

# THE EUCHARIST, THE CLIMAX OF VOCATIONS

by

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I have been asked to speak of the Eucharist as the climax of the various vocations. In this title there are, therefore, two key words: "Eucharist" and "climax" ("culmen"). To be sure of meeting your expectations and setting forth exactly the thought of the Church, I have re-read the passages of Vatican II—there are five in all—in which these two words are associated. For the Council, the Eucharist is the summit of the Christian life (*Lumen Gentium* 11), of the whole action of the Church, that is, of all her apostolic activities (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 10), of the whole life of the Christian community (*Christus Dominus* 30), of the whole of evangelization (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 5), and of the various sacraments (*Ad Gentes* 9).

This simple series of quotations makes it possible to see that the subject proposed to me touches a central point of the teaching of the Council. The Eucharist is the climax of the Christian aspiration. It is natural, therefore, that all the activities of the Church should aim at it and that the ecclesial community should be constituted for this orientation towards the Eucharist.

The Council says so explicitly and gives the underlying reason: "The sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate are bound up with the Eucharist and are directed towards it. For 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 — that flesh which is given life and gives life through the Holy Spirit. Thus men are invited and led to offer themselves, their works and all creation with Christ" (col. 925).

**The two aspects of the question**

It seems to me that this text contains everything that I would like to set forth to you. It shows clearly that the Eucharist is at the same time the climax of all the exterior activities of the Church and of her interior life; and that it is therefore important to speak not only of the Eucharist as a liturgical celebration, but also of the Eucharist in its relations with the interior sacrifice. The two aspects are inseparable, moreover, in the reality of things. "Between the exterior worship of the Temple and the interior worship of the heart, a deep correspondence is established; a necessary continuity is affirmed". (B. Bodrinsky, DS, t. 9, col. 923).

**EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION****Full development of the Eucharistic Celebration**

Let us begin, therefore, to describe the Eucharistic celebration in its entirety. The faithful, the Council says, "must be convinced that the principal manifestation of the Church consists in the full, active participation of all God's holy people in the same liturgical celebrations, especially in the same Eucharist, in one prayer, at one altar, at which the bishop presides, surrounded by his college of priests and by his ministers" (S.C. 41).

Here, then, is the complete form. It cannot always be realized entirely, I admit, but it must serve as a model.

The bishop cannot preside personally over his flock always and everywhere. In the parishes, it is a priest who takes the bishop's place, but the rest are not excluded. In particular, it is full and active participation that must be the object of our whole attention.

**The active participation of all**

This participation is justified by the fact that no one is present at Mass as an indifferent spectator, but everyone has the part of an actor in the strongest sense of the term, everyone is personally committed. It is true that the priest only by virtue of his priestly ordination carries out the sacrificial oblation by pronouncing the words of consecration, but the whole community of the faithful takes part in the oblation, offering it through the priest's hands; offering it with him. This unity of the sacrificial oblation, in the different roles, is well expressed by the "Pray brothers" of the Mass. The priest addresses the faithful: "Pray, brothers, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God the almighty Father".

The community answers that the sacrifice is common, it is true, to the whole assembly, but that the priest has an absolutely specific in it. "May the Lord receive the sacrifice from your hands...".

The active participation of all in the Mass is the effect of the fact that the Mass involves us all in the mystery of redemption. "What is carried out is God's salvation and the spiritual sacrifice of the Church. But nothing happens invisibly that is not visibly signified. It is, therefore, in a visible action that everyone, in the liturgy, accepts salvation and offers himself to the Father. It is by listening, speaking, walking, offering and eating that the meeting of God and man is accomplished mystically, and that the Covenant is renewed". (J. Gelineau, DS, t. 9, col. 925).

### The Celebrant

But what, then, is everyone's part in the eucharistic Celebration? Let us open Paul VI's missal. At the beginning of the liturgical texts, we find an important document entitled "Principles and norms for the use of the Roman missal". Chapter III, which I would like to summarize briefly, answers our question.

It should be noted first of all that the bishop has an absolutely preponderant part in the eucharistic Celebration. When the bishop is present, it is desirable that he should celebrate the Mass for the assembly. And this is not to give a ceremony more solemnity, but just to signify better the mystery of the Church. It is true that the bishop has the same consecrating power as the priest, yet his role in connection with the celebration of the Eucharist is more important. If he who celebrates the Eucharist does so "in persona Christi capitis", (in the person of Christ the head), this representation of Christ is more intense and richer in the episcopal order than in the priestly order. The bishop is invested with the fullness of the priesthood. Episcopal consecration also confers, with the office of sanctifying, the offices of teaching and governing. In this way the bishop, in an eminent and visible way, sustains the parts of Christ himself, Teacher, Pastor and Pontiff, and acts in his person (cf. L.G. 21).

The lawful celebration of the Eucharist supposes, therefore, that the bishop should celebrate it personally, or that he should have the Eucharist celebrated by the priests, his collaborators. The latter are united with him in the priestly dignity, but they depend on him in the exercise of their power.

**The Deacon**

It is not necessary to dwell any longer on the priest's role. It is well known. I would like to emphasize a little that of the deacon, who has a special role in the Christian community by virtue of the sacrament of Orders that he has received. This specific role has its liturgical expression in the eucharistic celebration. In my opinion this is not made sufficiently clear. The specific functions of the deacon, considered by Vatican II as "extremely necessary for the life of the Church" (L.G. 29), should not, without really serious reasons, be entrusted to laymen. On the contrary, in all territories where the episcopate considers it opportune according to the indications of the Council (cf. L.G., 29), vocations of deacons, eager to dedicate their lives permanently to the exercise of this holy Order, should be brought forth. The sacramental order of the diaconate has its own sacramental grace.

**The faithful**

The part that the faithful take in the sacrifice of the Mass is expressed by their whole behaviour. This is first of all a community behaviour. Any form of individualism is in conflict with the very nature of the Eucharist, which unites the faithful by uniting them with Christ.

This community behaviour will be manifested by a collective attitude in conformity with the progressive development of the celebration: the attitude shown to the proclamation of God's word, the prayer recited together, the singing that gives the prayer special fullness, the attitudes of the body (with particular attention to kneeling at the moment of consecration), above all, eucharistic communion.

The Church lays great stress, and rightly, on singing, which is a privileged form of the participation of the people of God. Singing enables us to express our joy and gratitude better; to manifest better unanimity of sentiments, because with its rhythm and melody it stimulates a fusion of voices, and facilitates more intense adherence to the words spoken.

Singing has, therefore, the aim of involving us more deeply in the liturgical celebration. It is for this reason that the Church never allows it to be replaced by records. The singing that the record reproduces will certainly be more beautiful than that which can be produced in an ordinary church. But this singing is not a prayer, at least it is not the prayer of the community gathered at that moment.

**Some particular liturgical activities**

The quality of a celebration depends a great deal on the altar service, carried out by one or more acolytes, who assist the celebrant, but it also depends on the way in which the readings are proclaimed. Here we are perhaps up against one of the most serious deficiencies of our celebrations. How often must we undergo hasty readings, carried out any how, without prior preparation, without concern for clear articulation to make oneself understood! The same can be said of the prayer of the faithful.

The carrying out of a celebration presupposes, therefore, a number of activities, for the singing, for the altar services, for the readings, for the prayer of the faithful, to comment on the ceremonies, to collect the offerings of the faithful... Each of these activities is indispensable for full development of the power of expression of Mass. But to perform each of these activities in the harmony of the whole requires very great availability, suitable preparation, great perseverance, and close collaboration with the clergy. The preparation itself consists not only in an immediate and practical activity (to choose the hymn, to rehearse it, to decorate the altar, etc.) but also in the concern to acquire liturgical knowledge, a culture in this matter. To take an active part in liturgical celebration presupposes, therefore, competence and dedication.

**Extraordinary minister of the distribution of Communion**

To be complete I would like to add a word on an important and delicate problem for a correct understanding of the Mass. Under some circumstances lay people, that is, persons not ordained, men and women, can distribute Holy Communion, both during the celebration of Mass and outside Mass (for example to the sick).

But this presupposes some conditions:

- that there are no priests or deacons;
- that priests and deacons are prevented from distributing communion, owing to another pastoral ministries, or because of illness or advanced age;
- that the number of the faithful asking for communion is a very large one.

The faithful who will thus be able to intervene for the distribution of the Eucharist will be personally chosen and authorized by the bishop.

He is also called upon to respect a certain order in his choice, giving preference to persons with a more special commitment towards the Church, such as, for example, seminarians from the major seminary, and religious men and women.

The bishop can also permit priests engaged in pastoral work, in case of urgency and necessity, to choose a person who will carry out this ministry for the occasion. We will not reproduce here all the legislation on this matter. It can be found in the instruction "Immensae caritatis" (SCDS, 19-1-1973).

Why these limits? Why this precise framework? 1) First of all, to show that the distribution of communion is not an ordinary liturgical activity for the faithful. It is, in fact, a function which is "more closely connected with the functions ("officis") of pastors" (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 24). In addition to the aptitude ("aptitudo") given by Baptism and Confirmation, it is necessary, therefore, "to be deputed by the hierarchy" (L.G. 33), that is to receive a special "mission" (A.A. 24).

2) It is for this reason that duly authorized faithful are called "extraordinary ministers of the distribution of communion". The extraordinary minister cannot intervene except in case of necessity and in virtue of a special delegation (Prümmer, III, n. 54). The ordinary minister, the one on whom it falls "ex-officio" to distribute the Eucharist, is only the bishop, the priest, the deacon. All this has practical consequences, which it is well to recall according to the Instruction "Immensae caritatis": "In view of the fact that these faculties are given solely for the spiritual good of the faithful (who ask to receive communion) and in case of real necessity, priests should remember that they are not dispensed from the duty of distributing the Holy Eucharist to the faithful who ask for it legitimately, or from the duty of taking it to the sick".

3) By authorizing some faithful in certain circumstances to distribute communion the Church does not create, therefore, a ministry parallel to that of priests and deacons. A suitable catechesis should enlighten minds on this matter. Any superficiality or haste in this field would result in a diminution of esteem in the Christian people for the ordained ministries of the priest and the deacon, indispensable for the Church.

#### **The full development of our celebrations**

After this parenthesis on the extraordinary ministries of the distribution of communion, we can return to the main subject, eucharistic celebration, the first part of our exposition, stressing again the necessity of giving to our celebrations the fullness of

their power of expression. This does not mean that it is necessary to have recourse to pomp or ostentation, but that every gesture and each of our words must be given their full significance. This presupposes great attention on the part both of the celebrant and of the faithful, but it does not require recourse to anything exceptional or luxurious.

Let me quote here some points of an article by Mons. Albert Descamps (Qu'en est-il exactement de la "Nouvelle" Messe? in *La Libre Belgique* on 28-5-1977). "A great step forward would be taken if priests would study again carefully, in its official version, the new amazement that many prescriptions or suggestions of the Ordo run the risk — if I may say so — of falling into disuse even before they have been applied, to the detriment of a sufficiently dignified celebration, complete in its parts, truly religious".

It is because we are unable to take advantage sufficiently of the riches contained in the "Ordo Missae" that our celebration are often poor, dry, constricted, in a word, mediocre. We are often content to respect the absolutely essential prescriptions. A minimum is enough for us in the main concern to avoid a celebration that is too long.

Now, to give all the rites of the Mass their rightful place and their worthy execution, and all words their full resonance, is not a luxury, does not require too much time. It is just to ensure the Mass its normal splendour, this splendour that we put in all the important acts of our life. It must be recognized that on this point we often sin by omission.

## EUCHARISTIC SPIRITUALITY

### Relationship between Celebration and Spiritual Life

However, the Mass is not just an exterior ritual celebration, a great sacred act. The Mass commits us personally in a particular way. A celebration is not a drama. It is our life that is in question. It is important, therefore, to consider how the liturgy is inseparable from a corresponding spirituality.

External worship fosters and nourishes piety. "The liturgy offers the believer a large number of signs to understand and meditate on the word to worship, to supplicate and give thanks, to confess one's own faith, to recognize one is a sinner and receive forgiveness, to accept the gift of Life to contemplate and love, to hope and

await the Kingdom in communion with one's' brothers gathered with the Church of earth and of heaven" (J. Gelineau, DS, t. 9, col. 926).

### **In the Sacrifice which she offers the Church offers herself**

In the rite of priestly ordination, at the moment when the bishop gives the new priest the chalice and paten with the bread and wine for the sacrifice, he utters the following words: "Receive the gifts of the holy people for the sacrifice that will be offered to God. Be fully aware of what you will do, imitate that which you will accomplish and conform your life to the mystery of Christ's cross". Inspired by a fine text of St. Augustine (*De Civitate Dei*, Book X, chap. VI), frequently used in the documents of the Magisterium Paul VI recalls that the Church "has learned to offer herself in the sacrifice that she herself offers" (*Mysterium Fidei*, AAS, 1965, p. 761).

This text in its conciseness shows that the Church cannot offer Mass, the sacrifice of Christ, without herself and without modelling the gift she makes of herself on the gift that Christ made of himself.

Mass is thus the concrete realization of Jesus' words: "If any man would come after me let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it". (Mk. 8, 34-35).

In the second eucharistic prayer immediately before the words of the institution, the celebrant recalls that Jesus "offered himself freely" to suffering and death. With these simple words, the liturgy sums up well a teaching of the New Testament. Jesus gave himself for us, he offered himself for our sins. "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Eph. 5, 2); "Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph. 5, 25). And this gift that Jesus makes of himself, in his redeeming passion, is at the centre of the whole plan of the Incarnation. Jesus Christ "who, though he was in the form of God. . . emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, . . . humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2, 6-8).

### **The gift of oneself: its measurement**

To this free gift of Christ, which the Mass celebrates, there must correspond our donation. I do not think it is necessary to make long speeches to explain what the gift of oneself means for



each of us. We can easily guess. It is a question of not reserving anything for oneself, of renouncing one's own will and one's own outlook, of not taking oneself back after having offered oneself, in a word, of agreeing to be completely the domain of the sovereignty and action of God. This is the interior sacrifice that is asked of us at Mass, and on this plane priests and the faithful are equal. Complete generosity is asked of both.

The Mass asks of each of us, in fact, complete generosity, because it brings before us the sacrifice of the cross which is Christ's sacrifice. Now the sacrifice of Calvary is the adequate expression of the offering that Christ made to the Father of all his humanity, an offer inspired by the greatest love that has ever existed. It follows that the interior offering of Christ, that is, of Christ's love, is the yardstick at which the interior offering of the Church and of each of her members must aim. Therefore I speak of "complete generosity". In the Mass, the Church must commit herself thoroughly. In a complete gift of herself to God, always tending towards an even more perfect gift. Thus we are called to live, in the celebration of the Mass. St. Paul's words: "Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2, 5).

#### **"Mysterium Tremendum"**

We are thus associated, both in the exterior rites and in the oblation of ourselves, in the sacrifice of the Mass, which brings before us the sacrifice of the cross, the supreme expression of Jesus' love. The celebration of the Mass is thus a tremendous mystery, which leads us to worship, and in which we should participate with deep awe. This awe has nothing to do with fear, on the contrary it is a filial sentiment in which love is inseparable from deep respect, motivated at the same time by the greatness of God and by his holiness.

The whole Mass, in its rites and its words, draws our attention to the greatness of God and his holiness: in the "gloria" and in the "Sanctus", in the eucharistic prayers, but also in the penitential act, in the "asperges", in the incensation of the altar, in the kneeling at the moment of consecration, in the "sign of reverence" ("debita-reverentia": *Eucharisticum Mysterium*, 34), which the faithful are called upon to make before communion and in the thanksgiving afterwards.

Among these expressions of awe, allow me to quote the prayer that the priest recites before communion: "Let not communion in your Body and your Blood, Lord Jesus become for me a judgment of condemnation, but let it be, through your mercy, a remedy and

safeguard for the soul and for the body". This prayer echoes St. Paul's warning: "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. Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For any one who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself" (1 Cor. 11, 27-29).

### Casualness

Diametrically opposed to this awe is a certain casualness, which very often indicates thoughtlessness or superficiality, and which might become real insolence and even lead to profanation.

Frequent communion, thank God, is no longer an exception today. The teaching of Pius X has yielded its fruits and has made it possible to overcome some too rigoristic opinions that made the Eucharist a reward, as it were, for perfection. Today we know that, while greater purity is recommended, the two conditions required to receive communion are: permanent or regained state of grace, even if it is still exposed to relapses; and honest intention which excludes mechanical habit and any other merely human motive.

Can it be said that today's frequent communion is always in conformity with this double requirement? A foreign bishop said to me recently, speaking of a large city: "Communion often becomes a cultural fact. People receive communion in order to do as others do. The importance of the act carried out is not understood". In this case, it is perhaps a question only of a regrettable lack of reflection, of the herd instinct. But when persons who live in clear disagreement with the principles of Christian morality do not hesitate to receive communion regularly without confession, then we are confronted with far more alarming cases.

The awe due to the presence of the Lord in the Eucharist is closely linked with the frequency of the sacrament of penance. Is not the estrangement from confession in certain environments the sign of a weakening of the sense of sin, or of its seriousness? Is it not the consequence of a limitation of morals to the social field only? Where sin no longer appears as an offense against God, not only is the sacrament of penance neglected but the holiness of God, the foundation of awe, is lost sight of.

### Other forms of respect

Respect for the Eucharist is manifested further in all forms of devotion bound up with the Reservation of the Holy Eucharist ("La Sainte Réserve"): Benedictions of the Most Holy Sacrament, respect

for the Eucharist taken as viaticum, processions, visits to the Blessed Sacrament. Liturgical laws give great importance to the place of the tabernacle in the Churches and to its decoration, related precisely to private prayer and to the adoration of the faithful. This is one of the reasons why the Catholic Church is not favorable — unless in exceptional cases — to the construction of interdenominational places of worship, that is, of churches or chapels that can be put at the disposal both of Catholics and of Protestant for their respective worship. In fact, for us Catholics the place of worship is used not only for the celebration of Mass, but it is also the place reserved for eucharistic adoration outside the Mass.

### Conclusion

Here ends this lecture. It consists of two parts: the eucharistic celebration and eucharistic spirituality. They are inseparable. In the Mass, in fact, the interior sacrifice is closely united with the exterior sacrifice. The Eucharist is really the climax of our Christian life, both at the level of our liturgical activities and at the level of our conscience.

We know, in fact, that the Mass is always, in a mysterious but real way, a participation in the heavenly liturgy of the angels and saints, according to the terms of the preface to the second eucharistic prayer:

“Therefore, with the angels and all the saints we proclaim your glory singing with one voice: Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord, God of power and might”.