

Articles and Conferences

Rome

March 29, 2007

Lenten Conference, "The Eucharist, mystery of light," at the Basilica of St. Mary Major, Rome

When meditating on the institution of the Eucharist, the fifth mystery of light, a question arises: how can we contemplate it in its proper perspective? The evangelists Luke and John give us the answer, by revealing to us the heart of Jesus when he instituted this great mystery.

Luke cites the words of Jesus himself: "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer" (Lk 22:15). Our Lord's heart harbored a longing in which the twelve apostles held an important place. What he fervently desired was to celebrate the paschal meal precisely with them. He knew that what was about to happen in that meal would influence their lives in a decisive way, especially the institution of the Eucharist. This is linked to his passion, which is included in Jesus' ardent desire, as he himself makes clear to us.

John, when introducing his account of the Last Supper, clarifies the nature and extent of Christ's desire: "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his

own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). Only love to the extreme of death on the cross explains all that was about to happen in the paschal triduum that was beginning and that, passing through his passion and death, would culminate in the resurrection.

The radiation of love emanating from the heart of Christ is the true light that enables us to understand the full meaning of the institution of the Eucharist. St. John, when he relates how Judas left the Cenacle after deciding to hand over Jesus, tells us a specific detail: "It was night" (Jn 13:30). The significance of this fact transcends the simple chronology of the event. St. Augustine comments that Judas himself was the night: that is to say, he bore the darkness within his own heart.¹ Outside was the darkness; in the Cenacle, the light. It was, above all, the light of Christ's love, which shines forth in the gift of the Eucharist, a gift of inexhaustible richness for our meditation.

Our beloved Pope John Paul II advised all the children of the Church to meditate in the Rosary on the institution of this inestimable gift: "A final mystery of light," he wrote, "is the institution of the Eucharist, in which Christ offers his Body and Blood as food under the signs of bread and wine, and testifies 'to the end' his love for humanity (Jn 13:1), for whose salvation he will offer him-

1. "Et ipse qui exivit, erat nox" ("He who went out, was night") In *Ioannis Evangelium*, n. 62, 6.

self in sacrifice.”² Thus the Pope highlights three aspects that sum up everything else: the offering of the Body and Blood of the Lord as food; his love to the end; his sacrifice. Let us begin by considering Christ’s love.

Eucharistic love

“The institution of the Eucharist sacramentally anticipated the events which were about to take place, beginning with the agony in Gethsemane.”³ Let us consider what Jesus did and said when he instituted the Eucharist. St. Luke tells us: “And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And likewise the cup after supper, saying, ‘This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’” (Lk 22:19-20).

Jesus says that his body is being given up. Giving is a proof of love, and the more intimate what is given, the greater is the love. Jesus gives his body, his blood, that is to say, his life; he gives himself. It is, above all, a self-giving made to his Father. A precious self-giving, since it stems from his love, a love obedient to the point of giving his life: “I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (Jn 14:31). “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life, that I may take it again” (Jn 10:17). Jesus’ obedient love dissolves the huge mound of selfishness and disobedience to God built up throughout the history of

mankind. It thus becomes also a gift of love to us, his gift and his Father’s. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

Jesus, with his body and his blood, gives himself to us not only in the hours of his passion and death, but also in the Eucharist. When he promised this gift in the synagogue at Capernaum, most of those present were disconcerted and incredulous: “How can this man give us his flesh to eat?” (Jn 6:52). They did not believe in his divine power, a creative power filled with infinite love. The Eucharistic gift puts human reason to the test, since it is blinded by such brightness. To walk in this light requires the faith that comes from God, as Jesus explained to them, exhorting them to be docile: “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him...Every one who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me” (Jn 6:44-45). But the Eucharistic gift also puts the human heart to the test; it is as if were a challenge to our selfishness, for if Jesus puts himself at our disposition to such an extent, how should we correspond to his generous love? Love demands love. Carelessness and indifference are a sign of a miserly heart.

Christ’s gift affects each one of us personally. We would be mistaken if we considered it as a gift made to the human race as a great anonymous mass. We have to reason in another way, with the logic that St.

2. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariæ*, October 16, 2002, no. 21/2.

3. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, April 17, 2003, no. 3.

Paul teaches us: “the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (*Gal* 2:20). Therefore, when we meditate on the mystery of the institution of the Eucharist, we can listen to Jesus’ words as truly addressed to us, present in the decisive events of the three days of his passion, death and resurrection. And this is not a merely a matter of the imagination. As John Paul II said in his final encyclical, “In this gift Jesus Christ entrusted to his Church the perennial making present of the paschal mystery. With it he brought about a mysterious ‘oneness in time’ between that Triduum and the passage of the centuries.”⁴

By instituting the Eucharist before his passion, Jesus wanted to make certain, so to speak, that he would have us very present in those moments of his redemptive sacrifice, in order to involve us in the great drama of his boundless love. As the Holy Father wrote in his recent Apostolic Exhortation: “The institution of the Eucharist demonstrates how Jesus’ death, for all its violence and absurdity, became in him a supreme act of love and mankind’s definitive deliverance from evil.”⁵ With the Eucharist Jesus wanted us to breathe the pure atmosphere of his love, to make it the energy of our life; he wanted to give us the love that is authentic, and teach us to turn it into a life of union, gift, and availability.

All this helps explain why Jesus wanted to accompany the institution of the Eucharist with a long dis-

course with his disciples in which love is the recurring theme—love to the end, because, as he said, “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (*Jn* 15:13). This is the love that flows forth from the intimacy of the divine life: “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love” (*Jn* 15:9).

Christ’s sacrifice

The Eucharistic mystery Jesus instituted is the surprising solution to the human impossibility of being able to be present at his redemptive sacrifice. The Eucharist enables us to overcome the distance of miles and centuries separating us from the drama of Calvary. He, together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, has manifested his infinite wisdom and unlimited power in making the sacrifice of Calvary the perennial source of divine life for the faithful in the Church. “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 we had been present there. Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits.”⁶

When he said to his Apostles, and in them to their successors in the priesthood, “do this in remembrance of me” (*Lk* 22:19), Jesus wanted his words to resonate in the Masses of all times, words that transubstantiated the bread into his body “given for you,” and the wine into his blood, “which is poured out for you.”

4. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 5/2.

5. Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, February 22, 2007, no. 10.

6. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 11/3.

Efficacious words that have never lost their consecratory power throughout the centuries. Christ thus sacramentally anticipated what would occur in the following hours, up to his last breath on the cross: his body given over and his blood poured out. It was his sacrifice that would be perpetuated each time that priests, celebrating the Eucharist, would follow his command: "Do this in remembrance of me."

To take part in the sacrifice of Calvary "as if we had been present there." This is a consoling reality, I might also say an exciting one, but one that at the same time calls us to an inescapable personal effort. In fact, according to the Gospel accounts, there were many people present at Calvary. Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was present there, and with her was John, the beloved disciple, and the pious women; the two crucified thieves were there, the centurion and the soldiers, the high priests with the scribes and the elders, and the people passing by, who were quite a few, "for the place where Jesus was crucified was near the city" (*Jn* 19:20). These persons acted in quite different ways: from our Lady's full union with Jesus and the faith of the repentant thief, to the mocking of many people and the brutality of the soldiers, and the indifference of some of the passers-by.

"As if we had been present there." In what way? The repentant thief acknowledged his sins; the other thief didn't. The Blessed Virgin Mary was fully united to Jesus in mind and heart; others were only on-lookers. Those who mocked seemed

to be moved by the devil. Jesus' words to the Apostles, "do this in remembrance of me," as he instituted the Eucharist, are addressed not only to his successors in the priesthood but also to every Christian. We should ask ourselves: in my participation at Mass, the memorial of Christ's sacrifice, with which persons on Calvary do I want to identify myself, and with which do I in fact identify myself?

Jesus' words affect us personally. Nevertheless, he turned to the apostles gathered there, he spoke to them in the plural. He is concerned about the salvation of all men and women, but here he views all as part of himself, of the Church that is his body, which finds in the Eucharist one of the most decisive moments of its formation, because the sacrifice that in the Eucharist is to be perpetuated down through the centuries is the sacrifice of the New Covenant. The four narrations of the institution of the Eucharist relate our Lord's words in this regard: "This is my blood of the covenant" (*Mt* 26:28; cf. *Mk* 14:24); "this cup...is the new covenant in my blood" (*Lk* 22:20; 1 *Cor* 11:25).

As Pope John Paul II explains, "the actions and words of Jesus at the Last Supper laid the foundations of the new messianic community, the People of the New Covenant."⁷ Meditating on the institution of the Eucharist should increase in us the sense of belonging to the Church, of communion with the others, children of God in the Church. It should increase in us our hunger for unity.

The fact of being involved through the Eucharist in Christ's redemptive sacrifice shouldn't lead us only to welcome the graces that come from him and to be moved by his sufferings and immense love. By instituting the Eucharistic mystery, Jesus has wanted something more from us. As the Holy Father taught in his first encyclical: "The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate Logos, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving."⁸ Like a father who wants to teach his young child to be compassionate and generous with the poor, and who puts some coins in the child's hand to give to a beggar asking for alms, so Jesus with the Eucharist puts his love in our hands to the extreme of his self-giving on the cross so that we can have something to offer to our Father God. This is not a pious exaggeration; it is the clear doctrine of the Church, as taught by the Second Vatican Council when referring to all the faithful: "Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life, they offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with It."⁹ Jesus offers himself and gives us the possibility of uniting ourselves to his offering.

The source of his sacrifice is his boundless love, both divine and human. This love stems from the fullness of the Holy Spirit that sanctifies his holy humanity and constitutes him as the Christ, the one who fully possesses the anointing of the

Spirit. The letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus "through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God" (*Heb* 9:14). As John Paul II explains: "the Holy Spirit acted in a special way in this absolute self-giving of the Son of Man, in order to transform this suffering into redemptive love."¹⁰ And through the gift of the same Spirit, divine love is infused into us, as St. Paul says: "God's love has been poured into our hearts, through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (*Rom* 5:5). Therefore we should not be surprised that Jesus put his love-offering in our hands so that we too can offer it to the Father. He, in coming to us, gives us his Spirit, who is the Love that, in the bosom of the Trinity, proceeds from the union of love between the Father and the Son.

The Spirit teaches us to love.

There's still more. We have entered into Jesus' act of self-offering in such a way that, in offering the Divine Victim, we can offer ourselves with him. This also is a gift of Jesus and of his Spirit, as the Church prays in a Eucharistic Prayer: "May he make us an everlasting gift to you."¹¹ A sacrifice of the whole person, and therefore of one's actions, as the Council explains in regard to the laity, although the teaching can be applied to all the faithful: "all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if

8. Benedict XVI, Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, December 25, 2005, no. 13.

9. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11/1.

10. John Paul II, Encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem*, May 18, 1986, no. 40.

11. The Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer III.

carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become 'spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ' (1 *Pet* 2:5). Together with the offering of the Lord's body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist."¹² Thus not only do we fulfill the Eucharistic commandment, "do this in remembrance of me," but also the other commandments of the Last Supper: that of service ("If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet." *Jn* 13:14), and that of love ("a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" *Jn* 13:34).

The commandment of service indicates the exterior form of our spiritual sacrifice; that of love, the interior form. While the Eucharist gives us the strength to carry these out. The Eucharist, love, service—three realities that characterize the Last Supper. Three realities that also define the life of the Church and that should mark the life of each Christian.

The gift of the Body and Blood of the Lord

When instituting the Eucharist, Jesus gave his body as food under the appearance of bread ("Take, eat, this is my body" *Mt* 26:26) and his blood as drink under the appearance of wine ("Drink of it all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is

poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" *Mt* 26:27-28). The promise of the bread of life was fulfilled: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any one 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).

The Eucharistic gift is the marvelous manifestation of God's condescension towards us, as the Fathers of the Church liked to say. Let us listen to St. John Chrysostom: "If we were incorporeal, he would have given us purely incorporeal gifts; but since the soul is united to the body, he has given us the spiritual in the sensible. How many say now: I would like to see our Lord, his appearance, his clothes, his shoes. But here you see and touch and eat him. You want to see his clothes, and he gives his very self to you, not only for you to see, but to touch him and to eat him, and to have him within yourself."¹³

Eucharistic participation in Christ's redemptive sacrifice is thus converted into intimate union with him. This is represented by the sign of food, the most expressive that exists. It is maximally expressive in the Eucharist because it immeasurably surpasses the mere signification. We receive the body of Christ in all its substantial reality, not only as an operative power in us. Our union with Christ reaches the highest summits, but we dare to affirm it trusting solely in his explicit words:

12. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 34/2.

13. St. John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew*, 82, 4.

"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me" (*Jn* 6:56-57).

This parallelism between Eucharistic communion and the intimacy of the Trinitarian union between the Father and the Son leads us to realize that to eat the Body of Christ is the ideal way to profoundly live our condition as sons of God in the Son, that is, in Jesus. The sequence *Lauda, Sion* of the Roman Missal calls the Eucharist "bread of the children," bread that feeds us as children, perfecting our participation in the divine filiation of Jesus. We receive it as food, but it is He who assimilates us to Himself. He is the protagonist of Eucharistic communion. Nevertheless, it never ceases to be a gift that invites us, that impels us to receive it with adequate interior dispositions. Jesus says: take and eat. He calls us therefore to an active role in his transforming action, that is to say, to second his action in us, without putting up resistance.

This transforming action attains a particular efficacy in Communion, but Jesus remains also after Mass in the tabernacle, because he knows that we have continual need of him, and he wants to be always accessible to us. St. Josemaría Escrivá, a great lover of the Eucharist, invites us to experience this intimacy with Jesus in the tabernacle: "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."¹⁴

Anyone who draws close to Jesus in Communion and then in the tabernacle, who knows how to contemplate and listen to his words in the Gospels, little by little is identified with him, and attains, so to speak, his way of thinking and acting and learns to look at others with the eyes of Jesus, as brothers and sisters. He learns to assimilate the commandments of love and of service.

We still need to look at one final point in the words with which Jesus instituted the Eucharist: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (*Mt* 26:28). All of us are invited to enter into this "many." Jesus doesn't exclude anyone, but anyone can exclude himself, because the blood is poured out for the remission of sins and this remission is not carried out if the person does not break with sin. Therefore the Eucharist is a continuous call to conversion. "The Synod Fathers rightly stated that a love for the Eucharist leads to a growing appreciation of the Sacrament of Reconciliation."¹⁵ The sacrament of conversion, of penance, of confession, of pardon, of reconciliation: these are the names the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* gives to this sacrament (nos. 1423-1424), which prepares the way for full participation in the Eucharistic sacrifice, for com-

14. St. Josemaría Escrivá, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 154.

15. *Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 20.

munion with Jesus. If a Christian marked by sin rejects the path instituted by Christ himself to reconcile ourselves with him, how can he draw close to receive him in communion? It would be an irreverent fiction to draw close externally as a friend, while remaining an enemy who does not want to be reconciled with Him.

On designating the institution of the Eucharist as a mystery of light in the holy Rosary, John Paul II offered all the children of the Church a marvelous opportunity to meditate on it frequently, even daily. We would like to find there our Lady, our Mother, but the Evangelists don't mention her in their accounts of the Last Supper. The Pope himself has shown us how to find her, inviting us to listen once again to the words of institution: "Do this in remembrance of me" (*Lk* 22:19). In the 'memorial' of Calvary all that Christ accomplished by his passion and his death is present. Consequently all that Christ did with regard to his Mother for our sake is also present. To her he gave the beloved disciple and, in him, each of us: 'Behold, your Son!' To each of us he also says: 'Behold your mother!' (cf. *Jn* 19:26-27).¹⁶ We certainly want to consider these words in meditating on the fifth sorrowful mystery, but also in contemplating the institution of the Eucharist. This is the memorial that makes present what happens on Calvary and that contains the Body and Blood of Jesus, formed in the womb of the Virgin Mary, the first true tabernacle of all time.

Rome

April 16, 2007

*On the 80th birthday
of Benedict XVI*

Happy Birthday, Holy Father!

A message published on the Internet on the 80th birthday of Pope Benedict XVI

The birthday of the Holy Father recalls the white smoke from the chimney of the Sistine Chapel on April 19, 2005, white smoke that announced not only an election, but also a sacrifice. It was the sign of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's willing acceptance of the burden of being the successor of St. Peter, at a time when he was looking forward to a well-merited rest after long years of intense work in the Lord's vineyard.

God gives the Holy Father a universal paternity. To be the Roman Pontiff means to become the father of a multitude of sons and daughters, who have to be guided and cared for in their many needs, and whom he must love in all circumstances.

On an anniversary one's thoughts usually go to the past, but it is also a time to consider the present and the future. It is a time to imagine all the savory fruits which the tree of the Church will produce through the generosity of Benedict XVI's dedication. He is a man who has embraced the task entrusted to him as Christ embraced the Cross. And he has

16. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 57/1.