

The Eucharist, Source, Centre and Summit of Christian Life

Why is our way of thinking and living the Eucharist so important? The answer we can give, even a humble and incomplete one, continues to be the one that the martyrs of Abitene sealed in the 4th century with their own blood, when they opposed the prescriptions of the emperor Diocletian. They explained that if they did not come together to celebrate the Eucharist, they simply could not exist. "*Sine dominico non possumus*". That is to say: without the celebration of the paschal mystery made accessible in the Lord's Supper, it is impossible to conceive of the survival and flourishing of Christian existence.

It is precisely what Father Henri Caffarel reminds you couples, to help you understand the meaning of your marriage from an awareness of the impact that the sacrament of the Eucharist has on your lives. To understand Christian marriage in depth, one must start from the Eucharist, which provides an architecture, that serves as its source and as an effective model. These are the words of Father Caffarel: "Husband and wife, you who eat the flesh of Christ, who drink His blood, who live in your soul and in your body the life of Christ, who dwell in Him and He in you, how could you not love one another with a love different from that of others, with a love risen from the dead? Can you look at each other, share your sorrows and joys, give yourselves to each other with all your heart, with all your body, helping each other all your life, without having the perception that you are living a very great mystery?" The "very great mystery" of marriage therefore requires it to be understood in continuity with the Eucharistic mystery, since spouses live "the life of Christ" in their souls and bodies. They remain in Christ, and Christ in them. This is why Christian couples are called to understand that they cannot live without the Eucharist, as Pope Francis emphasized in the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* where he states that "the food of the Eucharist offers the spouses the strength and incentive needed to live the marriage covenant each day" (no. 318). Who would be able to make the journey without the strength given by nourishment? Who could advance on their own path if they lacked the impetus and stimulus that are key to the journey itself? When the Holy Father received the leaders of the Teams of Our Lady last May, his words were very clear: "Today, it is thought that the success of a marriage depends only on the willpower of people. It does not. If that were the case, it would be a burden, a yoke placed on the shoulders of two poor creatures. Marriage, on the other hand, is a 'three-way relationship, in which Christ's presence between the bride and groom makes the journey possible, and the yoke is transformed into a series of gazes: the gaze between the bride and groom, the gaze between the bride and groom and Christ."

If we think about this flow of gazes, we will understand how the Eucharist is an experience of real love, and close to what you experience. In this way, we will immerse ourselves deeply in this sacrament that the Second Vatican Council says is "the source and summit of all Christian life" (LG 11) and described as the place where "all the spiritual good of the Church is contained, that is, Christ himself, our Passover, [...] the living bread that [...] gives life" (PO 5).

Participants in the mystery of Christ

At the Last Supper Jesus anticipates his imminent Passover by asking the disciples to understand and live it as a covenant sacrifice. The covenant is Jesus himself (Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:24). In his words and gestures there is a messianic intensity that transforms the announced death into a true offering, into a source of life. It seals an unequivocal call to communion with him.

We can certainly ask ourselves how is it possible to share an event so radically personal, so ardently incommunicable as death? "Death is a flower that blooms only once" - recall the well-known verses of Paul Celan. But what is proposed to the disciples in the mystery of the Eucharist is to allow themselves to share that experience of love. And as the Apostle Paul assures, "if we have died with Christ, let us



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also believe that we shall live with him" (Rom 6:8). Thus, in the giving of Himself, Christ Himself always revitalises, recreates and rebuilds us.

In the Eucharist, the possibility of participating mystically in what Christ is, opens up to us. Jesus became man so that men and women, through his death and resurrection, might participate in what Christ is. And this is perceived most clearly 'in the breaking of the bread', as witnessed by the disciples of Emmaus. The Eucharist finally allows us to understand it is the hermeneutical instance par excellence. Emmaus teaches us that our eyes are closed until the 'breaking of the bread'. This discovery of the soteriological significance of the figure of Christ represents, for every disciple of Jesus, the starting point and the horizon of a renewed existence. For us, the Eucharist becomes the place to taste salvation. That decisive transformation of the Human Being to which the rituals of the old covenant aspired, without succeeding in guaranteeing it or bringing it about once and for all, is now assured by the integral sacrifice of Christ's life, offered "once and for all" (Heb 10:10). Jesus offered himself to the Father, in a unique act of love, for a recipient other than himself: his brothers and sisters. Jesus' life becomes a sowing of the seeds of existence, that learn to transcend themselves and see themselves as a gift, as an interactive love made of gratuity and sacrifice. Modelled on the existence of Jesus, the Christian life is called to deepen and widen in this way. We do not remain the same. In every Eucharist we find ourselves challenged to come out of ourselves and to seek in Christ the nourishment that satisfies.

It is in this way that, founded on Christ, its perennial principle and foundation, the Church does not consider herself dependent on him only sporadically or sociologically bound to him, as in an external relationship. The Church comes from Christ in an absolutely strong, decisive and intimate way. The Eucharist shows that it is drawn from the open side of Christ (cf. Jn 19:34), just as the Creator drew Eve from the side of the sleeping Adam; and its nature is based on the mystery of the person of Jesus Christ and his saving memory. In every Eucharist the community proclaims: 'Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ'. It is in this way that the Church lives: she lives of and for her Lord. She is called at all times to turn towards Christ, to convert to him with all her heart. The life completely given by Jesus becomes the extraordinary possibility of life for the Church and, through it, for the world. And this statement applies as much to the Church as a whole, as the mystical body of Christ, as it does to every domestic Church - the Church that you, dear married couples, represent.

"Take, and eat, all of you"

"Take, and eat of it all: this is my Body offered as a sacrifice for you". It would perhaps be important to meditate on the anthropological meaning of these words. We frequently hear, even among Christians, that the Eucharist is a difficult ritual, too repetitive, with which we struggle to establish a permanent and affective relationship. We have cultivated a hunger for many secondary things and sometimes we have left behind the hunger, the need for the Eucharist. Let us try, for example, to meditate on the verb "to eat" and how it has always been with us. So ancient, so necessary, so present, so rich in meaning for our lives. We initiated our relationship with the world with our mouth. It was the first form of communication, the first form of inclusion into this history and also the first form of love. We think of the verb 'to eat' and how much we have learnt about what this verb represents throughout our lives. We think about the quantity and quality of the meals we have taken in our lives and how, without them, our lives would not be what they are, or simply would not be at all. In the family, we know this very well. Because there are fundamental dimensions of life, of biological life but also of spiritual life, of life as a project of existence, that in fact reach us through the verb 'to eat'.

Eating is not just swallowing. Eating is the capacity to incorporate, the capacity to ruminate and metabolize the world, to make a new synthesis, to construct oneself. It is not just swallowing morsels of



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external reality that thus pass into our internal world. It is also a process of transformation. And for us humans, the verb 'to eat' also has a special characteristic: even when we do it alone, eating is always an act of relating, a social act, if you like. A meal is a communal action because it always presupposes the other. In fact, we sit at the table because we feed on one another, because we need to internalize the presence of one another, their word, their face, their affection. And this silent ritual becomes for us a true nourishment without which we would not exist.

When Jesus said: "my flesh is real food and my blood real drink" (*Jn 6:55*), he knew well that by his gesture of love he was about to make himself the food of life for his disciples. When he states: "he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him up on the last day", Jesus is issuing a challenge. He is inviting us: "Eat the Life that I am. Feed on the divine Life that I am, incorporate my Life, my Flesh and my Blood".

Built and generated by the Eucharist

We gather around the Eucharistic table to feed on Christ. This is why the Church is born and reborn around the altar and why Christians cannot live without the Eucharist. "This is the bread that came down from heaven; it is not like the bread that the fathers ate and died. Whoever eats this bread will live" (*Jn 6:50*).

To say that bread is bread... is trite. Jesus goes further, reminding us that bread is gift, self-giving, self-surrender, and the desire for the other to live. Bread was not invented just because someone was hungry and found a temporary solution to their problem, no! Bread was invented by one who wanted others to live. True nourishment is inseparable from the desire for the other to live, the desire for you to be, to subsist in fullness! And Jesus says this, not only in reference to material bread, but also in referring to his own Body.

This is the testimony that Christ gives us until the end of time. And if he wanted his memory to be celebrated in the repetition of his Last Supper and in remembrance of these words of his, it is so that we might have a measure and a model for relating to one another. At each Eucharist we gather to celebrate Jesus' sacrificial gift of himself, the transformation of life into nourishment, and of his very flesh into food. Similar to Jesus and what Jesus did for us, the question is whether our lives also become nourishment for others.

At the table Jesus gives us the great proof of love, but also the great lesson. The Eucharist is itself a lesson. It is a real and persistent lesson. We go to the Eucharist to learn from Jesus how we all need to mature, in order to make our days a nourishing gift. For we know that if it is left in the saddlebag, bread can become hard. It can die without having fulfilled its mission. If bread is not put on the table and served, it is lost. Bread that is not immediately offered, soon becomes waste. Similarly, our life can also be lost. This is why in the words of the Gospel: whoever wants to gain life must give himself, must surrender himself (cf *Mt 16:25*). This is not an automatic process. We can live an entire life without our body being food for anyone. We can live in selfishness, subjugated by the dictatorship of indifference of which Pope Francis speaks. We can become sunk in a comfort zone that makes our life impermeable. No one comes to us because we live in a capsule, protecting ourselves from everything and everyone. When we behave like this, our life becomes no nourishment for anyone. And ultimately, we experience a total alienation from Jesus. This is similar to the scribes who asked: "How can he give us his flesh to eat?" (*Jn 6:52*). In our own lives, do we or don't we know, how a person can give their own flesh to eat?

All lives fit into the daily image of bread being broken and shared. Because life is something sown, grown, ripened, harvested, ground, kneaded: Our life is just like bread. We do not merely taste and



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consume the world. We perceive that within ourselves, our own part in the world can consume us and break us down. It can devour us. For both good and bad reasons, no one remains whole. We are the dough that breaks, crumbs that crumble, thickness that diminishes, food that is distributed. The real question lies in knowing with what consciousness, and with what sense, we live this inevitable cycle. We all consume ourselves; this is true. But in what role do we consume ourselves? We can all feel that life is broken and divided. But how do we make this tragic fact a form of fruitful and full affirmation of life itself? For us as Christians, the Eucharist is the vital place of deciding what to do with life. All lives are bread, yes, but not all lives are 'eucharistified'. That is, not all are configured in Christ and assumed, in his following, as a radical offering of self, as a gift, a living gift, as a service of unconditional love. All lives know an end, but not all lives come to the end of the birth of that Christ-like condition they carry within them. In his meeting with the Movement, Pope Francis evoked the story of a couple he had met: "Once, in a General Audience, there was a couple, married for 60 years, she was 18 when she got married and he was 21. So, they were now 78 and 81 years old. And I asked: 'do you still continue to love each other?' And they looked at each other and then came to me, tears in their eyes: 'We still love each other!'" It is of things like these that the Eucharist speaks to us when it reminds us of Jesus' request: "Do this in remembrance of me" (1 Cor 11:24).

The Eucharist is the source, center and summit of our life. A Christian has, come to think of it, no agenda other than this. It is not for nothing that the early theologians of Christianity insisted: "Christians who go to the Eucharist become 'eucharisticised'. That is, they take on the mission of becoming a Eucharistic presence in the world. Indeed, we can say that each one of us is a consequence of this meal. We are constructed and generated by the Eucharist. It is from the persistence of this gesture, this event, this memory (past, present and future). It is from perseverance in this remembrance of Jesus that we are truly generated and recreated in the Spirit of Jesus. Our life must be in dialogue with the twofold Eucharistic table, made of the Word and of the Lord's Body and Blood. For those who want to see, it never ceases to open up a horizon and a future for us. The table of the Eucharist makes us become in advance what we are not yet. It gives us a taste of the fullness we seek. This table is an instrument for making community. It is an instrument for dissolving inequalities. It is a craft of communion where walls, asymmetries, distances are all overcome. St Paul writes to the Corinthians: "We are, though many, one body: for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17).

Just as we could not understand anything about the table if we simply reduced it to a physical reality, so too we could not grasp the vital depth of the Eucharist if we looked at it only as a ritual reality. Just as the table makes concrete the fundamental care of our existence, so it is with the Eucharist. Together and separately, each in their own way express a positive response to the most basic needs of life. It is what our heart expresses, thirsting for love. In the Eucharist we understand that we are loved. The evangelist John makes this explicit in these words: "Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (John 13:1). Indeed, we can hear a resounding message, addressed to us: 'I want you to be', 'I want you to be heard', 'I want you to be delighted with tastes', 'I want for you the fullness'. And, as St Paul writes, may you grasp "what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and know the love of Christ that surpasses all knowledge" (Eph 3:18-19). In the Eucharist, each of us is called to feel loved: the Master and Lord washes our feet, and with what care he washes them! He heals our wounds, and with what love he heals them! With what care and hope the Good Samaritan that is Jesus, sets us on our way! "Even today, as the Good Samaritan, he comes to every person who is wounded in body and spirit, he pours upon the wounds the oil of consolation and the wine of hope". That is why we rightly hear in every Eucharistic celebration: "Blessed are those invited to the Lord's Supper".



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"Do you understand what I have done for you?"

It is well known how the Gospel of John chooses to recount the episode of the washing of the feet, at the Last Supper. "Jesus, knowing that the Father had placed everything into his hands and that he had come from God and was returning to God, got up from the table, laid down his clothes, took a towel and wrapped it around his waist. Then he poured water into the basin and began to wash the disciples' feet and to dry them with the towel with which he had girded himself" (Jn 13:3-5). He is the Master, yet, by washing the feet, he sets himself up as a servant. Jesus testifies to a religion of service, of love, of the willingness to be the last, of the ability to give life. In the most concrete way, in the most difficult way, in the way that hurts us most, it requires crawling on the ground washing one another's feet and kissing one another's feet. It requires offering to be the last in life, one to another, empowering others and giving them life. The question he asks the Twelve is the same question he asks us today: "Do you understand what I have done for you?" (Jn 13:12).

It is a crude language, that of the Eucharist, when he commands us to eat the flesh and drink the blood of Jesus. But the worst thing that can happen to us is to imprison the Eucharist in a sort of magic ritual, something we do not know how to grasp, without the key to interpret what is happening before our eyes. It is necessary that we Christians understand the Eucharist well: "This bread is not only bread; it is my body that I offer for you. This wine is not only wine; this wine is my life that I want to deliver for you". "Do you understand what I have done for you?" Jesus wants us to understand.

And what does it mean to understand the Eucharist? It is to understand what a life given means. It means to understand that each of us is called to give our life, to speak with our gestures, with our presence, with our daily commitment of love: "This that I live is not just a thing, a quantity of time, a fact; what I say is not just words. This that I invest is my life; it is a life that I give in imitation of Jesus. On the altar, along with the offering Christ makes of himself, we place our offering and commit ourselves to be food for one another.

It is wonderful that Jesus chose the meal as the great sacrament of his presence among us, until the end of time. It is an open table where the bread is offered for all and where the wine, which is his blood, is poured out for all. Will a Christian understand the Eucharist if he does not set out from here to risk, to transform, to try something different, to make the world different and better? Can a spirituality made up of maintenance and routine be considered true Eucharistic devotion? The Eucharist asks more of each of us. It asks us to be, to become what we are. It asks us to dare, to believe. Before Easter, Jesus says something of great importance. He says: "I have longed to eat this Passover with you" (Lk 22:15). Food has to do with desire. And so, what is our desire? What is our hunger? What is it that we want? What do we take away from here? The Eucharist is not to make us comfortable in an armchair; it makes us put on pilgrim sandals. The Eucharist is for women and men who go out to engage in the world, inflamed by God's charity, with the audacity to build alternative models, carrying in their hearts the expectation of "new heavens and a new earth, in which justice dwells" (2 Peter 3:13).

Father Léon-Dufour S.J. recalled in this regard that the Eucharist is not an escape from reality, or an interlude to enclose ourselves in a bubble, indifferent to the suffering of the world. Quite rightly he said: 'The Mass is essentially challenging. The mystery of the Eucharist is generative. It lifts up reality. It endows us with a capacity to reconfigure, to remake, to reinvent, to fill empty jars to the brim with 'good wine', as at the wedding in Cana. Speaking to the Teams of Our Lady in 2003, Pope St John Paul II entrusted the participants with this incisive thought: "The different phases of the Eucharistic liturgy invite spouses to live their conjugal and family life following the example of that of Christ, who gives himself to others out of love. They will find in this sacrament the necessary boldness for acceptance, forgiveness, dialogue and communion of hearts. It will also be a precious help in facing the inevitable



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difficulties of any family life. May the members of the Teams be the first witnesses of the grace that regular participation in sacramental life and Sunday Mass brings.

May Mary, who at the wedding feast of Cana anticipated Jesus' Eucharistic destiny, accompany us and help us to shape our existence around the Eucharist.

Card. José Tolentino de Mendonça

