

Introduction

The Vatican Council called the Eucharist the “source and summit of Christian life.” It is a beautiful statement. Unfortunately, it is not true. It can be amply justified theologically. Sadly, on the practical level, the matter is quite otherwise. It is an unhappy fact that the vast majority of the Christian world—and the Catholic world as well—does not believe it at all. Christians do not celebrate the Eucharist with any regularity—less than half of all Catholics celebrate Mass each Sunday—and even many who do attend do not see it as essential to providing direction for their lives.

Some church leaders indict those who do not celebrate regularly as having little fervor. More likely, they are simply demonstrating that the celebrations that they have experienced provide no essential link between the liturgy and their daily lives. Their faith and belief in Christ is such that the eucharistic celebration plays but a minor role.

It should also be noted that, on another level, official church policy itself perhaps does not go out of its way to give primary emphasis to making the Eucharist accessible. More importance is placed on maintaining an elite, all-male priesthood than on ordaining a sufficient number of people for us to remain a eucharistic church. Ecclesiastical policies that set stringent or arbitrary requirements for priesthood help to perpetuate situations where large numbers of people have no real access to the Eucharist. This says, at the practical level, that church law and discipline are more important than Eucharist for Christian life.

Be that as it may, there is no doubt that a gap has developed between everyday Christian life and the Eucharist. It is not seen as the source and summit of Christian life as much as a devotion and, therefore, as something optional. Hence, the purpose of this book: to try to bridge the gap between liturgy and daily life, so that the inner reality and dynamism of the Eucharist itself may begin to inspire the self-

understanding of the Christian. This will help to enkindle the “awe” that Pope John Paul II hopes to achieve with this “Eucharistic Year.”

Underlying the approach of this book is a theology of Eucharist that differs somewhat from the devotional understanding that fills many spiritual books. It also differs from theological approaches that are inspired more by scholastic theology than by the Scriptures. We do not wish to deny any value in these approaches, but they will not solve the problems of our times.

We Need a New Approach

Unless a better way is found of explaining the Eucharist, we are in danger of reinforcing a piety that is becoming less and less meaningful for a great number of people and that may even have been set aside by the theology of Vatican II. If our celebrations and catechesis do not keep this in mind, the Eucharist will be no more than an external display with no lasting effects.

Two major emphases underlie the approach of this book. The first is a conviction that we must move from a devotional (private, individualistic) understanding of Eucharist to a communal one. Second, we must go from a passive to an active appreciation of the meaning of this (and, indeed, every) sacrament.

We know that, by the thirteenth century, communion at least once a year had to be made a matter of church law. This shows the extent to which people had fallen from liturgical practice and an understanding of the place of the Eucharist in Christian life. Whether they felt unworthy to receive communion because of a sense of personal sinfulness, or simply lacked appreciation of the meaning of the liturgy, the Eucharist had little effective influence in people’s lives. They turned instead to devotions of various kinds. These gave them more immediate contact with the divine, especially because the saints seemed closer, somehow, to the everyday world than did the church’s liturgy.

Eventually the Eucharist itself became another devotion. This was the era of processions, expositions of the blessed sacrament, of people running from church to church in order to catch another moment of consecration. Examples could easily be multiplied. The fact remains, however, that many eucharistic devotions tended to lose their rooted-

ness in the liturgy. The consequence was to further divorce the “source and summit” of people’s lives from the reality of their everyday world.

The Communal Dimension

One major problem with the devotional approach is that it ignores the communal dimension of the Eucharist. It turns the Eucharist into a private, individualistic, relationship with Jesus rather than an ecclesial one. Saying that the Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life is meant to express the conviction of the Fathers, who affirmed that it was the Eucharist that made the church. However, statements such as these will remain but pious hopes unless Eucharist is seen as the action of the entire Christian community gathered to express its identity.

Interestingly, one of the first names given the Eucharist in the New Testament is *ekklesia*, church. For the early community, the theology and understanding of what it meant to be church and to gather for Eucharist were one and the same. Even today we have been reminded by the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and Pope Paul VI’s encyclical *Mysterium fidei*, as well as Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, that there are other real presences of Christ in the church. Chief among these is his presence in the assembly gathered in his name to proclaim the liberation he has wrought by his death and resurrection, and the communion that should result from our being able to gather at the table of the Lord.

We also come to Eucharist to be missioned, to continue the work of Christ. It may be possible to do this if we regard the Eucharist as the highest and greatest of devotions. But ignoring the fact that Eucharist is actually the public worship of all God’s people does nothing to give us a proper sense of identity. Neither does it liberate the individual from private seclusion and give the sense of mission that comes from realizing our responsibilities as part of the new covenant people.

The symbolism of a community gathered by the Lord is a powerful reminder that we are called to continue the work of establishing the kingdom for which Jesus lived and died. This is what it means to be church.

Until recent years the communion rails effectively segregated the congregation from what was happening in the sanctuary. The impres-

sion given was that all the important actions took place there—and that there was no room for the people. Lectors and eucharistic ministers are very recent. The distinction between clergy and laity was so visibly emphasized in our churches that people naturally felt they really had no role to play in the liturgical action. Conversely, the liturgy had little role to play in their lives.

What, then, were people to do? If they went to church at all, it was mainly to receive something from God. They went to deepen their relationship with Jesus, or to receive grace, or to be enlightened. Perhaps they even looked forward to communion and the sacramental encounter that it permitted. But this essentially passive attitude made it impossible to really enter into the eucharistic action, because it was seen as belonging to someone else—to the priest, or to Jesus. If we do not see it as our action as well, the eucharistic prayer itself becomes an exercise in nostalgia or historical memory of what Jesus did for us almost two thousand years ago. If our sacramental encounter with the risen Lord is to have any meaning at all, however, it will be because Jesus meets us on our life's journey today and invites us to join in solidarity with him, to become agents of the world's salvation.

“Do This in Memory of Me”

We repeat these words at each Eucharist. The tendency is to see them only as the words of the priest. Even worse, we think of them as being solely words of consecration. But Jesus never asked us to repeat words. He asked us to do what he himself was doing at that moment. And that was preparing to give his life for the salvation of the world. St. John's chapter 13 shows Jesus washing the feet of the disciples as an example of what we ourselves should be doing for one another. All in memory of him. Every Eucharist asks us to join with Jesus in the task of the world's salvation.

Eucharist is solidarity. Jesus invites us to his table that he might inspire us with his vision and join us with himself in the salvation of others. This is the missionary dimension of the church and of its Eucharist. If our Eucharists in the past have not been totally effective in transforming lives, in making the faithful more committed to the work of Christ, perhaps it is because people have felt they were there

to receive rather than to give. The hands we have outstretched, however, are not only to receive the body of Christ; they are, in turn, to give him to others. This is the essence of Christian mission. And it belongs to the entire people by reason of baptism.

I am convinced of the theological truth that the Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life. I am also convinced of its practical falsity for the majority of Christian people. Perhaps years of passive and devotional Eucharists have effectively isolated it from daily consciousness and life; for too many people, Eucharist says almost nothing about the real world of economics, politics, or social realities. Making Eucharist and our relationship with Jesus a private reality strikes at the root of the nature of the Christian community. We are a sacramental people, and a sacramental church—sacraments, that is, of the saving power of Christ.

The Eucharist is a challenge to the church and to the world. Our common problems will be solved only when we can learn to love one another the way Jesus has loved us—love that can require even giving our lives for one another. Each time we celebrate Eucharist, we proclaim the death of one who has given his life for us, and who looks to us to be willing to do the same. It is this active love and commitment that is at the heart of Eucharist.

The approach to Eucharist in this book, then, situates it at the heart of the church, expressive of what the church itself is; at the same time it suggests ways in which the liturgy itself helps us to live out in our daily lives what we celebrate at the table of the Lord.

There is meant to be a reciprocity between liturgy and life. This reciprocity can be understood by looking more deeply into the basic rhythms that characterize the eucharistic liturgy. These are the very same rhythms meant to characterize the Christian community. The truth of this was borne home to me in a striking article by Edward Gabriele, “The Ministry of the Eucharistic Presider” [*Emmanuel*, vol. 93 (April, 1987), pp. 144-51]. His article provides the general outline for this book.

Whether we recognize it or not, there is a reciprocity between liturgy and everyday life. That is, the effectiveness of our Eucharists and the power of our Christian witness are directly related. It is impossible to

celebrate the Eucharist meaningfully if our lives are not eucharistic in the fullest sense of that term.

Furthermore, a well-celebrated Eucharist has the ability to mold the community so that it becomes what Christ intended it to be: his true body. Before the twelfth century the body of Christ meant the church. The church and the *corpus Christi eucharisticum* (or *mysticum*) were practically identified with each other. Since then, however, we have reversed our understanding and priorities. The body of Christ has come to mean the Eucharist, and the mystical body the church. Furthermore, we have come to see the church as a divinely instituted hierarchical organization with the Eucharist as one of the several means of grace dispensed by it for the growth of individual members.

We have to realize that the Eucharist is not mainly what the church does: it is what the church is. The identity of the church as the body of Christ is both expressed and effectively proclaimed by its being centered in the reality of his body and blood. Thus the ancient dictum of the Fathers: it is not only the Eucharist that makes the church, it is the church that makes the Eucharist.