

**Thoughts on the Eucharist**      Reflection at Intercessors for Priests      Saturday,  
October 11, 2014 9:30 AM      (The central action of the Church)

What I would like to reflect on today is the Eucharist, which is in our Catholic tradition a very central if not the very **central action of the Church**. It is the way by which we **pass on the faith**. It is the way by which we **grow in the faith**. Now in a sense the Eucharist is extremely rich, and it's so rich that people often select a certain element and then just focus on that and then ignore all the others. That is a great danger because **we need to see the whole riches of our faith tradition and of our Eucharistic sacramental theology**.

When you look at the Mass, first of all, starting off with the word "Mass" itself, what does Mass mean? It comes from the word for dismissal. *Ite Missa est* in Latin means you are dismissed. The whole idea is that the Mass is a gathering of the faithful who are sent forth. Actually the very essential first concept of the **Eucharist** we should have is **it's an assembly of people gathered in order to be sent forth into the world to bring the fruit of Christ to the world. So that is fundamental**.

Now the structure of the Mass of course is itself one of the problems in understanding it. The first part the Mass is focused on the word, the liturgy of the word. Now we think about the word, we say: What does that mean when we say the "word of God"? What we mean by the word of God is different from what other people might mean by the word of God. **In our Catholic tradition the word of God means the message, the good news, of Christ translated into human language**. This is the work of the Holy Spirit. **Without the Holy Spirit the word of God cannot be conveyed**.

In tradition, however, some people have gotten confused. They have **confused the word of God with the words, the words, of the Bible or of preachers**. I got somewhat close to some of the members of the Assembly of God in my past, my history. I really liked a lot of them. Their theology however we could not agree with. This one man I remember at Bolingbrook, had a little handout that he gave to people who visited his church and in that they explained what their beliefs were. They only have a couple. They don't have a whole creed, but a few beliefs. One of them is they believe in the verbal inspiration of the Holy Scripture, that every word is chosen by Holy Spirit. So I asked him, I said, "Now is this what you believe, that every word is picked by the Holy Spirit? He said, "Yes, that's what we believe." I said, "Well doesn't that lead to all kinds of problems?" And he said, "Well, we have to acknowledge that, yes, every word is chosen by the Holy Spirit, but we don't have them anymore. We don't have the original texts," which is true.

**The earliest texts we have are from the fourth century**. We know there were texts before the fourth century, so we don't have the originals. So in a way they are saying, well, we know we don't have the exact words. But the real problem is that the words of the text, even the most ancient ones, the very first texts, were in Greek. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are in Greek. Even Paul wrote in Greek. Now Jesus did not speak in Greek; we are pretty sure. It is generally believed that Jesus spoke in Aramaic. Even the New Testament itself is a "translation" from the original talk of Jesus into the Greek of the New Testament, via the human authors.

**The Catholic understanding is that in a way that the incarnation continues through the people who follow Christ, that their humanity now becomes an extension of Christ's humanity through the incorporation into the body of Christ through Baptism,** so that the humanity of Matthew now becomes part of what he gives. It is the message of the Holy Spirit, but it's in the body of Matthew and in the mind of Matthew and the language of Matthew and the thinking of Matthew. If you look at Matthew's Gospel, you see it has very specific interests. It is very clearly written for Christian Jews, teaching Christian Jews precisely how Christ has come to fulfill the Law and in a way to perfect the Law. That is the particular focus on Matthew's Gospel. Not Luke, Luke wrote for gentiles. So he had a different perspective and his experience is different; his language is different. Again, Mark is different. Mark apparently wrote also for Christian Jews. He wrote the first gospel upon which both Luke and Matthew depend. And then there's the Fourth Gospel, John, which is unique. It is not like the other three. And John is the beloved disciple and so he had insights into love and into friendship and into relationship that are quite distinct, and in my opinion quite beautiful. I've always had a particular attraction for the Fourth Gospel.

But they are all good. They are all Holy Scripture and **they are all inspired by the Holy Spirit, but through the humanity of the evangelists.** And **that is explicitly taught by our Church,** especially in the encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* in 1943 by Pius XII because at that time actually people had gotten to the view of saying, oh no, the words are inspired by God. He said no, and Leo XIII had already said that back in the 1800s. If you ever have heard of the Moody Bible Institute, Dwight Moody was a very forthright speaker and teacher and he taught in Chicago, of all places. He taught the new prophecy it was called, and that was late 1800s early 1900s. He made it very clear that the Catholic Church was wrong because we taught that the message of the gospel is what is inspired not the words themselves. He said, nope, it's the words themselves. So that is not our tradition. So Leo XIII said it very clearly in the late 1800s and then it was repeated in 1943 by Pius XII.

But this continues in everybody, everyone who is, **everyone believes in their own way, that is, through your own experience, through your own way of thinking and feeling and imagining.** You can't get away from that. In fact what we have to do is in fact utilize all those faculties, which is the very point made by **Ignatius of Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises. We use our faculties to enter into the stories we read in the Scriptures and, thereby, we make them our own and we become part of them and they become part of us. So that's really the first part of the Mass, this attempt to transfer the messages of Jesus into the lives of people today.**

However, if you study the life of Jesus or the teachings of Jesus, the mission of Jesus, as the evangelists portrayed them, you will see something that's rather clear: that Jesus' teachings didn't take root very easily. Even the apostles themselves had a hard time getting his teachings, much less did the crowds get them. It seems—I'm saying it seems because it's clear in the indication of Scripture, although it doesn't say it in so many words, that Jesus realized that in a way they almost couldn't, because something was missing. Something was missing in the people that needs to be there. Now when something is missing that needs to be there, that's called an evil. **Evil is the absence of something that needs to be there. What's missing is we could call it grace or we could call it the vitality of the Holy Spirit or something like that, this supernatural dimension.** We are created for the supernatural. We

can live in the natural alone, but God does not intend us to. And when we live in the natural alone, there are distortions and warpings that take place within the human person. The thinking is warped. The feelings are warped. Things get out of whack.

What is ultimately missing when the supernatural dimension is missing, when the Holy Spirit's vitality is not there, or grace is missing, **what is really missing in plain language is love**, in the truest sense of the word. There can be various forms of affection and they are good, but the love which is God is missing. And in a life that doesn't experience God as love—maybe it has all kinds of beliefs about God, but they aren't the correct beliefs. They aren't really that God is love and they don't experience this love in their lives. This is something that is terribly wrong. What it produces is, well, it produces actually a kind of negative reaction to life and **it includes even hostility to what is good and holy**.

So Jesus experienced that, people being hostile to him, even people who had faith in God and who were even proud of their faith. But they were hostile to him who is, in fact, the Son of God. What is that in people? Well, you can name it, but it's sin, **sin at work, which is hostile to God**, hostile to what is holy, but which may be also very proud and even righteous and even believing itself to be holy. So we had this situation.

**Jesus' answer to all this is to give his life on the Cross, to give his life in love.** It isn't the blood, per se blood, but it's the blood that is poured out in love. So Jesus lived his own gospel. He said, "Love your enemies." That's what God did in him. **God loved his enemies to the point of Jesus losing his life** and suffering greatly before in his passion and death. This is the Cross, and this **Cross is really central to Jesus' mission**, that he delivered or redeemed the human race, redeemed it from its bondage, delivered it from its bondage, through his love poured out on the Cross. And he wanted his apostles, his Church, to know this, to know the centrality of the Cross.

So in the midst of the Seder Meal, which is really a meal of remembrance where Jews gather once a year to relive the Passover and to insert themselves into the Passover—that's how they believed the **Passover, the Seder**, worked—well, **during this meal he takes bread** and he says, "This is my body which will be given for you." So he is interpreting his death on the Cross as a sacrifice, as a gift. **He takes the cup** and he says, "This is my blood that will be poured out for you." Now pouring blood out was the work of the priest in the Temple, and it was symbolic of the famous Day of Atonement, Yom Kippur, when once a year the high priest took blood poured out and poured it before the mercy seat in the Temple. The mercy seat represented the heavenly temple. What they believed was that the inner sanctum of the Temple was in a sense a heavenly space on earth. It represented God's throne in heaven. Once a year the high priest entered there and poured this blood. **So Jesus is saying no, I am going to be the sacrifice of atonement.** I am going to be; my blood is going to wash away the sins of the people. So this is so important that this is what he did right before he died, that he told the apostles. It's a kind of reverse. Instead of a meal of remembrance, he is not remembering, **he is prophesying.** He is foretelling what is going to happen and interpreting it. And then he says, "Do this in memory of me." So he intended it to become, as it were, a **Seder for Christians, a remembrance for Christians.**

But as things turned out—and maybe in the early Church it was only once a year. I don't know. Some say the first couple of years they only did that, you know, like the following Holy Thursday. I don't know if it's true; no one knows. But we know that by the time of Paul it had become **a regular thing to gather together to break bread in remembrance of the Lord, to focus on his death on the Cross as the gift of salvation.** So we need to return to that constantly and remember, well, the price of our salvation, to put it one way, the cost of our redemption, and to realize really we have been redeemed from.

Now the word redemption is used for slaves. Slaves are redeemed or given freedom. We have been given our freedom through Christ. And it's a freedom not from as much as to. It is a freedom from, but it's a freedom to now serve God as he did. But it's very clear by the very fact that Jesus uses bread and wine which are foods and he said, "Do this in memory of me," it's very clear that this transformation that he is talking about, this redemptive transformation, **this restorative transformation, is a gradual process.** It is not something that can happen just in a moment, but it's something we grow into. And it's important that we keep in mind that **every Mass, every Eucharist, really is focusing on the Cross.**

The tendency in non-Catholic circles is to talk about the Cross quite a bit, but not to connect it to the Eucharist. So when they have a Eucharist it's a fellowship meal, but it's not tied to the Cross. They have separated the two. But it is the very nature of our Church to put the two together because when then we come to receive the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ **it is the risen Lord we are receiving.** Now sometimes people, they think, well, since it's the body of Christ, so Jesus said this on the Last Supper; therefore, what we are receiving is his body at the Last Supper or his body on the Cross. Not really, we receive his body **as it is now in eternity. We receive his risen presence.** He meets us on earth with his heavenly presence: body, blood, soul, and divinity. So we have to keep all this together and realize that this then is in itself a sort of template for life. **Life is a matter of learning how to enter into the teachings of Christ and allowing the Cross of Christ to transform us from inside.** That means that we are going to constantly have to be looking at how our lives are conformed to Christ. That's why when we gather the first thing we do is keep in mind—we remember our sins. That's not so we can be guilty. That's so that we can let go of, **we can let go of our sins so we celebrate the sacred mysteries.**

Now following that what should be **the fruits of the sacrament?** Well, they are various. Inwardly one of the first fruits of the sacrament is **contemplation.** That is why I for example always spend some time in quiet after Communion because it's such a wonderful pleasure to sit in contemplation. Now there are people outside of our faith who spend enormous energy and spend hours at a time trying to quiet down their minds and trying to get in a sense of communion, whereas really it's a gift given to us in the Eucharist. We should enjoy it. It's foolish just to bolt from the church. Oh Mass is over; let's go. We need to enjoy the contemplation that God is giving us inwardly. **It's an inward gift.**

Outwardly it is up to us now to **recognize the connection we have to the body of Christ, because when we receive Christ, his risen presence, we receive "the whole Christ."** St. Augustine said in a Mass "the whole Christ," the whole Church, offers "the whole Christ" to the Father. When we receive the whole Christ in Eucharist, then **we are receiving our brothers and sisters in the world,** including those who are troubled, who are in trouble,

who have problems, who are poor, who are needy. We receive them too, and they are part of us; we are part of them. So one of the moral consequences of the Eucharist is to **be more concerned with other people, and really even—you have to learn how to do this—but even to take initiative in helping.**

For example there is the story of Jesus very often he is asked to do something, “Oh Jesus, do this; oh please do that,” but there are times when he takes the initiative. He takes the initiative for example with the man at the pool. Remember at Bethesda he takes the initiative. He goes up to him: “Do you want to be healed?” The story of the widow whose only son died: he stops the procession and says, “Young man, get up.” He didn’t ask her if she wanted him back. She didn’t ask him; he didn’t ask her. He didn’t ask anybody. He just took the initiative. Well, humanly speaking, actually we don’t have the right to do that, but God does. And God might just tell us that we have to take the initiative some time. Yes, invade someone’s space, if you are sent. Now you have to be—now **that requires discernment**, but you might. **As a participant at the table of the Lord you might be sent to a sister or brother in the body of Christ and told to do something, and, well, I would recommend you try your best to do it.**

These are just some thoughts on the Eucharist, which is very central to our life, and I believe that reflecting on the Eucharist and thinking about it and praying about it is very helpful to maintain the life of joy that God wants us to have. So be joyful. God bless you all.