

Pope John Paul II and the Eucharist

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Preface

No one in the history of the church has written more consistently, eloquently or devotionally on the Eucharist than our present reigning Pope John Paul II. He has truly been called and is an apostle of the Eucharist. He has included the theme of Eucharist devotion and adoration in every one of his major addresses and encyclicals. In fact, the signature that he has placed on all his writings are two themes: devotion to the Eucharist and devotion to Mary, our mother, who is the mother of the Eucharist. The following is compiled from the Pope's writings on the Eucharist.

I. The Eucharist, the Core of Christian Life

From the Eucharist, we all receive the *grace* and strength for everyday life, for living a truly Christian existence, in the *joy* of knowing that God loves us, that Christ has died for us and that the Holy Spirit lives in us.

Full Participation in the Eucharist

Our full participation in the Eucharist is the true source of that Christian spirit we should like to see in our own lives and in every aspect of society. Wherever we work – in politics, in the economy, in culture, in the social or scientific fields – it does not matter what our job may be – the Eucharist is a challenge to our daily lives.

There must always be consistency between what we believe and what we do. We cannot live on the glories of our Christian past. Our union with Christ in the Eucharist must be manifest in the truth of our lives today: in our actions, in our sense of values, in our life-style, in our relationships with others.

Summoned To Live as True Followers of Christ

For each of us, the Eucharist is a summons to make an ever greater effort to live as true followers of Christ: truthful in what we say, generous in what we do, caring for and respectful of the dignity and rights of all, whatever their class or their income may be; ready to make personal sacrifices, loyal and just, generous, prudent, compassionate and self-disciplined; aiming at the good of our families, of our young people, of our country, of Europe, of the world. The truth of our union with Christ in the Eucharist is attested by whether or not we truly love our neighbor, whoever that may be, and by the way we treat other people, especially our own families: husbands and wives, children and parents, brothers and sisters. It is attested by the effort we really make to be reconciled with our enemies, to forgive those who wrong us or offend us.

Given the agnostic society – a sadly hedonistic and permissive one – in which we live, it is essential to deepen our teaching on the august mystery of the Eucharist, in such a way as to acquire and maintain absolute certainty over the nature and purpose of the Sacrament which is rightly called the core of the Christian message and of the life of the Church. The Eucharist is the mystery of mysteries; so its acceptance means totally accepting the nexus 'Christ-and-the-Church', from the preambles of the Faith to the doctrine of the Redemption, to the concept of sacrifice and of consecrated priesthood, to the dogma of 'transubstantiation', to the importance of legislation in liturgical matters.

Restore the Eucharist and Priesthood

Today, this certainty is necessary before all else, in order to restore the Eucharist and priesthood to their absolutely central position, to have a proper sense of the importance of Holy Mass and Holy Communion, to return to eucharistic pedagogy, this being the source of priestly and religious vocations and inner strength for practicing the Christian virtues.

Today, is a time for reflection, for meditation and for prayer for Christians to recover their sense of worship, their fervor. Only from the Eucharist profoundly known, loved and lived can we hope for that unity in truth and charity which is willed by Christ and urged on all by the Second Vatican Council.

Sacrament of His Body and Blood

The Eucharist is the sacrament of his Body and Blood, which he himself has offered once and for all (cf. Hebrews 9:26-28), to set us free from sin and death, and which he has entrusted to his Church for her to make the same offering under the species of bread and wine and so to feed his faithful people forever – that is, us who stand about his altar. The Eucharist is thus the sacrifice par excellence, that of Christ on the Cross, by means of which we receive Christ himself, Christ entire, God and man.

The Son's sacrifice is unique and unrepeatable. It was made one single time in human history. And this unique and unrepeatable sacrifice 'endures'. The happening on Golgotha belongs to the past. The reality of the Trinity constitutes a divine 'today' forever. Thus, it is that all humanity shares in this 'today' of the Son's sacrifice. The Eucharist is the sacrament of this unfathomable 'today'. The Eucharist is the sacrament – the greatest one the Church has – by which the divine 'today' of the Redemption of the world meets our human 'today' in a manner ever human.

Sunday Eucharist

We must once again emphasize how important it is, in obedience to the precept of the Church, to take part in the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist. For everyone, this is the highest act of worship in the exercise of the universal priesthood, just as the sacramental offering of the Mass is the highest act of worship, for priests, in the exercise of the priestly ministry. Participation in the eucharistic banquet is a vital condition for everyone for union with Christ, as he himself has said: 'In all truth I tell you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you will have not life in you' (John 6:53).

Participation of the Laity

The Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds all the faithful about the significance of participating in the Sunday Eucharist (cf. nn. 2181-2182). Here I wish to conclude with those famous words in the First Letter of Peter, which portray the laity participating in the Eucharist-Church mystery: "You too must become living stones making a spiritual house as a holy priesthood, to offer the spiritual sacrifices made acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:5).

For every faithful Catholic, participation at Holy mass on Sunday is at once a duty and a privilege: a sweet obligation to respond to God's love for us, so that we can then bear witness to this love in our daily lives. The fulfilling of the dominical precept ought, for every Christian family, to be a fundamental source of joy and unity. Every Sunday, all and everyone of you have an appointment with God's love. Don't fail to keep it!

II. The Two Tables of the Lord And the Common Possession of the Church

The Table of the Word of God

We are well aware that from the earliest times, the celebration of the Eucharist has been linked not only with prayer but also with the reading of Sacred Scripture and with singing by the whole assembly. As a result, it has long been possible to apply to the Mass the comparison, made by the Fathers, with the two tables, at which the Church prepares for her children the word of God and the Eucharist, that is, the bread of the Lord. We must therefore go back to the first part of the sacred mystery, the part that at present is most often called the *Liturgy of the Word*, and devote some attention to it.

The reading of the passages of Sacred Scripture chosen for each day has been subjected by the Council to new criteria and requirements. As a result of these norms of the Council a new collection of readings has been made, in which there has been applied to some extent the principle of continuity of texts and the principle of making all the sacred books accessible. The insertion of the Psalms with responses into the liturgy makes the participants familiar with the great wealth of Old Testament prayer and poetry. The fact that these texts are read and sung in the vernacular enables everyone to participate with fuller understanding.

Eucharistic Mystery

Nevertheless, there are also those people who, having been educated on the basis of the old liturgy in Latin, experience the lack of this “one language,” which in all the world was an expression of the unity of the Church and through its dignified character elicited a profound sense of the Eucharistic Mystery. It is therefore necessary to show not only understanding but also full respect towards these sentiments and desires. As far as possible, these sentiments and desires are to be accommodated, as is moreover provided for in the new dispositions. The Roman Church has special obligations towards Latin, the splendid language of ancient Rome, and she must manifest them whenever the occasion presents itself.

Witnesses and Sharers in the Celebration

The possibilities that the post-conciliar renewal has introduced in this respect are indeed often utilized so as to make us witnesses of and sharers in the authentic celebration of the Word of God. There is also an increase in the number of people taking an active part in this celebration. Groups of readers and cantors, and still more often choirs of men or women, are being set up and are devoting themselves with great enthusiasm to this aspect. The Word of God, Sacred Scripture, is beginning to take on new life in many Christian communities. The faithful gathered for the liturgy prepare with song for listening to the Gospel, which is proclaimed with the devotion and love due to it.

All this is noted with great esteem and gratitude, but it must not be forgotten that complete renewal makes yet other demands. These demands consist in a new sense of responsibility towards the Word of God transmitted through the liturgy in various languages, something that is certainly in keeping with the universality of the gospel and its purposes. The same sense of responsibility also involves the performance of the corresponding liturgical actions (reading or singing), which must accord with the principles of art. To preserve these actions from all artificiality, they should express such capacity, simplicity and dignity as to highlight the special character of the sacred text, even by the very manner of reading or singing.

Word of God in the Liturgy

Accordingly, these demands, which spring from a new responsibility for the Word of God in the liturgy, go yet deeper and *concern the inner attitude* with which the ministers of the Word perform their function in the liturgical assembly. This responsibility also concerns the choice of texts. The choice has already been made by the competent ecclesiastical authority, which has also made provision for the cases in which readings more suited to a particular situation may be chosen. Furthermore, it must always be remembered that only the Word of God can be used for Mass readings. The reading of Scripture cannot be replaced by the reading of other texts, however much they may be endowed with undoubted religious and moral values. On the other hand, such texts can be used very profitably in the homily.

Indeed, the homily is supremely suitable for the use of such texts, provided that their content corresponds to the required conditions, since it is one of the tasks that belong to the nature of the homily to show the points of convergence between revealed divine wisdom and noble human thought seeking the truth by various paths.

The Table of the Bread of the Lord

The other table of the Eucharistic Mystery, that of the Bread of the Lord, also requires reflection from the viewpoint of the present-day liturgical renewal. This is a question of the greatest importance, since it concerns a special act of living faith, and indeed, as has been attested since the earliest centuries, it is a manifestation of worship of Christ, who in Eucharistic communion entrusts Himself to each one of us, to our hearts, our consciences, our lips and our mouths, in the form of food. Therefore, there is special need, with regard to this question, for the watchfulness spoken of by the Gospel, on the part of the pastors who have charge of eucharistic worship and on the part of the People of God, whose “sense of the faith” must be very alert and acute particularly in this area.

Care By Episcopate for Entrusted Churches

I therefore wish to entrust this question to the heart of each one of you, venerable and dear brothers in the episcopate. You must above all make it part of your care for all the churches entrusted to you. I ask this of you in the name of the unity that we have received from the Apostles as our heritage, collegial unity. This unity came to birth, in a sense, at the table of the Bread of the Lord on Holy Thursday. With the help of your brothers in the priesthood, do all you can to safeguard the sacred dignity of the eucharistic ministry and that deep spirit of Eucharistic Communion which belongs in a special way to the Church as the People of God, and which is also a particular heritage transmitted to us from the Apostles, by various liturgical traditions, and by unnumbered generations of the faithful, who were often heroic witnesses to Christ, educated in “the school of the cross” (Redemption) and of the Eucharist.

Continuous Invitation

It must be remembered that the Eucharist as the table of the Bread of the Lord is a continuous invitation. This is shown in the liturgy when the celebrant says; “This is the Lamb of God. Happy are those who are called to his supper”; it is also shown by the familiar Gospel parable about the guests invited to the marriage banquet. Let us remember that in this parable there are many who excuse themselves from accepting the invitation for various reasons.

Sin vs. Conscience

Moreover, our Catholic communities certainly do not lack people who could participate in Eucharistic Communion and do not, even though they have no serious sin on their conscience as an obstacle. To tell the truth, this attitude, which in some people is linked with an exaggerated

severity, has changed in the present century, though it is still to be found here and there. In fact, what one finds most often is not so much a feeling of unworthiness as a certain lack of interior willingness, if one may use this expression, a lack of Eucharistic “hunger” and “thirst,” which is also a sign of lack of adequate sensitivity towards the great sacrament of love and a lack of understanding of its nature.

Role of the Sacrament of Penance

However, we also find in recent years another phenomenon. Sometimes, indeed quite frequently, everybody participating in the eucharistic assembly goes to Communion; and on some such occasions, as experienced pastors confirm, there has not been due care to approach the sacrament of Penance so as to purify one’s conscience. This can of course mean that those approaching the Lord’s table find nothing on their conscience, according to the objective law of God, to keep them from this sublime and joyful act of being sacramentally united with Christ. But there can also be, at least at times, another idea behind this: the idea of the Mass as only a banquet in which one shares by receiving the Body of Christ in order to manifest, above all else, fraternal communion. It is not hard to add to these reasons a certain human respect and mere “conformity.”

Christian Conscience

This phenomenon demands from us watchful attention and a theological and pastoral analysis guided by a sense of great responsibility. We cannot allow the life of our communion to lose the good quality of sensitiveness of Christian conscience, guided solely by respect for Christ, who, when He is received in the Eucharist, should find in the heart of each of us a worthy abode. This question is closely linked not only with the practice of the sacrament of Penance but also with a correct sense of responsibility for the whole deposit of moral teaching and for the precise distinction between good and evil, a distinction which then becomes for each person sharing in the Eucharist the basis for a correct judgment of self to be made in the depths of the personal conscience. St. Paul’s words, “Let a man examine himself,” are well known; this judgment is an indispensable condition for a personal decision whether to approach Eucharistic Communion or to abstain.

Eucharistic Table

Celebration of the Eucharist places before us many other requirements regarding the ministry of the eucharistic table. Some of these requirements concern only priests and deacons, others concern all who participate in the Eucharistic Liturgy. Priests and deacons must remember that the service of the table of the Bread of the Lord imposes on them special obligations which refer in the first place to Christ Himself present in the Eucharist and secondly to all who actually participate in the Eucharist or who might do so. With regard to the first, perhaps it will not be superfluous to recall the words of the Pontificale which on the day of ordination the bishop addresses to the new priest as he hands to him on the paten and in the chalice the bread and wine offered by the faithful and prepared by the deacon: “Accipe oblationem plebis sanctae Deo offerendam. Agnosce quod agis, imitare quod tractabis, et vitam tuam mysterio dominicae crucis conforma.” This last admonition made to him by the bishop should remain as one of the most precious norms of his eucharistic ministry.

Examine Handling of Body And Blood

It is from this admonition that the priest’s attitude in handling the bread and wine which have become the body and blood of the Redeemer should draw its inspiration. Thus, it is necessary for all of us who are ministers of the Eucharist to examine carefully our actions at the altar, in particular the way in which we handle that food and drink which are the body and blood of the

Lord our God in our hands: the way in which we distribute Holy Communion; the way in which we perform the purification.

All these actions have a meaning of their own. Naturally, scrupulosity must be avoided, but God preserve us from behaving in a way that lack respect, from undue hurry, from an impatience that causes scandal. Over and above our commitment to the evangelical mission, our greatest commitment consists in exercising this mysterious power over the body of the Redeemer, and all that is within us should be decisively ordered to this. We should also always remember that to this ministerial power we have been sacramentally consecrated, that we have been chosen from among men “for the good of men.” We especially, the priests of the Latin Church, whose ordination rite added in the course of the centuries the custom of anointing the priest’s hands, should think about this.

Receiving in the Hand or on the Tongue

In some countries the practice of receiving Communion in the hand has been introduced. This practice has been requested by individual episcopal conferences and has received approval from the Apostolic See. However, cases of a deplorable lack of respect towards the eucharistic species have been reported, cases which are imputable not only to the individuals guilty of such behavior but also to the pastors of the church who have not been vigilant enough regarding the attitude of the faithful towards the Eucharist. It also happens, on occasion, that the free choice of those who prefer to continue the practice of receiving the Eucharist on the tongue is not taken into account in those places where the distribution of Communion in the hand has been authorized. It is therefore difficult in the context of this present letter not to mention the sad phenomena previously referred to. This is in no way meant to refer to those who, receiving the Lord Jesus in the hand, do so with profound reverence and devotion, in those countries where this practice has been authorized.

The Hands of the Priest

But one must not forget the primary office of priest, who have been consecrated by their ordination to represent Christ, the Priest: for this reason their hands, like their words and their will, have become the direct instruments of Christ. Through this fact, that is, as ministers of the Holy Eucharist, they have a primary responsibility for the sacred species, because it is a total responsibility: they offer the bread and wine, they consecrate it, and then distribute the sacred species to the participants in the assembly who wish to receive them. Deacons can only bring to the altar the offerings of the faithful and, once they have been consecrated by the priest, distribute them. How eloquent therefore, even if not of ancient custom, is the rite of the anointing of the hands in our Latin ordination, as though precisely for these hands a special grace and power of the Holy Spirit is necessary!

Privilege of the Ordained

To touch the sacred species and to distribute them with their own hands is a privilege of the ordained, one which indicates an active participation in the ministry of the Eucharist. It is obvious that the Church can grant this faculty to those who are neither priests or deacons, as is the case with acolytes in the exercise of their ministry, especially if they are destined for future ordination, or with other lay people who are chosen for this to meet a just need, but always after an adequate preparation.