



ADOREMUS 2018

Symposium Keynote

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The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Church's life and mission

The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us, quoting the words of the Council Fathers in the Second Vatican Council¹, 'the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life'². Living our faith in this present moment belongs to a rich and developing tradition. This is certainly true when we consider the Eucharist within the life of the Church. And what is the catalyst for this developing tradition into which we are immersed today? In his *Principles of Catholic Theology*, Joseph Ratzinger suggests, the seat of all faith is the "memoria Ecclesiae"³. This is because the notion of memory brings together being and time. Memory is at the heart of the Eucharist. Christian faith is certainly about remembering, the continual calling to mind what the Lord has done for us. This may surprise you, for Joseph Ratzinger, the theologian who became Pope, this remembering in faith is best expressed within the ministry of catechesis. He tells us this, 'the Church's creed has been developed, above all, from the existential context of the catechumenate, and it was in this context that it was promulgated.'⁴ Catechesis then, is not about the transmission of intellectual statements of faith, constantly needing to be updated⁵. Catechesis is about bringing others into our faith experience of the saving events of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. As Ratzinger puts it, the Church 'came into existence because someone lived and suffered his word; by reason of his death, his word is understood as word par excellence, as the meaning of all being, as logos.'⁶ So being a Christian means, 'the life embraced the word, and the word formed the life.'⁷ In this sense, terms such as progressive or traditionalist really have little meaning. Again, in the words of Ratzinger, 'What we Christians must learn from Christ is, therefore, neither revolution nor traditionalism but something quite different: that we are to read Scripture from the Father's perspective, that is, from the perspective of a concrete relationship to God.'⁸

This same theologian also suggests, 'a frequently recurring problem in the intellectual climate of our age

- 1 Lumen Gentium 11
- 2 CCC1324
- 3 Ratzinger J, *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 23
- 4 *ibid*, 26
- 5 *cf ibid*, 26
- 6 *ibid*, 26
- 7 *ibid*, 26
- 8 *ibid*, 98

ADOREMUS 2018

Symposium Keynote

is that of reconciling history with the present - of transforming the events and words of a time now past into the realities and needs of the present.⁹

There is more we may say about a theological reflection on the theme of Eucharist and Church. Authentic Christian theology takes responsibility for the witness of the community of faith. This is because the community of faith exists before theological inquiry. In the words of Henri de Lubac, ‘the mystery of the Trinity has opened to us a totally new perspective: the ground of being is *communio*.¹⁰’ The Church is a sovereign work of the Lord, and must always be open to the creative and saving realities of divine revelation. So in a very real way, theological inquiry involves the relationship between the biblical events of revelation and the unfolding tradition. Theology is about event and action, more than it is about words and intellectual ideas. It must become truly orthodox, a word often associated with the correct articulation of doctrine, but in fact meaning right praise, and therefore concerning liturgical celebration. The liturgical celebration of the Eucharist then, is justly called primary theology. The Eucharist is a principal form of revelation. In so many respects, all theological inquiry, including a theology of the Church, is a reflection upon, and a drawing out of, what is given to us in the liturgy.

In all of this, we are invited to keep in mind the now familiar awe-inspiring statement near the beginning of *Deus Caritas Est*, ‘Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction.’¹¹ This, together with our reflection so far, tells us the Eucharist is not a fact to be proven but the announcement of a Person to encounter. Look also to Benedict XVI’s address to the International Theological Commission in December 2010, in which he lays the foundation for a life-giving theology. He suggests that this is an experience of encounter with the love of Christ in which we are invited to experience the paschal mystery. We experience the paschal mystery in an unmediated way in the Eucharist. And this encounter with Christ’s love for us produces a true knowledge.

This relationship with the Eucharistic mystery can never be about knowing alone. Knowledge is not the real fruit of theological reflection but rather, a love which is the fruit of encounter. The Gospel tells us, the demons know who our Lord is - what they lack, is understanding, and even more, a deep personal commitment which alone brings about true life¹². Again, Benedict XVI’s remarks to the ITC, ‘Whoever has discovered in Christ the love of God, infused by the Holy Spirit in our hearts, wishes to know better the one who loves him and whom he loves. Knowledge and love sustain one another in turn. As the Fathers of the Church affirmed, whoever loves God is impelled to become, in a certain sense, a theologian, one who speaks with God, who thinks of God and seeks to think with God.’ You cannot expect me to come to Liverpool from Birmingham, without mentioning our very own city saint, Blessed John Henry Newman. Newman in *A Grammar of Assent* distinguishes two kinds of knowing, “notional” and “real”.

9 *ibid* 9

10 Quoted in *ibid* 22-23

11 *Deus Caritas Est* 1

12 Cf Mk 1.24

ADOREMUS 2018

Symposium Keynote

One contemporary theologian¹³ suggests these may be called “abstract knowledge” and “experiential knowledge”; knowledge of the head or of the heart. I sense this is a good way into thinking about the Eucharist. We are not primarily in the business of the notional or abstract knowledge of the head, but rather, the real and experiential knowing of the heart.

We may suggest then, “the fruit of theological reflection is the bringing to birth and nurturing of that awe and wonder which gives praise to the living God.¹⁴” This raises our discussion beyond the interminable debates about what is traditional and what is novel. And perhaps von Balthasar best presents all this most admirably, and issues us with a warning, and those of us involved in a catechetical sharing of our eucharistic faith with others, should definitely heed these words, ‘whatever is merely put in storage, handed down without any fresh efforts being made on one’s own part... putrifies, like the manna did. And the longer the living tradition has been broken through purely mechanical repetition, the more difficult it may become to renew it.¹⁵’

I sense this is an important point to ponder in regard to our topic, the Eucharist in the life of the Church. For this reflection also has a living context within ecclesial mission. In terms of this mission, and again quoting Joseph Ratzinger, ‘our principal need is for a reconstruction of the existential context of catechumenal training in the faith as the source of a common experience of the Spirit that can thus become also the foundation of realistic reflection.¹⁶’ To my mind, this breathtaking idea focuses on a concern for all of us, and also points us towards where we may address this concern. Our experience of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults means this often becomes an intellectual programme rather than what it actually is, a liturgical journey into deeper encounter with the Lord, and principally through the Eucharist. It is one question to ask, do our people know their faith from the perspective of an intellectual sense of knowing. It is a more profound question to ask, do our people encounter the living Jesus within Eucharistic liturgical celebration?

As we have seen, the Eucharist is about loving more than about knowing. Being Church invites us to a true engagement with Jesus; on the Lord’s Day, daily for many, as we celebrate the sacred mysteries. Eucharistic adoration is also a privileged meeting place with the Lord. And of course, there is that contemplative prayer which St Teresa of Jesus describes as a companionable close sharing between friends. There is another place where we encounter Jesus, as Pope Francis constantly reminds us, in the faces of those whose lives are poor and broken. This particular meeting with the Lord is truly eucharistic.

Some of you may recall the haunting words of Karl Rahner half a century ago now, ‘The Christian of the future will be a mystic or he will not exist at all.¹⁷’ This prophetic observation is still worthy of our attention today.

13 Robert P. Imbelli S.J. of Boston College
14 Oakley D, Pastoral Ministry, xi
15 von Balthasar H. Explorations in Theology 157
16 Ratzinger J. op cit, 26
17 Rahner K Theological Investigations vol 20, 149



ADOREMUS 2018

Symposium Keynote

And if we place this mysticism within a eucharistic context, then existentially, we disciples find ourselves living a spiritual experience of hungering and thirsting, more than a sense of self-fulfilled contentment. Because that was the experience of Jesus, the Bread of Life, he hungered for our salvation, he thirsted for justice and righteousness. The Old Testament manna was daily food for a journey, just as the Eucharist is food for a pilgrim people of God. All too often, Christians seek a settled and rigid life, a life that does not change in a pilgrim's way, that tries to hold on to something and, in this settled way, does not sit comfortably with the eucharistic verbs, take, bless, break and share.

What stops us sharing communion, holy communion, with the Blessed Trinity and with each other? The answer is of course sin. Genesis 3 is about living with shame, our faces turned away from God, and each other for that matter. It is one of the most painful chapters in the Scriptures, haunting in the sense in which it so clearly speaks to human experience. And yet, as the pilgrim people of faith know only too well, the story of the Fall is not the final word. Like the father in the parable of the lost son, God is always looking for us, even if it is we who choose to turn away.

If we are going to consider the Eucharist in the life of the Church, then we must consider the theme of mercy. To receive Jesus in the Eucharist is to receive mercy. In his encyclical letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, St John Paul II wrote this, 'I wish once more to recall this truth and to join you, my dear brothers and sisters, in adoration before this mystery: a great mystery, a mystery of mercy. What more could Jesus have done for us? Truly, in the Eucharist, he shows us a love which goes "to the end" (cf. Jn 13:1), a love which knows no measure.' (EdE, 11)

At the beginning of the recent Year of Mercy, the Church received the gift of our Holy Father's text, *Misericordiae Vultus*. Pope Francis spoke of the fundamental mystery of mercy offered to us in our brokenness, 'Jesus Christ is the face of the Father's mercy.' (1) And Jesus asks us, as the Father asked humanity in Genesis 3, 'Where are you?' Behind this question is this truth, that God will come looking for us, that he intends to find us, that sin is not the final word. How we need to hear that truth. Jesus is always present to us in the tabernacle, in times of adoration, and how often we choose to turn away from the face of the Father's mercy.

God asks us, 'Where are you?', and our response to this divine question begins with the quality of my engagement with Eucharistic mercy in my life, making sure this does not descend into mere ritual or observance, making the celebration of the Mass and Adoration, a real encounter with the fundamental question which God asks humankind, 'Where are you?'

I want then, to offer a few thoughts about our meeting with mercy within our eucharistic encounter with Christ in the life of the Church. And the context for this must always be within an understanding of discipleship as missionary, as reaching out to others in order to welcome them into the communion we have come to know and appreciate. *Misericordiae Vultus* describes mercy as 'a wellspring of joy, serenity and peace.' (no2) In our daily lives, we do not always drink deeply from the wells of joy, serenity and peace. We cannot avoid or escape the world we live in. Listening to the news, challenged by the



ADOREMUS 2018

Symposium Keynote

conversations around us, we seem to be back in the so-called dark ages. From time to time, it is easy for us to become despondent, burdened by all this, even overwhelmed would not be too strong a term. We can hear things which are challenging, things which get into our minds and mess us up if we are not careful. After all, as the apostle Paul writes, 'For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.' (Eph 6.12) Almost instinctively, it seems to me, good disciples know they are unable to bear this burden on their own, and they know exactly where they need to take the challenges of daily life. They take all this to the Good Shepherd in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. They join their own burden to the One who carries our burdens, the Lamb of God who was sent to carry the weight of sin.

When we come before Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament and realise how much we are loved by the Lord and shown his mercy, this leads to a certain way of looking at things, to being joyful and to being grateful. It seems at times, there are few signs of joy and gratitude in the lives of many disciples called to be missionary.

Many disciples of Jesus are somewhat broken, wounded and crippled by resentment, a burning anger, a furious sense that they are unappreciated, unloved, unrewarded. It all seems to be part of the spirit of our age.

So what do we need to do, to become more completely, the pilgrim people God wants us to be, fulfilled, energised, ready for service as disciples of Christ? We need to enter into the meaning of Eucharist, thanksgiving, the spirit that lies within the words of the psalmist, 'Bless the Lord oh my soul' (Psalm 103). If we disciples begin to look as though we have found the pearl of great price, and to mix the Gospel metaphors, not buried it in a field somewhere, then others might take our good news message more seriously. And hopefully, I have already given you a few ideas to reflect on how we might free ourselves to bless the Lord, truly present to us in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar.

To meet with Jesus in the Eucharist is to encounter the power of the divine Logos made flesh, and in those Johannine terms we see that recognising mercy towards ourselves and others is to encounter God's power. In the words of Pope Francis, quoting the Angelic Doctor, 'It is proper to God to exercise mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way. Saint Thomas Aquinas' words show that God's mercy, rather than a sign of weakness, is the mark of his omnipotence.' But I want to reflect a little more on this liberating insight of St Thomas Aquinas, 'It is proper to God to exercise mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way. God's mercy, rather than a sign of weakness, is the mark of his omnipotence.' We are invited here to think of the Eucharist as an instrument of divine healing, a fountain of saving and merciful power to bring us true salvation.

Living the Eucharist at the heart of the Church today brings us into an experience of what it means to be the pilgrim people of God. Our hearts need to be formed so that our vision is that of a heart which understands the power of one who said after feeding the multitude with bread and fishes, 'Gather up



ADOREMUS 2018

Symposium Keynote

the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’ (Jn 6.12). This gathering so that nothing is lost, is a rich example of what being missionary today involves. A heart, shaped by the Eucharist, will come to know, nothing will be wasted, and especially our struggles and even our failings. Our hearts need to be generous enough to persevere in service. But how are we going to break out from the deep-down instinct, which suggests this is something I can do by myself? There is only one way, the way of authentic pastoral charity, in itself, a gift from the Lord as we seek to become empty and filled up with nothing less than Christ himself. To put this bluntly, unless I have a heart that fills me with a desire to lay down my life for you, I won’t have the spiritual energy to lead you to the place imagined in my pastoral vision.

St John Vianney knew this. We remember him as the great confessor, the miracle worker, the one to whom crowds flocked - but maybe we forget where it all began: the broken down church, the indifferent community, the hostile response to his ministry. His response to this challenging place called Ars? He spent hours before the tabernacle, to become a priest who lived the Eucharist he offered every morning.

The response of the patron of priests was to enter a programme of clear and determined spiritual intent. First of all, he began to pray and fast, hours of praying in his little church, days of severe fasting. And then his programme of visiting, faithful, constant, talking about the things that mattered to the people: harvests and storms, rural matters in a country community. Patient and persistent, this parish priest won the confidence of the families entrusted to him. In his profoundly eucharistic heart, our saint knew the people needed joy and fun in their lives - but not the sort they found in the four taverns for a community of just over two hundred, the fun they found in dubious entertainment which just needed a fiddler for a flash mob-type dance. So he provided his own version of entertainment. The conversion of this little village didn’t happen overnight. But when it did, this was his living out of a eucharistic heart focused upon Jesus truly present in the Blessed Sacrament.

So how are we going to do it? From time to time in the parish, I used to speak of the “offer-it-up” mentality; and the grey-heads would smile and nod - they knew exactly what I was talking about. In my boyhood, I never received sympathy from my mother. Falling off the bike, getting a bloody nose from some neighbourhood bully, being humiliated at school: all would be greeted with the maternal invitation, ‘offer it up son’ - sometimes for the holy souls, often for the missions, even for the conversion of England: but offer it up and make use of it. Something of this has stuck with me, flavoured with the little way of Therese (or at least a version of it until I discovered it wasn’t about my efforts, but the way of trust and confidence). The offering up of humiliation for those amongst whom we live and serve: what a noble vocation!

Luke tells us about the widow Anna, ‘She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.’ (Lk. 2: 37) In my experience, fasting is always a challenge, but I’ve discovered something powerful about it lately. It works better if we do it for a purpose, it works even more, if we accompany it with adoration. Jesus, the Bread of Life, will fill us somehow in a most unexpected manner.



ADOREMUS 2018

Symposium Keynote

In my seminary community, just as in others I am sure, there is a visit to the Blessed Sacrament after lunch, an opportunity for that real pleading with the Lord, when we keep knocking on his door throughout the day. And this echoes the visit of many throughout our land, to the tabernacles of our churches, still a feature of our ecclesial experience.

Offering up our sufferings, fasting and prayer, are the three most powerful forms of joining ourselves to Jesus in his eucharistic presence. We can use these means: to strengthen ourselves against temptation, to grow in holiness, to find perspective in our lives, to win others to Christ, to achieve what we seek for the communities we live in, to become the ecclesial sacrament of Christ presented to us in the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.