

To confront these problems, and others that cannot be dealt with now in this brief presentation, perhaps it would be necessary to study the suitability of new norms, because experience shows that it is not enough to recall the present norms: that is to say, some of these ought to be revised.

A recovery of the sense of the sacred in Eucharistic celebrations, stemming from a true love for Christ and a sincere devotion, would foster in the whole Church an increase in Christian practice, in priestly vocations, and in missionary zeal, and also help strengthen the spiritual life of the People of God, both clergy and laity. If we restore the respect, devotion and love that we should always have towards the Mystery of the Eucharist, it would become a source of life and attraction for many souls who have distanced themselves from the faith, and also for non-Catholics and non-Christians.

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The Eucharist and Penance

Theological and Pastoral Reflections

To begin my talk I would like to cite some words of St. Josemaría Escrivá, a holy priest who passionately loved the two sacraments that I will focus on. He was speaking at a time of the year quite close to the one in which we now find ourselves, because it was a time close to Christmas.

“Christmas season, first days of 1939. To be reborn and continue forward, to begin and carry on. In material things inertia means not changing: not moving what is at rest, not halting what is moving. But in spiritual matters, to carry on and continue forward is never inertia. We return to the same, always the same: God with us, the Christ Child. And, guided by the Angels, we go to adore the God Child, whom our Lady and St. Joseph present to us. Through all the ages, from every corner of the earth, weighed down and yet spurred on by the work of all human activities, magi will continue arriving at the Bethlehem ever present in the tabernacle. Put care into your work; prepare your offering—your work, your duty—for the Epiphany of each day.”¹

This is my aim: to nourish our eagerness to draw close to “the Bethlehem ever present in the tabernacle,” in order to grow in our knowledge of the august sacrament of the Eucharist, protected by the love that Mary and Joseph had for Jesus. We will do so with an eagerness to speak to Emmanuel, God with us, and with the desire to receive him with our body and

1. St. Josemaría Escrivá, cited in *The Way: Critical Historical Edition*, edited by Pedro Rodríguez, Rialp, Madrid, 2004, 3rd ed., p. 1051.

soul adorned with the greatest possible cleanliness, assisted by the marvelous sacrament of forgiveness, which fills one with a foretaste of the happiness of heaven.

“The Church of the new Advent, the Church that is continually preparing for the new coming of the Lord, must be the Church of the Eucharist and of Penance. Only when viewed in this spiritual aspect of her life and activity is she seen to be the Church of the divine mission, the Church in statu missionis, as the Second Vatican Council has shown her to be.”² With these words, our beloved John Paul II, in his first encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, stressed the central role of the Eucharist and Penance in the life of the Church on its pilgrimage through history. On earth the Church draws its life from the Eucharist. It grows and is strengthened thanks to the Eucharist; it is constantly called to conversion, purified and united more closely to Christ through the Eucharist and Penance. Thus the Body of Christ is truly built up and prepared for its definitive encounter with him.

In the recent Synod of Bishops dedicated to the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Christian life, there was ample reflection on the importance of these two sacraments in the Church’s life. It called attention to the fact that not a few faithful lack a deep knowledge of the treasures of grace that divine mercy grants us through the Eucharist

and Penance, while also being deficient in their knowledge of the conditions for worthy reception of Holy Communion. Improved formation and effective pastoral action are therefore especially necessary, in order to strongly recover, as one reads in the seventh proposition of the Synod, “the pedagogy of conversion that is born of the Eucharist and that therefore frequent individual confession should be fostered.”³

Here I will speak of the specific redemptive efficacy of the celebration of the Eucharist and of the sacrament of Penance, with particular reference to the links uniting these two sacraments. In the first part, I will consider the Eucharist, the fount of reconciliation of mankind with God in Christ. In the second, I will discuss the relationship between the Eucharist and Penance, in our coming to share in the redemptive grace of the Cross. Finally, I will deal with the need for the sacrament of Penance in order to receive Holy Communion fruitfully.

The Eucharist, fount of reconciliation of mankind with God

“I am the living bread which came down from heaven,” said Jesus in Capernaum, announcing the sacrament of the Eucharist that he would institute in the Cenacle at Jerusalem. And he added: “if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (*Jn* 6:51).

2. John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, March 4, 1979, no. 20.

3. Final List of Propositions of the XI General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 2-23, 2005), proposition no. 7, cf. *ibid.*, nos. 30, 40 and 46.

Jesus declares himself before men as sent by the Father to free us from the power of sin, to reconcile us with God (cf. *Col* 1:13-20) and to make us sharers in his own divine life. He wants to transform us into himself and enable us to participate in the communion of life and love in the Most Blessed Trinity (cf. *Jn* 17:22). He carries this out through the paschal mystery of his death and resurrection, anticipated sacramentally at the Last Supper. Since then, in Holy Mass, Jesus continues to carry out that mission: he brings love, forgiveness and God's peace to the world. He grants these gifts to those who believe in him, to those who accept with faith the grace that he offers them, inspiring in their souls new dispositions which make them capable of growing in union and friendship with God.

Our Lord does so through the ministry of the Church, the organically structured priestly people. Throughout the centuries, the Church proclaims, as Christ himself did and with his authority, the Gospel of conversion and penance. It leads mankind, through words and example, towards Christ the Redeemer. It prepares them for a personal, intimate encounter with him, through its preaching and the celebration of the sacraments.

Christ carried out the redemption once and for all by his life, death and glorification. But he wants us men and women, created in his image and likeness, to collaborate personally and actively in the specific application of the

work of salvation. He counts upon human freedom, according to the well-known affirmation of St. Augustine of Hippo: "He who made you without you, will not justify you without you."⁴ This transformation is carried out through faith and the sacraments, particularly in the Eucharist. Every time that Holy Mass is celebrated, the Sacrifice of the Cross, which has gained the grace of salvation for all mankind, is made present. Therefore the Holy Eucharist is found at the center and root of the divine economy of pardon and reconciliation, precisely because it is the memorial of the Sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The salvific reality of such an ineffable mystery has its origin in Christ's love (cf. *Jn* 13:1), who instituted it to facilitate for people of all times a vital contact with his perfect holocaust: "Do this is memory of me" (*Lk* 22:19).

By such an august Mystery, we enter into communion with Christ and his redemptive work and, in a special way, with its deepest core: the perfect act of love and obedience to his Father's will, by which he defeated the power of sin and death. In his last encyclical, Pope John Paul II pointed to this ineffable grace: "When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of her Lord's death and resurrection, this central event of salvation becomes really present and 'the work of our redemption is carried out.' This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if

4. St. Augustine, *Sermon* 169, 13, PL 38, 923.

5. John Paul II, Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, March 17, 2004, no. 11.

we had been present there. Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits.”⁵

The real Eucharist presence of the sacrifice of Christ builds up the Church. Each time that Christians gather to celebrate the Eucharist of the Lord, they celebrate and live the mystery of their own reconciliation, carried out once and for all in Christ’s Paschal sacrifice, but which reaches them here and now in the Church. This was emphasized forcefully by Pope Benedict XVI, in his first message to the Church after his election as successor to St. Peter: “The Eucharist makes constantly present the Risen Christ who continues to give himself to us, calling us to participate in the banquet of his Body and his Blood. From full communion with him flows every other element of the Church’s life,” because it constitutes the “heart of Christian life and the source of the Church’s evangelizing mission.”⁶

St. Josemaría Escrivá expressed the same reality with these words. “Because of the Blessed Trinity’s love for man, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist brings all graces to the Church and to mankind. This is the sacrifice announced by the prophet Malachi.... It is the sacrifice of Christ, offered to the Father with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit—an offering of infinite value, which perpetuates the work of the redemption in us and surpasses the sacrifices of the Old Law. The Holy Mass brings us face to face with one of the central mysteries of our faith, be-

cause it is the gift of the Blessed Trinity to the Church. It is because of this that we can consider the Mass as the center and the source of a Christian’s spiritual life.”⁷

It is only through the Eucharist that we have access to Christ’s redemptive sacrifice. This takes place not simply through a memorial filled with faith, but especially through a real contact, through the sacramental memorial instituted by the Redeemer himself. As John Paul II explained: “The Mass makes present the sacrifice of the Cross; it does not add to that sacrifice nor does it multiply it. What is repeated is its memorial celebration, its ‘commemorative representation’ (*memoralis demonstratio*), which makes Christ’s one, definitive, redemptive sacrifice always present in time.”⁸

Thanks to this “making present” of Christ’s sacrifice and our direct participation in its celebration, “men and the world are restored to God through the paschal newness of the Redemption. This restoration,” John Paul II writes in his letter *Dominicae Cenae*, “cannot cease to be: it is the foundation of the ‘new and eternal covenant’ of God with man and of man with God. If it were missing, one would have to question both the excellence of the sacrifice of the Redemption, which in fact was perfect and definitive, and also the sacrificial value of the Mass. In fact, the Eucharist, being a true sacrifice, brings about this restoration to God.”⁹

6. Benedict XVI, Message at the end of the Eucharistic celebration in the Sistine Chapel, April 20, 2005.

7. St. Josemaría Escrivá. *Christ Is Passing By*, nos. 86–87.

8. John Paul II, Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, March 17, 2004, no. 12.

9. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dominicae Cenae*, February 24, 1980, no. 9.

Each time the Eucharist is celebrated, the Church beseeches the Father that, in virtue of the redeeming sacrifice of the Son and through the action of the Holy Spirit, salvation may reach all humanity. This is what we ask for in the Eucharistic Prayers, which make frequent reference to the reconciling work of Jesus, and in which we ask the Father that his Son's sacrifice may "advance the peace and salvation of all the world."¹⁰

Nevertheless, in order to obtain the forgiveness freely offered by "God, rich in mercy" (*Eph* 2:4), and ensure that the redemptive power of the Cross reaches us, conversion and true penance are required on our part, leading us to rectify not only our disordered sentiments and affections, but also all our conduct, accepting the grace that God offers us and trying to correspond fully to his love. Thus the importance of the Church's prayer, in the celebration of the Eucharist, that beseeches God the Father, in Christ and with the Holy Spirit, for the grace of conversion for all men and women.

If we want to transform the world, so often lacerated by misunderstanding, injustice, hatred and violence, which stem ultimately from the personal sins of mankind, we must persevere in prayer to the Father, asking him, in the name of Jesus (cf. *Jn* 15:16) and with the grace of the Holy Spirit, for the conversion of sinners and the gift of charity for all men and women. This prayer to the Father, in Christ and with

the Paraclete, constitutes the soul of the apostolate that we Christians have to carry out in the midst of the world.

In the Eucharist we find, therefore, the source of the gift of contrition, which changes hearts hardened by sin and makes possible a full conversion to God. With regard to this truth, we need to recall the magisterium of the Council of Trent, in which the Church reflected at length on and clarified the basic terms of the relationship between the Eucharist and Penance. That Council taught that the Sacrifice of the Mass "is truly propitiatory and has this effect, that if we, contrite and penitent, with sincere heart and upright faith, with fear and reverence, draw near to God, 'we obtain mercy and find grace in seasonable aid' (*Heb* 4:16). For, appeased by this sacrifice, the Lord grants the grace and gift of penitence and pardons even the gravest crimes and sins."¹¹

This text does not affirm that the Sacrifice of the Altar directly remits mortal sins, but that the forgiveness of sins is attributed to the gift of penitence that is prayed for and obtained in the Sacrifice of the Mass, and that always includes the necessity of receiving the sacrament of Penance.

This gift reaches us from heaven as a fruit of Christ's charity: "The Eucharist signifies this charity, and therefore recalls it, makes it present and at the same time brings it about. Every time that we consciously share in it, there opens in our souls a real dimen-

10. Roman Missal, Third Eucharistic Prayer.

11. Council of Trent, Sess. XXII. Doctrine about the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, ch. 2: Denz.-Sch. 1743.

sion of that unfathomable love that includes everything that God has done and continues to do for us human beings, as Christ says: 'My Father goes on working, and so do I' (*Jn* 5:17). Together with this unfathomable and free gift, which is charity revealed in its fullest degree in the saving sacrifice of the Son of God, the sacrifice of which the Eucharist is the indelible sign, there also springs up within us a lively response of love. We not only know love; we ourselves begin to love. We enter, so to speak, upon the path of love and along this path make progress. Thanks to the Eucharist, the love that springs up within us from the Eucharist develops in us, becomes deeper, and grows stronger."¹² Thus, by means of the love offered to us in the Eucharist, we grow in our union with Christ.

In short, each soul receives salvation to the extent that one enters into vital contact with the Redeemer, with his love and obedience to the Father, and makes the decision to die with Christ to sin in order to live with him in God (cf. *Col* 3:3). Certainly Christ's Paschal sacrifice—his passion, death and resurrection—in itself was sufficient to forgive all the sins of mankind. Nevertheless, man attains the remission of his sins in accord with the mode in which he participates in the power of Christ's sacrifice. And that mode is distinct in the Eucharist and in Penance.

The relationship between the Eucharist and Penance in our sharing in the redemptive grace of the Cross

In the holy sacrament of Penance, participation in the fruit of the Sacrifice of the Cross is brought about through the acts that pertain to the essence of the sacramental sign. These are, on the part of the subject, the acts of contrition, confession of sins and acceptance of penance; and on the part of the minister of Christ and the Church, the absolution. Thanks to these acts, a Christian is configured in a singular way with the death and resurrection of Christ. As John Paul II said: "Our reconciliation with God, our return to God's house, is carried out through Christ. His passion and death on the Cross stands between every human conscience and every human sin, and the infinite love of the Father. This Love, quick to heal and forgive, is nothing other than Mercy. Each of us through our personal conversion, through repentance, through our firm resolution to return, finally, in confession, agrees to undertake a demanding personal spiritual journey, which is a prolongation and echo of the painful spiritual journey that our Redeemer undertook."¹³ Through the penitential acts of the subject and the absolution of the minister, the sinner is truly configured with Christ, Victor over sin, and reconciled with God.

In the case of the Eucharist, participation in the redemptive grace of the Cross requires faith in God the Savior, petition for divine pardon, acceptance of the gift of conversion and penance, and union with Christ and his brethren through charity. By participating in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice

12. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Dominicae Cenae*, February 24, 1980, no. 5.

13. John Paul II, Homily March 16, 1980: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, vol. 3/1 (1980) 573-574.

with faith, hope and love for Christ the Redeemer, a Christian, moved to repentance by the power of the Holy Spirit, can obtain reconciliation with God. But this does not mean that the Eucharist is an alternative to the sacrament of Penance for obtaining the remission of grave sins. In other words, the Eucharist does not forgive our offenses against God; it gives us the grace to have recourse to the source of pardon in the sacrament of Penance.

John Paul II spoke clearly on various occasions in this regard. We can cite here, as an example, his words to a group of bishops on an *ad limina* visit in 1981: "The theory that the Eucharist forgives mortal sin without the sinner going to the sacrament of Penance is not compatible with the Magisterium of the Church. It is true that the Sacrifice of the Mass, through which all grace comes to the Church, obtains forgiveness for the sinner, but this does not mean that those who have committed mortal sin can approach Eucharistic communion without previously having reconciled themselves with God through the priestly ministry."¹⁴

The Eucharist, fount and summit of the Church's entire life,¹⁵ and therefore of its penitential dimension and its struggle against sin, does not make the other sacraments superfluous. Nor can we view as superfluous deeds of penance and interior purification, among which figure preeminently prayer, fasting, alms, and other acts of

mortification of the senses and the disordered passions.

Nor should one cease to stress that, for those who are separated from God by grave or mortal sin, reconciliation with God can only be had in the measure to which one accepts fully the gift of conversion and penance, which necessarily includes, at least implicitly, the intention of reconciling oneself with God through the ministry of reconciliation that Christ conferred on his Church. Conclusive in this respect is the teaching of the Council of Trent: "Though it happens sometimes that this contrition is perfect through charity and reconciles man to God before this sacrament is actually received, this reconciliation, nevertheless, is not to be ascribed to the contrition itself without a desire of the sacrament, which desire is included in it."¹⁶ Jesus, in granting to the Church, through the apostles, the power of forgiving sins, thus linking his own forgiveness to the forgiveness granted by them (cf. *Jn* 20:22), made this sacrament the ordinary means of reconciliation and, therefore, of salvation for the Christian sinner. For this reason, the Magisterium of the Church has explicitly formulated—maternally, one should add—the need for the sacrament of Penance, making it clear that the baptized sinner cannot recover grace without confessing his sins at least in desire.¹⁷

A close relationship exists between Penance and the Eucharist. Penance

14. *Idem.*, Discourse to the bishops of Abruzzo and Molise, during their *ad limina* visit, December 4, 1981, no. 4: AAS 74 (1982) 220–221.

15. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11.

16. Council of Trent, session 14, *Doctrine on the Sacrament of Penance*, ch. 4: Denz.–Sch. 1677.

17. Cf. Council of Trent, sess. VI, *Decree on Justification*, ch. 14: Denz.–Sch. 1543.

leads to a desire for union with God in Christ, a union that in this world reaches its greatest expression in the Eucharist. And the Eucharist fosters, in turn, a constant call to conversion and penance. The One who is present in the Eucharistic mystery is the Son consubstantial with the Father, the One through whom everything has been made, the eternal Word, who took on our flesh in the womb of Holy Mary, ever Virgin, who suffered and died for us on the Cross, who rose and ascended gloriously to heaven, and who will come to judge the world at the end of time. When we consider the greatness of the gift that is offered to us (his very Person: body, blood, soul and divinity, overflowing with love for mankind, whom he wants to save), there is born in us almost spontaneously a sense of our own unworthiness, together with sorrow for our sins, the interior need for purification, and the desire to be more faithful, to fulfill what he expects and asks of us.

The saints have experienced in a singular manner this attraction of Christ's love. Upon contemplating our Lord's self-giving in the Eucharist, how often the Founder of Opus Dei exclaimed: "Jesus has remained in the Eucharist out of love for you."¹⁸ "Jesus has remained in the Sacred Host so as to stay by our side, to sustain us, to guide us. And love can only be repaid with love."¹⁹ In the face of Christ's redemptive love, his complete self-giving, a person with faith remains as though overwhelmed, full of wonder. "I am awed by

this mystery of Love," exclaims St. Josemaría. "Here is the Lord seeking to use my heart as a throne, committed never to leave me, provided I don't run away."²⁰ And our amazement at this superabundance, this "madness" of divine love, leads us to live in a state of continual conversion, to strive to be faithful at every moment of our life.

The call to conversion, to love, comes from Christ and leads us back to Christ in the Eucharist. Eucharistic piety reinforces our hope, our trust in the mercy of God. It also helps us to discover our miseries and sins, so that we will bring them to the sacrament of Penance, and thus, through the words of divine forgiveness, we will raise the Cross of our Lord victoriously over our lives, over our weaknesses.

"If the first word of Christ's teaching, the first phrase of the Gospel Good News, was 'Repent, and believe in the Gospel' (metanoieite)," writes John Paul II, "the Sacrament of the Passion, Cross and Resurrection seems to strengthen and consolidate in an altogether special way this call in our souls. The Eucharist and Penance thus become in a sense two closely connected dimensions of authentic life in accordance with the spirit of the Gospel, of truly Christian life. The Christ who calls to the Eucharistic banquet is always the same Christ who exhorts us to penance and repeats his 'Repent.' Without this constant ever renewed endeavor for conversion, partaking of the Eucharist would lack its full redeeming effective-

18. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Forge*, no. 887; cf. *The Way*, nos. 538-539.

19. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow*, no. 686.

20. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 161.

ness and there would be a loss or at least a weakening of the special readiness to offer God the spiritual sacrifice in which our sharing in the priesthood of Christ is expressed in an essential and universal manner. In Christ, priesthood is linked with his Sacrifice, his self-giving to the Father; and, precisely because it is without limit, that self-giving gives rise in us human beings subject to numerous limitations to the need to turn to God in an ever more mature way and with a constant, ever more profound, conversion.²¹

In other words, in the unity of the Church's sacramental organism, the Eucharist and Penance complement each other in the struggle against sin. They are two different sacraments, and, at the same time, closely and intimately united. Each has its own special effects and purpose, but with a relationship to the effects and purpose of the other. The Eucharist always proclaims a call to penance, to conversion, to correspondence to Christ's love; and it leads sinners to sacramental Penance. Both the offering of the sacrifice and Holy Communion proclaim by their very nature that the enmity between the sinner and God has been objectively eliminated. Penance prepares us to participate, with a pure heart, in the liturgical offering of the "pure, holy and immaculate Victim;" to offer our lives to the Father, in Christ, with the strength of the Holy Spirit, to receive his Body and Blood, his whole Person, in Holy Communion.

Penance before Communion

The relationship between the Eucharist and Penance receives a new and powerful light when we recall that the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation has developed, since the beginnings of Christianity, in function of participation in the Eucharist.

As early as the third century, speaking of Eucharistic Communion, Origen says "the advantage to him who uses it is that he partakes of the bread with undefiled mind and pure conscience."²² And a few centuries later, at the end of the Patristic period in the West, St. Isidoro of Seville summed up as follows the universal position of the Church: "If there are such sins, which separate one, as dead, from the altar, one must first do penance, and only thus is one to receive this saving medicine. For whoever eats unworthily, 'eats and drinks judgment upon himself' (1 Cor 11:29)"²³

According to the living Tradition of the Church, for anyone who has sinned gravely after Baptism, reconciliation with God and with the Church by means of the sacrament of Penance is a required condition for receiving Eucharistic Communion.²⁴ In this respect, ecclesiastical legislation states: "Anyone who is conscious of grave sin may not celebrate Mass or receive the Body of the Lord without previously having been to sacramental confession, unless there is a grave reason and there is no

21. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, March 4, 1979, no. 20.

22. Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of St. Matthew* 11, 14; PG 13, 948.

23. St. Isidore of Seville, *On Ecclesiastical Offices* I, 18, 7; PL 83, 755-756.

24. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1385.

25. Code of Canon Law, can. 916.

opportunity to confess; in this case the person is to remember the obligation to make an act of perfect contrition, which includes the resolve to go to confession as soon as possible.”²⁵

Today there is a special need to recall this norm of the Church and to explain its dogmatic foundation. Many of the faithful seem to ignore it; some think that it is enough to participate in the celebration of the Eucharist to licitly receive Communion, without paying attention to the state of sin they might find themselves in. In fact, in many areas where the sacrament of Penance is seldom administered, there are often a large number of communions, and, on occasion, people who persist obstinately in open and grave sin come to receive the Blessed Sacrament. It is enough to consider the faithful who contract only civil marriages, or who are in *de facto* unions, or those who have formally collaborated in the promotion, approval, or application of civil laws that gravely offend against the law of God, as is the case with laws that authorize abortion or euthanasia.²⁶

In addition, as a number of pastors during the last Synod of Bishops pointed out, many people have lost the authentic sense of sin. Often merely subjective criteria are used to distinguish between good and evil, and the state of mortal sin is reduced to a few situations in life where one adopts a “fundamental option,” understood as a direct and formal rejection of God. This

position overlooks the gravity of transgressing the precepts of the Decalogue, and forgets that certain acts, included in the list of sins mentioned by St. Paul in the First Letter to the Corinthians (cf. *1 Cor* 6:9-10), in the Letter to the Galatians (cf. *Gal* 5:19-21) and in the Letter to the Ephesians (cf. *Eph* 5:5), separate men from friendship with God and from the kingdom of heaven.

A number of specious reasons exist (falsely based on Sacred Scripture, because its meaning is twisted) that try to justify participation in sacramental Communion without prior confession of mortal sins. The then Cardinal Ratzinger, years ago, noted the danger of viewing the Eucharist as simply the continuation of the meals with sinners that Jesus took part in throughout his life to lead them to conversion by his friendship. According to this hypothesis, the Eucharist would be the “table of sinners,” open to everyone without conditions. Some have even gone so far as to say that the reception of the Eucharist should not have any prior conditions linked with the sacraments of Baptism or Penance. Cardinal Ratzinger has refuted these specious arguments, emphasizing that Christ’s Last Supper, which is perpetuated in the Eucharist, was not one of the meals our Lord had with publicans and sinners. On the contrary, it was a very special meal, the Paschal meal, which was celebrated with one’s family. Therefore Christ gathered that night only with the apostles, who constituted his spiri-

26. Cf. Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, March 25, 2004, no. 83.

27. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, *Il Dio Vicino. L’eucaristia cuore della vita cristiana*, Torino, 2003, p. 58f. [English edition: *God is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life.*]

tual family, and whom he had prepared with his words and with the washing of their feet to receive Communion from his hands. As Cardinal Ratzinger said, the Eucharist is not the Sacrament of Reconciliation, although it presupposes this sacrament, but rather the “sacrament of the reconciled,” of those who are in God’s grace and are already in communion with him.²⁷

In one of his first homilies as Roman Pontiff, Benedict XVI once again returned to this point. “By faith, the Eucharist is an intimate mystery. Our Lord instituted the Sacrament in the Upper Room, surrounded by his new family, by the twelve apostles, a prefiguration and anticipation of the Church of all times. And so, in the liturgy of the ancient Church, the distribution of Holy Communion was introduced with the words *Sancta sanctis*: the holy gift is intended for those who have been made holy. In this way a response was given to the exhortation of St. Paul to the Corinthians: ‘A man should examine himself first; only then should he eat of the bread and drink of the cup’ (1 Cor 11: 28).”²⁸

Therefore, it is especially urgent to enlighten people’s consciences with an integral catechesis both about sin and about reconciliation, and also about the preparation needed to receive the Eucharist. These topics should be brought up in homilies, and in the sacrament of Penance, for Confession is a privileged means for forming consciences. “Sacramental confession is

not a human but a divine dialogue. It is a tribunal of divine justice and especially of mercy, with a loving judge who ‘has no pleasure in the death of the wicked; I desire that the wicked turn back from his way and live’ (*Ezek* 33:11).”²⁹ Not infrequently, referring to his own experience in confession, St. Josemaría would say: What a joy for my soul, to know that I have been forgiven by Jesus himself!

It is not a valid argument to say that one cannot find a text in Sacred Scripture that explicitly points out the need to confess grave sins to a minister of Reconciliation before going to communion. From the earliest times, it was always considered a grave offense, a sacrilege, to receive communion in mortal sin, since it directly involves the Body of Christ, which is holy and demands being received in a holy way, in accord with the words of St. Paul. “Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord” (1 Cor 11:27). That is to say, he who receives communion sacrilegiously will merit the punishment of one who mistreats the Body and Blood of Christ. “Let a man,” St. Paul continues, “examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself” (1 Cor 11:28-29).

Throughout the centuries, Tradition has found in this text of St. Paul not

28. Benedict XVI, Homily on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, May 26, 2005.

29. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 78.

only the general conditions required to receive the Eucharist worthily, but also the origin of the precept of confessing one's sins to those who have the power to absolve them, before communicating. Receiving the Eucharist with due respect requires the desire to seek union with Christ, and therefore the determination to reject what is an obstacle. Thus anyone in a state of grave sin, before receiving communion, should have recourse to the sacrament of Penance.

The destruction of sin and all its consequence, the way of repairing disobedience against God and attaining God's forgiveness, in the New Law was not left to man's decision. Christ himself definitively established its basic features, through the sacrament of Penance. Therefore, contrition, if truly sincere, seeks to recover friendship with God and always leads, at least implicitly, to the desire to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Sorrow for sins would be false if it was united to the rejection of God's command to confess them to the priest in the sacrament of Penance, since contrition comes from love for God, which is intrinsically incompatible with the rejection of a precept given by God himself: "If you love me," Jesus said to his disciples, "you will keep my commandments" (Jn 14:15).

Very much to the point here are the words of St. Augustine: "No one says to himself: I alone will do my penance before God . . . For were his words without meaning: 'what you loose on earth,

shall be loosed in heaven'? Were the keys to the Church of God given in vain? It is not sufficient, then, to confess to God; one needs to confess to those who have received from him the faculty and the power of binding and loosing."³⁰

Pope John Paul II repeatedly confirmed, with his warm and fatherly voice, the Church's teaching in this matter. In his last encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, he declared: "I therefore desire to reaffirm that in the Church there remains in force, now and in the future, the rule by which the Council of Trent gave concrete expression to the Apostle Paul's stern warning when it affirmed that, in order to receive the Eucharist in a worthy manner, 'one must first confess one's sins, when one is aware of mortal sin.'"³¹

This is a text of particular interest, since it authoritatively affirms the perennial validity of the penitential praxis prior to receiving Communion, while pointing out its dogmatic foundations: St. Paul's exhortation to the Corinthians, which the Council of Trent explained, basing itself on the living Tradition of the Church: "He who would communicate," the Council teaches, "ought to recall to mind the precept of the Apostle St. Paul: 'Let a man examine himself.' Now ecclesiastical usage declares that a examination is required so that no one, conscious of mortal sin, however contrite he may seem to himself, approach to the sacred Eucharist without previous sacramental confession."³²

30. St. Augustine, Sermon 382, 3; PL 39, 1711.

31. John Paul II, Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, (March 17, 2004), no. 36.

32. Council of Trent, session XIII, Decree on the Holy Eucharist, ch. 7; Denz.-Sch. 1646-1647.

To preach and recall the need for the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a sure criterion for pastoral efforts in regard to Penance. In this respect Pope John Paul II, in his Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei*, recommended “that in places of worship confessors be visibly present at the advertised times, that these times be adapted to the real circumstances of penitents, and that confessions be especially available before Masses, and even during Mass if there are other priests available, in order to meet the needs of the faithful.”³³

Finally, I would like to mention another situation: that of the faithful who are in God’s grace, but who feel the weight of their own wretchedness and are saddened by their lack of correspondence. In this case, they should not stay away from Communion. One need not wait until one is “perfect”—for we are always waiting—in order to receive our Lord sacramentally. St. Josemaría used to stress: “He has stayed here for you. It is not reverence to omit going to Communion when well disposed. It’s irreverence only when you receive him unworthily.”³⁴ “Go to Communion. It doesn’t show lack of respect. Go this very day when you have just got over that ‘spot of trouble.’—Have you forgotten that Jesus said: It is not by those who are well, but by those who are sick, that the physician is needed?”³⁵ I saw in the life of that holy priest his sincere sorrow and penitence, without scruples, for what he considered a lack of love for our God. In that situation, he would say

trustingly: “I hold on strongly to the Mercy of God, who comes to me in Communion, so that He can provide what I don’t know how to give Him.”

Here we do well to stress that union with our Lord in the Eucharist strengthens a Christian’s soul for the struggle against sin, so that one can always abide in Christ’s love, as he himself desires (cf. *Jn* 15:9). Hence the importance of the personal dispositions—faith, love, contrition, humility—needed to receive communion fruitfully. “It is not possible to ‘eat’ the Risen One, present under the sign of bread, as if it were a simple piece of bread. To eat this Bread is to communicate, to enter into communion with the person of the living Lord. This communion, this act of ‘eating,’ is truly an encounter between two persons; it is allowing our lives to be penetrated by the life of the One who is the Lord, of the One who is my Creator and Redeemer. The purpose of this communion, of this partaking, is the assimilation of my life with his, my transformation and conformation into the One who is living Love.”³⁶

The faithful who accept with devotion the love that Jesus offers them in the Eucharist, obtain the strength needed to sever all disordered attachment to creatures. Thus they attain the remission of the venial sins of which they are repentant, and also are helped to promptly and decisively separate themselves from occasions of offending

33. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Misericordia Dei*, April 7, 2002, no. 2.

34. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, no. 539.

35. *Ibid.*, no. 536.

36. Benedict XVI, Homily on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, May 26, 2005.

God. The Church teaches that the Eucharist is “an antidote whereby we may be freed from daily faults and be preserved from mortal sins.”³⁷

“We go to Jesus—and we ‘return’ to him—through Mary,”³⁸ St. Josemaría used to say. If we allow ourselves to be taught by Mary, “the woman of the Eucharist,” she will always lead us to the Eucharistic Jesus. And if ever we have the misfortune of separating ourselves from him through sin, she will help us return to Jesus, with a contrite heart, with faith and hope in his infinite mercy, through the sacrament of Penance.

Rome December 13, 2005

*At the opening of the academic year
of the Pontifical University of the
Holy Cross.*

As we begin a new year in the life of this University, we are especially thankful to our Lord for the year that has just ended. We find in our heart the need to exclaim, with the Apostles Peter and John: “We cannot help but speak of what we have seen and heard.”¹ Indeed, the year just ended has been rich in expressions of God’s love for us. We have known the sorrow and the joy of seeing the passing of our

beloved John Paul II and the abundant graces that God has poured out upon the Church and the world. With great hope we have lived through the days of the Conclave and have been filled with gratitude at the gift of the new Pope, Benedict XVI.

On the day following his election, the Holy Father said: “John Paul II’s funeral was a truly extraordinary experience in which, in a certain way, we glimpsed the power of God who, through his Church, wants to make a great family of all the peoples by means of the unifying power of Truth and Love.”² Yes, we have experienced this unifying force, and we find in it the nucleus of our task as a university: to unify in truth and in love.

We live in an age that experiences in a special way the desire for unity among peoples, at times as a reaction to the fact of deep divisions. The evidence of war and the multiple attacks against human life, both on the individual and social level, have brought about in men of good will a profound aspiration towards peace and concord. Nevertheless, a Christian is spurred to foster unity not only for negative reasons. Each of us feels spurred on by the charity of Christ, of which the Church is the sign and instrument.³ Our Lord, who prayed to the Father *ut omnes unum sint*,⁴ that we all might be one, has also left us the source and definitive mani-

37. Council of Trent, session XIII, Decree on the Holy Eucharist, ch. 2; Denz.-Sch. 1646-1638.

38. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *The Way*, no. 495.

1. Acts 4:20.

2. Benedict XVI, First message at the end of the Eucharistic Concelebration with the Cardinal electors in the Sistine Chapel, April 20, 2005.

3. Cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic const. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 1.

4. Jn 17:21.