

(English translation)

Rocca di Papa, October, 4 1976

The Eucharist and the New Testament

Jesus Eucharist, what presumption, what audacity it is to speak of you, you who, present in the churches of all the world, know the secrets, the confidential words, the hidden problems, the sighs of millions of people, the tears of joyous conversions known to you alone, you the heart of the Church.

We would not speak of you at all, for we do not like making a break in the reserve that is due to a love so high, so lofty as yours, if it were not that our own love seeks to overcome every fear and would like to go beyond, a bit beyond the veil of the white host and the wine in the golden chalice.

Forgive our daring! But love wants to know in order to love even more so as not to end this earthly journey without having discovered, at least a little, who you are.

And yet we have to talk about Eucharist ... because we are Christians, and in the Church, our mother, we live and bring her the ideal of unity.

Now, no mystery of faith has as much to do with unity as the Eucharist. The Eucharist opens up unity and brings out all its content. In fact, it is through the Eucharist that the consummation of the unity of men with God and of men with one another happens, and the unity of all the cosmos with its Creator.

God made himself man. And so we have Jesus on earth. He could do everything. But the logic of love demanded that, once he had taken a step like this from the Trinity to earthly life, he should not stay just for 33 years, though with a divinely extraordinary life like his, but that he should find a way of staying in every century and especially of being present in every point of the world in what was the highest moment of his love: sacrifice and glory, death and resurrection. And he did remain. With his divine imagination he invented the Eucharist.

It is his love which reaches the extreme.

Thérèse of Lisieux would put it like this: 'Oh Jesus, let me say, in overflowing gratitude, let me say that your love reaches madness.'¹

The institution of the Eucharist

But let us hear how it all took place. Matthew, Mark, Luke and Paul talk about it.

Luke says: 'When the hour came he took his place at table, and the apostles with him. And he said to them, "I have longed to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; because I tell you, I shall not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God" ...

Then he took some bread, and when he had given thanks, broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which will be given for you, do this as a memorial of me".

He did the same with the cup after supper, and said, "This cup is the covenant in my blood which will be poured out for you" (Lk. 22:14-20).

If Jesus had not been God, I don't see how in so few solemn words he could have presented realities that are so new, unpredictable, and fathomless that they cast you into ecstasy, because, once they are understood a little, human nature can not withstand such things.

Jesus, you are there the only one who knows everything, you alone realize that your gesture ends centuries of waiting, and see the infinite consequences of what you are doing to carry out that divine plan foreseen by the Trinity from all eternity: the Church which has its beginning on earth and which penetrates deep into the future depths of the kingdom. I repeat, if you had not been God, how could you have talked and acted in such a way?

¹ Thérèse of Lisieux, *Manuscrits autobiographiques*, manuscrit 'B' deuxième partie, Lisieux, 1957. Cf. *Autobiography of a Saint*, trans. Ronald Knox, Harvill Press, London, 1958, p. 241.

But something of what your heart felt in that moment does shine through to us in the words, 'I have longed', and there is an immense happiness; 'before my passion', and there is the meeting between the cross and joy and the link between these two things, because what you were about to do was to be your testament and a person's testament is only valid after his death. You left us an inheritance beyond human measure; you left us yourself.

Pierre Julien Eymard, founder of the Blessed Sacrament Fathers, says: 'Jesus Christ, too, wants to have his memorial ... his masterpiece to make him immortal in the hearts of his followers, as an unceasing reminder of his love for man. He will be its inventor and craftsman, he will consecrate it as his last testament and his death will be its life and its glory ... this is the divine Eucharist.'²

Then Jesus 'gave thanks'.

Eucharist means 'thanksgiving' and the supreme thanksgiving was the thanksgiving directed to the Father for having cared for and having saved mankind, with the most extraordinary interventions.

And taking the bread and the cup he said: 'This is my body which will be given for you, do this as a memorial of me ... This cup is the new covenant in my blood which will be poured out for you.'

This is the Eucharist.

It's the miracle.

According to Thomas Aquinas the Eucharist is the greatest of Jesus's miracles.³ In fact, as Pierre Julien Eymard says, 'it exceeds all the others in its object, and is superior to all for its duration in time. It is the permanent incarnation, the perpetual sacrifice of Jesus, it is the burning bush that is always aflame on the altar; it is the manna, the true bread of life, that comes down from heaven each day.'⁴

'... These miracles,' as Ignatius of Antioch says, 'crying to be told, but wrought in God's silence.'⁵

And the Second Vatican Council affirms that '... in the most blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself, our Pasch and the living bread which gives life to men through his flesh – which is vivified by the Holy Spirit and vivifies, and gives life to men.'⁶

From the Old to the New Testament

Jesus celebrates his passover like a banquet. In every home, supper-time is the time of the deepest intimacy, of brotherhood, and often of friendship and celebration.

The banquet at which Jesus presides is celebrated like the Jewish Passover, and as such it contains in a summary form the entire history of the people of Israel.

Jesus's last supper is the fulfilment of all God's promises.

The elements of the new supper are full of the meaning they have taken on in the Old Testament. The bread, a gift of God and an indispensable means of life was a symbol of communion, a reminder of the manna. The wine, which the Book of Genesis calls the 'blood of the grape' (Gen. 49:11), was offered in sacrifices (cf. Ex. 29:40) and it was the symbol of the joy of the messianic times (Jer. 31:12). The chalice was a sign of participation in joy and of acceptance of affliction and it called to mind Moses's Covenant (Ex. 24:6). And bread and wine were promised by Wisdom to her disciples (Prov. 9:1-6).⁷

Like the father of a family, Jesus, in his gestures and in the 'prayer of blessing' repeats the Jewish rite.

But in this banquet there is a tremendous difference and novelty compared to the Hebrew Passover. Jesus's supper is celebrated within the context of his passion and death, and in the Eucharist he anticipates, in a symbolic and real way, his sacrifice of redemption. Jesus is the priest of this sacrifice,

² Pierre Julien Eymard, *La Sainte Eucharistic, La Presence Reelle*, Tome I, Paris, 1949, p. 87.

³ Office of Corpus Christi, Lesson IV, Old Roman Breviary.

⁴ Pierre Julien Eymard op. cit. p. 142.

⁵ Ignatius of Antioch, *Ephesians* 19, 1 (PG 5, 660) *Library of Christian Classics*, Vol 1, trs. & ed. C. C. Richardson, S.C.M., London, 1953, p. 93.

⁶ 'Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests' (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) 5 in *Vatican Council II, The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery OP, Dominican Publications, Dublin, 1975, p. 871.

⁷ Cf J. Castellano, 'Eucaristia' in *DESI*, Rome, 1975, p. 737.

Jesus is its victim.

Pope Paul VI spoke in these terms on Holy Thursday 1966: 'We cannot forget that the Supper ... was a commemorative rite, it was the paschal banquet, which had to be repeated each year in order to transmit to future generations the indelible memory of the liberation of the Jewish people from the slavery of Egypt ... That evening, Jesus replaces the Old Testament with the New: "This is my blood", he says, "of the New Testament ..." (Mt. 26:28); with the old historical and figurative Passover, he links up his own passover and makes it follow on from the old one.' His passover is historical too and is definitive, but it is also figurative and points towards another final event, the final *parousia* (the second coming) ...⁸

The words of Jesus, 'From now on, I tell you, I shall not drink wine until the day I drink the new wine with you in the kingdom of my Father' (Mt. 26:29), which the famous exegete Benoit translates as 'an appointment in Paradise'⁹, give the Eucharist the characteristic of a banquet that will reach its total fulfilment after our resurrection.

For Athanasius however starting with our life now we can participate in communion with the risen Christ. Athanasius, referring to this Passover of the New Testament, says: 'We do not approach a temporal feast, my beloved, but an eternal and heavenly. Not in shadows do we shew it forth, but we come to it in truth!'¹⁰ He also says that we no longer celebrate this feast by eating lamb's meat, but 'we eat the Word of the Father...'¹¹

For Athanasius, to eat the bread and wine which have become the body and blood of Christ is to celebrate the Passover,¹² that is, to relive it. In fact, the Eucharist is the sacrament of communion with the paschal Christ, with Christ who has died and is risen and has passed on (Passover = Passage), has entered a new phase of his existence, the glorious phase at the right hand of the Father. As a result, to receive Jesus in the Eucharist means to participate already here on earth in his life of glory, in his communion with the Father.

The bread of life

John has his own way of describing Jesus Eucharist. Already in the sixth chapter of his Gospel he recounts that the day after Jesus had multiplied the loaves, in the great speech at Capernaum, he says, among other things: 'Do not work for food that cannot last, but work for food that endures to eternal life, the kind of food the Son of Man is offering you' (Jn. 6:27).

Shortly afterwards Jesus presents himself as the true bread come down from heaven, which must be accepted through faith: 'I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never be hungry; he who believes in me will never thirst' (Jn. 6:35).

And he explains how he can be the bread of life, '... and the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world . . .' (Jn. 6:51).

Jesus already considers himself bread. And so this is the ultimate reason of his life here on earth. To be bread so as to be eaten, to be eaten so as to communicate his life to us.

'This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that a man may eat it and not die. I am the living bread which has come down from heaven. Anyone who eats this bread will live for ever' (Jn. 6:50-51 a).

How short-sighted we are compared to Jesus.

He, the infinite who comes from eternity, has protected a people with miracles and graces, and built up his Church, and he moves on towards eternity where life will never cease.

We, at most, limit our gaze to today or maybe tomorrow, in this our brief existence and at times we fret over trifling things. We are blind. Yes, blind, we Christians too, are often blind. Perhaps we do live our faith, but we are not fully conscious. We do understand Jesus in a few things he says which have to

⁸ *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, Poliglotta Vatican, 1967, IV, p. 164.

⁹ Pierre Benoit, cited in Castellano, art. *cit.*, p. 738.

¹⁰ Athanasius, 'Letter IV, 3.' Easter Day. For 332 in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. IV, ed. Archibald Robertson, Parker & Co., Oxford, 1892 (PG 26, 1377), p. 516.

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Cf. *ibid.* IV, 5 (PG 26, 1379), p. 517.

do with our consolation or guidance, but we don't see all Jesus. 'In the beginning was the Word,' then creation, then the incarnation, then almost a second incarnation through the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist, which serves as our *viaticum*, our food for our journey through life towards the next life, then the kingdom with him, divinized by his person which is in his body and his blood which have become Eucharist.

If we view reality in this way, everything assumes its rightful value, everything is projected towards the future which we shall reach, if already here on earth we try to live, as much as is possible the heavenly city, in a commitment of love towards God and all mankind, like Jesus who went through the world doing good.

What an adventure life is if it has this outcome!

The Pharisees were arguing with one another, and Jesus answers, explains and reaffirms and finally he says: '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).

'Abides in me and I in him' – here unity is consummated between Jesus and the human person who eats him, bread. In this way the fullness of life which is contained in Jesus and which comes to him from the Father, is transmitted to men. With this the indwelling of man in Jesus is achieved.

Albert the Great writes: Christ 'embraced us with too much love, because he united us to himself so much that he is in us, and he himself penetrates into our innermost parts.

'Divine love causes an ecstasy. It is rightly called an ecstasy of divine love, because this love puts God in us and us in God. The Greek word *ekstasis* means to be taken out of oneself. In fact (Jesus) says: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him" (Jn. 6:57). He says, "Abides in me", that is to say, he is placed outside of himself; and "I abide in him", that is, I am placed outside of myself...'

'And this can be done by his ... charity, which penetrates into us ... and attracts us to him. Not only does it attract us to him, it draws us within him, and he himself penetrates within us right to the very marrow of our bones.'¹³

In this stupendous chapter of John's Gospel, Jesus affirms: 'And the bread that I shall give is my flesh, for the life of the world' (Jn. 6:5 1) and also, 'Anyone who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I shall raise him up on the last day' (Jn. 6:54).

'For the life of the world.' Therefore, the Eucharist already serves in this world to give life. But what is life? Jesus told us: 'I am the life'. This bread nourishes us with him, already here below.

'And I shall raise him up on the last day.' The Eucharist also gives life for the next world. But what is the resurrection? Jesus told us: 'I am the resurrection'.

It's Jesus, who begins in us his immortal life, which does not end with death. Even if the body is corruptible, life, which is Christ, remains in the soul and in the body, as the principle of immortality.

The resurrection is a great mystery for all men who reason with human standards.

But there is a way of living in which the mystery becomes less incomprehensible.

By living the Gospel viewed from the perspective of unity, we experience for example that in carrying out the new commandment of Jesus, mutual love leads to fraternal unity among men, and this exceeds natural human love itself. Now this effect, this achievement is the result of our doing the will of God. Jesus knew, in fact, that if we corresponded to his immense gifts we would no longer be his 'servants' or his 'friends', but his 'brothers' and brothers to one another, because we would all be nourished with his same life.

John the Evangelist uses a very helpful image to indicate this different kind of family; the image of the vine and the branches (Jn. 15). The same sap, or we could say the same blood, the same life, that is, the same love which is the love with which the Father loves the Son, is communicated to us (cf. Jn. 17:23-26), and circulates between Jesus and us. Therefore we become one flesh and one blood with Christ, and so it is in the truest and deepest supernatural sense that Jesus calls his disciples 'brothers' after

¹³ Albert the Great, *De Euch.*, d. 1, c. 2, n. 7 (Borgnet edition, Vol. 38, p. 200).

his resurrection (Jn. 20:17). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews confirms that the risen Jesus 'is not ashamed to call them brothers'. (Heb. 2:11).

Now, once this family of the heavenly kingdom has been built, how can we think of death as putting a sudden end to the work of God, with all the painful consequences this would imply? No. God would not face us with an absurd separation. He had to give us an answer. And he did give it, in revealing the truth of the resurrection of the body. A believer can almost say; this truth no longer seems a dark mystery of faith, but rather a logical consequence of Christian living. It brings us the immense joy of knowing that we shall all meet again along with Jesus who united us in this way.

The Eucharist in the Acts of the Apostles

Revelation also mentions the Eucharist in the Acts of the Apostles.

The early Church is extremely faithful to Jesus in carrying out his words, 'Do this as a memorial to me.'

Regarding the first community of Jerusalem, in fact, we read that: 'They remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers' (Acts 2:42).

And talking about Paul's apostolate: 'On the first day of the week we met to break bread. Paul was due to leave the next day, and he preached a sermon that went on till the middle of the night ... then ... he broke bread and ate and carried on talking till he left at daybreak' (Acts 20:7.11).

The Eucharist in the Epistles of Paul

Also in his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul shows his ardent and firm faith in the body and blood of Christ, with the words: 'The cup of blessing that we bless is it not a communion with the blood of Christ, and the bread that we break is it not a communion with the body of Christ?' (1 Cor. 10:16), and he goes on to describe the effect that this mysterious bread has in the person who receives it, saying: 'Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Cor. 10:17).

One body!

This is how John Chrysostom comments: 'We are that self-same body. For what is the bread? The Body of Christ. And what do they become who partake of it? The Body of Christ: not many bodies, but one body. For as the bread consisting of many grains is made one so that the grains nowhere appear ... so are we conjoined both with each other and with Christ.'¹⁴

Jesus, you have a great plan for us, and you are carrying it out through the centuries. It is to make us one with you so that we may be where you are. You came from the Trinity down to earth and it was the will of the Father that you return but you didn't want to go back there alone, you wanted to go back together with us. This, then, is the long journey: from the Trinity back to the Trinity, passing through the mysteries of life and death, of suffering and glory.

It is good that the Eucharist is also 'an offering of thanks'. Only through the Eucharist can we ever thank you enough.

(Taken from: Chiara Lubich *The Eucharist*, New City London, 1979, pp.9-20.)

¹⁴ John Chrysostom, 'In 1 Cor.' hom. 24,2 (PG 61, 200) in *A Library of Fathers of the Holy Catholic Church*, Oxford, 1884, p. 327-8.