people in prayer, that sustains our invocation, and our invocation is an invocation of the Church.”<sup>40</sup> Only Jesus can say “my Father.” While all the rest of us, when we address God as Father, always do so in communion with the “we” that Jesus

35. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no 89a.

36. Félix María Arocena, “*Liturgia: visión general*,” in José Luis Illanes (coord.), *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, p. 753.

37. Benedict XVI, Address at a meeting with priests from the Albano diocese, August 31, 2006.

38. Félix María Arocena, “*Liturgia: visión general*,” in José Luis Illanes (coord.), *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, p. 748.

39. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no 89a.

40. Benedict XVI, General audience, May 23, 2012.

inaugurated, making it possible for us through Baptism to become, in him, God's children.

The liturgy makes this clear to us in a very tangible way. When the priest leaves the pulpit or his seat and takes his place at the altar—the center of the Eucharistic liturgy,<sup>41</sup>—everyone's attention is directed to the common prayer that the priest and people address to the Father, through Christ in the Holy Spirit.<sup>42</sup> In this part of the celebration, the priest speaks with the people only in the dialogues from the altar,<sup>43</sup> since the sacrificial action that takes place in the Eucharistic liturgy is not principally directed to the community. The priest and people do not pray to one another, but to the one Lord and God. Indeed, the spiritual and interior orientation of everyone, of the priest (as representative of the whole Church) and of the faithful, is *versus Deum per Iesum Christum*. Thus we can better understand the exclamation of the ancient Church: "*Conversi ad Dominum.*"<sup>44</sup>

Specifically, the placing of the cross in the center of the altar points to the centrality of the crucifix in the Eucharistic celebration and the orientation of the whole assembly during the Eucharistic liturgy: we don't look at one another, but rather at the One who was born, died and rose for us, our Saviour. As St. Josemaría wrote at the beginning of 1935: "The Holy Cross and the altar stone—completely isolated from the table of the altar—occupy the place of honor."<sup>45</sup> We all have to turn our eyes to Christ, the Rising Sun from whom all salvation comes, and from whom we receive the gift of grace.<sup>46</sup> As Pope Francis points out with simplicity: "On the table there is a cross to indicate that

41. See *Roman Missal*, GIRM, no. 73.

42. See *Roman Missal*, GIRM, no. 78.

43. See "*Pregare ad Orientem versus*," *Notitiae* 322, vol. 29/5 (1993), 249.

44. "In the early Church there was a custom whereby the Bishop or the priest, after the homily, would cry out to the faithful: '*Conversi ad Dominum*' – turn now towards the Lord. This meant in the first place that they would turn towards the East, towards the rising sun, the sign of Christ returning, whom we go to meet when we celebrate the Eucharist. Where this was not possible, for some reason, they would at least turn towards the image of Christ in the apse, or towards the Cross, so as to orient themselves inwardly towards the Lord. Fundamentally, this involved an interior event; conversion, the turning of our soul towards Jesus Christ and thus towards the living God, towards the true light." Benedict XVI, Homily at the Easter Vigil, March 22, 2008

45. St. Josemaría, *Instruction* January 9, 1935, no. 254 in AGP, series A.3. 90-1-1; cited in Félix María Arocena, "*Liturgia: visión general*," in José Luis Illanes (coord.), *Diccionario de san Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, p. 750.

46. Benedict XVI insisted on this point. In 2002, the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger said that "the representation of the priest is realized in the sacramental act, in which with respect and trembling one can speak and act in the name of Christ. But this does not mean that one should look at the priest as if he were physically an icon of Christ. He should be striving to become an image of Christ by his life, but it is precisely as part of this effort that he, together with the faithful, looks to Christ in order to be able to imitate him. The transfer of the representation of Christ to the physical form of the priest, which Fr. Farnés and others offer us, leads to a false divinization of the priest, from which we should free ourselves as soon as possible. The essential character of the Church as a process, as a praying movement towards our Lord, is thus unfortunately obscured." Joseph Ratzinger, "Response of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to Pere Farnés," *Phase* 252 (2002) 511-512.



on this altar what is offered is the sacrifice of Christ: he is the spiritual food that we receive there, under the species of bread and wine.”<sup>47</sup>

To the extent that we take to heart the words of the liturgy, we are united with the Church in a dialogue with God. The priest speaks with Christ and through him with the Triune God, and thus prays with and for the others. As St. Josemaría stresses: “Our overriding desire when we celebrate Mass is the same as Christ’s when he offered himself on Calvary: to bring mankind to eternal glory in the love of God.”<sup>48</sup>

While Christians, through the communion of saints, can never be said to be alone, in the liturgy this is made especially clear. “*Orate, fratres*, the priest invites the people to pray, because this sacrifice is yours and mine, it is the sacrifice of the whole Church. Pray, brethren, although there may not be many present, although materially there may be only one person there, although the celebrant may find himself alone; because every Mass is a universal sacrifice, the redemption of every tribe and tongue, and people and nation (see *Rev* 5:9).”<sup>49</sup>

In the Eucharistic Prayer, this universality acquires its true breadth: “Heaven and earth join with the angels of the Lord to sing: *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus*... I adore and praise with the angels—it is not difficult, because I know that as I celebrate the Holy Mass they surround me, adoring the Blessed Trinity. And I know that in some way our Lady is there, because of her intimate relationship with the most Blessed Trinity, and because she is the Mother of Christ, of his flesh and blood: the Mother of Jesus Christ, perfect God and perfect Man.”<sup>50</sup>

We can’t pray to God in an authentic way if we are spiritually isolated from others, if we fail to open our heart to them. “The Christian faith is never a merely subjective or personal-private relationship with Christ and his word, but rather it is totally objective and ecclesial.”<sup>51</sup> Hence no Christian prays alone. The Holy Spirit always accompanies us. Our prayer is always two-sided and in chorus, united to the Church’s constant invocation of the Holy Spirit.

47. Pope Francis, General audience, February 5, 2014.

48. St. Josemaría, “A Priest Forever,” in *In Love with the Church*, no. 47.

49. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no 89d.

50. Ibid. He made a similar consideration elsewhere: “When I celebrate Mass with just one person to serve it, the people are present also. I feel that there, with me, are all Catholics, all believers, and also all those who do not believe. All God’s creatures are there—the earth and the sea and the sky, and the animals and plants—the whole of creation giving glory to the Lord. And especially I will say, using the words of the Second Vatican Council (*Lumen gentium* no. 50), that we are most closely united to the worshipping Church in heaven as we join with and venerate first of all the memory of the glorious ever Virgin Mary, of Saint Joseph and the blessed apostles and martyrs, and of all the saints.” St. Josemaría, “A Priest Forever,” in *In Love with the Church*, no. 45.

51. Joseph Ratzinger, *Convocados en el camino de la fe*, Ed. Cristiandad, Madrid, 2004, p. 172.

Therefore “to live the Holy Mass means to pray continually, and to be convinced that, for each one of us, this is a personal meeting with God. We adore him, we praise him, we give thanks to him, we atone for our sins, we are purified, we feel ourselves united to Christ with all Christians.”<sup>52</sup>

The entire life of each of the faithful needs to be imbued with an awareness of this unity: “We must develop our interior life and the Christian virtues with our eyes upon the good of the whole Church.”<sup>53</sup> The Eucharistic Prayer is an eloquent opening of our heart to the intentions of Christ’s Spouse present throughout the world: “Thus we begin the canon, with the confidence of God’s children, calling him our most loving Father: *clementissime*. We pray for the Church and for all those who are a part of the Church—the Pope, our families, our friends and companions. And a Catholic, with a universal heart, prays for all mankind, since no one can be excluded from our ardent zeal.”<sup>54</sup>

Throughout the Eucharistic Prayer we return at various moments to petitions and to the intercession of the saints. “We ask God to hear our petitions. We call on the memory of the glorious ever-Virgin Mary and of a handful of men who were among the first to follow Christ and to die for him, and we recall our union with them.”<sup>55</sup> And then come “more petitions, because we human beings almost always feel the need to ask for things—prayers for our deceased brothers and sisters, for ourselves. We have brought all of our weaknesses, our lack of faithfulness. The weight is heavy, but he wants to bear it for us, and with us.”<sup>56</sup>

The moment for the Consecration draws near, where once again there takes place “the infinite divine madness of Love.”<sup>57</sup> We are at the summit of the Eucharistic Prayer, as the General Instruction on the Roman Missal specifies: “By means of words and actions of Christ, the Sacrifice is carried out which Christ himself instituted at the Last Supper, when he offered his Body and Blood under the species of bread and wine, gave them to his Apostles to eat and drink, and left them the command to perpetuate this same mystery.”<sup>58</sup>

The priest joins his hands and clearly pronounces the words of our Lord,

52. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 88a.

53. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 145b.

54. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 90a. This prayer of intercession, Pope Francis insisted, “moves us particularly to take up the task of evangelization and to seek the good of others. . . . intercessory prayer does not divert us from true contemplation, since authentic contemplation always has a place for others.” Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, November 24, 2013, no. 281.

55. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 90a.

56. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 90c.

57. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 90b.

58. Roman Missal, GIRM, no. 79d).

as this sublime moment demands.<sup>59</sup> It is especially at this moment that the priest acts *in persona Christi*, which “means more than offering ‘in the name of or ‘in place of’ Christ. *In persona* means in specific sacramental identification with ‘the eternal High Priest’ who is the author and principal subject of this sacrifice of his, a sacrifice in which, in truth, nobody can take his place.”<sup>60</sup> Saint Josemaría saw this with noontday clarity: “I am on the one hand a member of the faithful like the others; but above all, I am Christ at the Altar! I am renewing in an unbloody manner the divine Sacrifice of Calvary and I am consecrating *in persona Christi*, in the person of Christ. I really represent Jesus Christ, for I am lending him my body, my voice, my hands, and my poor heart, so often stained, which I want him to purify.”<sup>61</sup>

“The canon ends with another invocation to the Blessed Trinity: *Per Ipsum, et cum Ipso, et in Ipso...* Through Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ, who is all our love, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever.”<sup>62</sup> We realize once more that we are immersed in the Trinitarian current of God’s love for all men and women that is the Eucharist. The canon concludes by directing to the Trinity a prayer of praise: “the form of prayer which recognizes most immediately that God is God. It lauds God for his own sake and gives him glory, quite beyond what he does, but simply because HE IS. It shares in the blessed happiness of the pure of heart who love God in faith before seeing him in glory.”<sup>63</sup> While certainly the whole Eucharistic celebration is a great act of thanksgiving addressed to the Blessed Trinity, nevertheless the final doxology of the Eucharistic Prayer sums up and concentrates all of this praise.

The priest then elevates the paten and the chalice to offer to the Father the great immolated Victim: Christ, the supreme expression of the honor and glory due to God. Indeed, the formula of the final doxology makes clear that all prayer of praise “is possible only through Christ: he unites the faithful to his person, to his praise, and to his intercession, so that the sacrifice of praise to the Father is offered through Christ and with him, to be accepted in him.”<sup>64</sup>

As Saint Josemaría said: “In the Holy Sacrifice of the altar, the priest takes up the Body of our God, and the Chalice containing his Blood, and raises them above all the things of the earth, saying: *Per Ipsum, et cum Ipso, et in Ipso*—through My Love, with My Love, in My Love! Unite yourself to the action of

59. Pope Paul VI suggested, on January 22, 1968, this rubric when pronouncing Christ’s words (see Annibale Bugnini, *La riforma de la liturgia* (1948-1975), 408, note 15). Thus “the transcendence of the moment of the Consecration is emphasized, the special meaning and difference of these words from the rest, as the summit of the whole Eucharistic Prayer and indeed of the whole Eucharistic celebration.” Félix María Arocena, *En el corazón de la liturgia. La celebración Eucarística*, Palabra, Madrid, 1999, p. 178.

60. St. John Paul II, Apost. Letter *Dominicae Cenaе*, February 24, 1980, no. 8.

61. St. Josemaría, “A Priest Forever,” in *In Love with the Church*, no. 44.

62. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 90c.

63. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2639.

64. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1361.

the priest. Or rather, make that reality a part of your life.”<sup>65</sup> We are encouraged to make this a reality in our daily life,<sup>66</sup> since “corresponding to so much love demands of us a total self-giving, of body and of soul.”<sup>67</sup>

6. *Communion: when our encounter becomes adoration and union*

Communion is an essential part of the Mass. Saint Josemaría frequently advised this practice in his preaching.<sup>68</sup> As early as 1931, when pointing out the practices to be followed by faithful of Opus Dei, he wrote that they “will ordinarily receive Holy Communion within the Mass, because this is the meaning of the liturgy.”<sup>69</sup> From the same period come also these words: “Communion in the Mass is the rule, not the exception. *Intra Missam*, with hosts offered and consecrated in the Mass. What God has united we men should not separate. Sacrifice united to the Sacrament. Why separate it without a reasonable cause?”<sup>70</sup>

The rite of Communion has as its aim that the faithful, properly disposed, receive the Bread of Heaven and the Chalice of Salvation, the Body and Blood of Christ, who offered himself for the life of the world.<sup>71</sup> The Our Father, the sign of peace, and the symbolic action of breaking of the bread are all meant to prepare us for communion with Christ .

In the homily we have been considering, Saint Josemaría speaks about our drawing close to God the Father: “Jesus is the Way, the Mediator. In him are all things; outside of him is nothing. In Christ, taught by him, we dare to call God our Father—he is the Almighty who created heaven and earth, and he is a loving Father who waits for us to come back to him again and again, as the story of the prodigal son repeats itself in our lives.”<sup>72</sup> Communion increases our union with Christ, unites us to him by separating us from sin, and builds up the Church.<sup>73</sup> We are united to Christ and through him to all of our brothers and sisters. Filiation in Christ and fraternity: we encounter these sentiments throughout the entire Eucharistic celebration.

“Lord I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” This prayer preceding Communion is a

65. St. Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 541.

66. Ernst Burkhardt – Javier López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría*, vol I, p. 557.

67. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 87c.

68. See Jose Antonio Abad, “*Liturgia y vida espiritual*,” in José Luis Illanes (coord.), *Diccionario de San Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer*, p.758–759.

69. St. Josemaría, Personal Notes, Notebook 5, no. 496, December 23, 1931; cited in *The Way: Critical-Historical Edition*, commentary on no. 536, pp. 705–706.

70. *Ibid.*

71. See *Roman Missal*, GIRM, no. 80.

72. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 91a.

73. “Those who receive the Eucharist are more closely united to Christ. Through it Christ unites them to all the faithful in one body—the Church.” *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1396.

sign of contrition, of a love-filled sorrow that offers our Lord adoration and throws light on what is happening at that moment: “We do not merely receive something in the Eucharist. It is the encounter and unification of persons; the person, however, who comes to meet us and desires to unite himself to us, is the Son of God. Such unification can only be brought about by means of adoration. Receiving the Eucharist means adoring the One whom we receive. Precisely in this way and only in this way do we become one with him.”<sup>74</sup> As the founder of Opus Dei said, employing a graphic image: “On this earth, when we receive an important person, we bring out the best—lights, music, formal dress. How should we prepare to receive Christ into our soul? Have we ever thought about how we would behave if we could only receive him once in a lifetime?”<sup>75</sup>

The Holy Mass draws to a conclusion: “With Christ in our soul . . . the blessing of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit accompanies us all day long, as we go about our simple and normal task of making holy all honest human activity.”<sup>76</sup> The editor of the historical-critical edition of this homily comments: “In a natural and spontaneous way, the author stresses once and again his fundamental teaching, stemming from the foundational gifts impressed by God on his soul: the call of all the Christian faithful to holiness in their own state and circumstances of life, and in particular the mission-vocation of the lay faithful to make holy all honest human activity. He calls this a simple and normal task, since it does not go beyond the boundaries of ordinary professional and social life, and has to be carried out within the duties and obligations of each person.”<sup>77</sup>

The Holy Mass is meant to influence the entire life of the faithful. “Closely united to Jesus in the Eucharist, we will attain a continual presence of God, in the midst of the ordinary occupations proper to the situation of each person on our earthly pilgrimage, seeking God at all times and in all things.”<sup>78</sup> As Pope Francis said: “Celebrating true spiritual worship means to surrender oneself as a living, holy, and acceptable sacrifice to God (see *Rom* 12:1). A liturgy separated from spiritual worship runs the risk of emptying itself, losing its Christian originality and falling into a generic sacred sense, almost magical, and into an empty estheticism. Being the action of Christ, the liturgy provides the interior impulse to take on the same sentiments as Christ, and in this dynamism the whole of reality is transfigured.”<sup>79</sup>

74. Benedict XVI, Address to the Roman Curia, December 22, 2005.

75. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 91b.

76. *Ibid.*, no. 91d.

77. St. Josemaría, *Es Cristo que pasa. Edición crítico-histórica*, commentary on no. 91d, p. 512.

78. St. Josemaría, Letter, February 2, 1945, no. 11, cited in Ernst Burkhardt – Javier López, *Vida cotidiana y santidad en la enseñanza de san Josemaría*, vol. I, pp. 565-566.

79. Pope Francis, Message to the participants in the Symposium “*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Gratitude and Commitment for a great ecclesial movement,” February 18, 2014.



This brief overview of the liturgy of the Holy Mass led by the hand of St. Josemaría helps us understand why he said: “As you attend Mass, you will learn to deepen your friendship with each of the three divine Persons.”<sup>80</sup> The faithful learn to draw close to the Father, in Christ, through the action of the Holy Spirit, and in this dialogue with the divine Persons their Christian life is strengthened. Each gesture and word of the rites invites us to enter into this dialogue, and therefore we feel the interior impulse to put great care into them, striving to follow eagerly this path of love: “A person who fails to love the Mass fails to love Christ. We must make an effort to live the Mass with calm and serenity, with devotion and affection. Those who love acquire a finesse, a sensitivity of soul that makes them notice details that are sometimes very small, but that are important because they express the love of a passionate heart.”<sup>81</sup>

80. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 91e.

81. *Ibid.*, no 92a.