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Living the Eucharist: An Aspect of a Christian's Ongoing Formation

Jude Chisanga

Abstract

In this article, the author offers his reflections on the importance of forming every Christian in devotion to the Eucharist. Reflecting on its role under six themes, the author argues that, aware of the real presence of God in the Holy Eucharist, every Christian should be lost in wonder before this reality.

Pope John Paul II was ill and was in hospital. The whole world was concerned about his suffering, but he asked for a television connection to be made for him so that he would be able to follow a meditation on the Eucharist, which was being given in the Vatican to the papal household. He wanted to follow the recollection from his hospital bed. That was certainly an example of the incredible devotion of Pope John Paul II to the Holy Eucharist. A person very close to him narrated that during his last days on earth, Pope John Paul II spent most of his time in the chapel sitting in his wheel chair, writing from time to time on a small piece of paper with instructions for his staff. And, certainly, the declaration of the Year of the Eucharist was a gift which came from Pope John Paul II's great devotion to this great sacrament.

This paper is an invitation to on-going formation into a deep appreciation of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. It is important for us to arrive at a sense of Eucharistic amazement as we live our Christian lives.

I am proposing that a Christian's on-going formation needs to be centred on the reality of the Eucharist. Every Christian life needs to be a reflection of the Eucharist. Writing about how the Eucharist should be mirrored in the religious life, E. Rinere tells us that 'the Eucharist speaks' everything. It is all-encompassing'.¹

¹ E. RINERE, 'Eucharist Mirrored in Religious Life', 386.

I have divided my work into six sections:

- A. An invitation to a Eucharistic amazement in our lives
- B. The Eucharist, communion with Jesus and our brothers and sisters
- C. The Eucharist, a new Pentecost
- D. The Eucharist and the Trinity
- E. The Eucharist, a marriage
- F. The Eucharist, communion with the Church.

Even though my paper relies for the most part on Holy Scripture, I recommend the reader to consult the books in the bibliography because these have influenced my understanding of the Eucharist.

A. Invitation to Eucharistic Amazement in our Lives

Every Christian needs to come to a particular level of Eucharistic amazement. We all need to have a strong awareness of the miracle of the Eucharist. Every Christian should be lost in wonder before the reality of the Holy Eucharist, an awareness of the real presence of God in the Holy Eucharist. I give as an example of the wonder and amazement we should have before the Eucharist the experience of Jacob when he awoke from sleep and realised that God was truly in that place, which he had not recognised before his dream:

Jacob left the town of Beersheba and started out for Haran. At sunset he stopped for the night and went to sleep, resting his head on a rock. In a dream he saw a ladder that reached from earth to heaven, and God's angels were going up and down on it. The Lord was standing beside the ladder and said, 'I am the LORD God who was worshipped by Abraham and Isaac. I will give to you and your family the land on which you are now sleeping...' Jacob woke up suddenly and thought, 'The LORD is in this place, and I didn't even know it'. Then Jacob became frightened and said, 'This is a fearful place! It must be the house of God and the ladder to heaven' (Gen 28: 10-17).

In front of the Eucharist, we are all invited to make Jacob's words our own; we should foster a realisation of the presence of Jesus Christ

in the Holy Eucharist. Actually, we all need to learn to experience a fervour when entering our chapels and churches. This should be our aim and desire: to become aware not only with our minds but with our whole beings of the presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. It may be that we don't really recognise Jesus' presence in the Eucharist. If so, we should pray for the grace to recognise his presence and worship accordingly. That is what happened to Mary Magdalene after the resurrection of our Lord: she was transformed. On the morning of Easter, Mary was speaking with Jesus and arguing with a person she thought to be a gardener because she did not recognise him at first:

As soon as Mary said this, she turned around and saw Jesus standing there. But she did not know who he was. Jesus asked her, 'Why are you crying? Who are you looking for?' She thought he was the gardener and said, 'Sir, if you have taken his body away, please tell me, so I can go and get him'. Then Jesus said to her, 'Mary!' She turned and said to him, 'Rabboni'. The Aramaic word 'Rabboni' means 'teacher' (Jn 20: 14-16).

Mary Magdalene was very sad as she spoke because she did not know that she was speaking to Jesus.² She was crying until the moment when Jesus pronounced her name, and it was at that moment that the Holy Spirit enkindled a spark in her heart and she recognised Jesus and said, 'Master, so it is you!' From that moment, the whole world was different for Mary, and she went to tell the disciples of Jesus about him being raised from the dead. We also must hope for the moment when Jesus speaks our name and we recognise him in the Eucharist.

Another example of not recognising Jesus occurs after the Resurrection when Jesus speaks to his disciples on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. The disciples responded to Jesus but were very sad because they did not recognise him. When he asked them if they had any fish, they told him that they had not caught anything. Jesus told them to let out their nets in the sea: this time they caught lots of fish. And at that moment, there was a spark in the heart of one of the disciples, and he told the others that it was the Lord, and from that moment their world was changed (Cf. Jn 21: 4-8). In the same way, we should pray for a similar experience in relation to the Holy Eucharist.

² Cf. R. CANTALAMESSA, 'The Eucharist, Communion with God and with One Another'.

When we receive the Eucharist, we eat the body of Jesus, but we do not assimilate him. On the contrary, he assimilates us as he is a stronger, vital principle. This is the miracle of the Eucharist, we are transformed. Whoever unites themselves to Jesus becomes one spirit with him. So the Eucharist is a very dynamic sacrament. Its goal is to transform us into Jesus Christ; it means that our thoughts, feelings, and desires are little by little transformed into those of Jesus Christ.³

B. The Eucharist, Communion, with Jesus, with All

The Eucharist is Holy Communion. It involves communion with Jesus and, at the same time, communion with our brothers and sisters. In his article entitled 'Conversations on the Eucharist', in the Review for Religious, Br Patrick Moffett writes that 'The Eucharist in its entirety, inclusiveness, and universality is an integral engagement of the worshipping Body of Christ. It constitutes the singular act, par excellence, of the believing community'.⁴ In his first letter to the Corinthians, St Paul writes that 'When we drink from the cup that we ask God to bless, isn't that sharing in the blood of Christ? When we eat the bread that we break, isn't that sharing in the body of Christ? By sharing in the same loaf of bread, we become one body even though there are many of us' (1 Cor 10: 16-17). Note that in this verse from Corinthians, the word 'body' occurs twice in these two short verses but with different meanings. The first time, it means the real body of Jesus, born of the Virgin Mary, crucified, and raised. When Paul says 'the bread we break, is it not the communion with the body of Christ?', 'body' means the real body of Jesus. In the second verse, when Paul says 'because we share in the same bread, we are one body, 'body' means something different: it means the Church, our brothers and sisters.⁵ Moffett also tells us that 'the Eucharist ritualises and celebrates who we are as a people and who we are becoming'.⁶ Therefore, there could be no better way of saying that communion is always both communion with Jesus Christ and our brothers and sisters.

³ Cf. R. CANTALAMESSA, 'The Eucharist, Communion with God and with One Another'.

⁴ P. S. MOFFETT, 'Conversations on the Eucharist', 265.

⁵ Cf. R. CANTALAMESSA, 'The Eucharist, Communion with God and with One Another'.

⁶ P. S. MOFFETT, 'Conversations on the Eucharist'. 268.

C. The Eucharist, a New Pentecost

When the apostles received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, some people mistook them for intoxicated persons, and it was true that they were drunk. But they were not intoxicated because of wine; they were rather intoxicated by the new wine, namely the Holy Spirit. There is a difference between the special intoxication we receive in the Eucharist and the normal intoxication we get from alcohol and drugs. Nonetheless, there is an analogy between the intoxication of the Spirit and other intoxications.⁷ In fact, both types of intoxication take us beyond our normal limitations; we go out of ourselves when we are intoxicated; we break our finiteness and experience a kind of infiniteness. However, the difference is that when we are intoxicated with alcohol and drugs, we go out of ourselves and start living at a lower level, but when we are intoxicated with the Holy Spirit, we go out of ourselves and experience a kind of ecstasy on a higher level, the level of God.⁸

There is a beautiful analogy between what happened in the historical life of Jesus and in the Eucharist, and this is a very meaningful detail because the Eucharist is a continuation of the life of Jesus. We see repeated in the Eucharist what happened in the life of Jesus. In the historical life of Jesus, at the moment of the incarnation, the Holy Spirit gave us Jesus because he was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit came upon Mary and the power of God overshadowed her (cf. Lk 1: 35-38). When Jesus died on the cross, the contrary happened: it was Jesus who gave us the Holy Spirit. The blood and water which flowed from the pierced side of Jesus were signs of the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 19: 34). St John explains this in his first letter, namely that there are three testimonies: blood, water, and the Spirit. Blood and water are the signs of the reality of the Spirit.

At the consecration, the Holy Spirit gives us Jesus; he becomes present on the altar but not by the power of the priest as he is only an instrument. The bread becomes the body of Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. That is why the priest invokes the Holy Spirit before pronouncing the words of consecration. However, at communion, it is Jesus who gives us his Holy Spirit, and this is truly a new Pentecost.

⁷ Cf. R. CANTALAMESSA, 'The Eucharist, Communion with God and with One Another'.

⁸ Cf. R. CANTALAMESSA, 'The Eucharist, Communion with God and with One Another'.

We experience a new Pentecost in a deeper manner when we get a new heart, the heart of a child.⁹

D. The Eucharist and the Trinity

There is a Trinitarian dimension in the Eucharist. And the foundation of this is a dogmatic principle, namely that in God, there is one nature but three persons. So if we receive the divine nature of the Son in the Holy Eucharist, we also receive the divine nature of the Father and the Holy Spirit; the three are inseparable. It means that where there is one of these divine persons, the other two are also present; they are indivisible. To support this idea, Jesus utters the following words in the Gospel of John, 'I want all of them to be one with each other, just as I am one with you and you are one with me. I also want them to be one with us...' (Jn 17:21) This means that when we receive Jesus in the Holy Eucharist, we also receive the Holy Spirit; there is no more sure way of receiving a new Pentecost than through receiving the Eucharist because, in the Eucharist, we receive the source of the Holy Spirit, the crucified and risen Jesus Christ from whose pierced side the Holy Spirit flew.

When the prophet Ezekiel had to prophesy upon the dry bones, he did not know yet where the Holy Spirit came from as those were Old Testament times (cf. Ezekiel 37). But now when we consider the Holy Spirit, we are looking in one direction; we look at Jesus and say, Come, Holy Spirit, from the pierced side of the crucified Lord.¹⁰

E. The Eucharist, a Marriage

St Paul gives us a hint in order for us to understand something profound concerning the Eucharist. Speaking about marriage, he says that the goal of marriage is that the body of the bride belongs no longer to herself but to the spouse, and vice versa (cf. Eph 5: 21-33). This law is applied to the Eucharist because St Paul speaks precisely about marriage between Jesus Christ and the Church. When we apply this rule

⁹ Cf. R. CANTALAMESSA, 'The Eucharist, Communion with God and with One Another'.

¹⁰ Cf. R. CANTALAMESSA, 'The Eucharist, Communion with God and with One Another'.

to the Eucharist, it means that in the Eucharist, we receive the body of Christ, but Jesus also receives our body; Holy Communion is reciprocal. Consequently, Jesus needs every human life in order to have the experience of everybody as he did not have all possible experiences.¹¹ Jesus had limited experience; he was a man and not a woman; he died at the age of thirty-three and so he did not know what it meant to be old; he was not married so he did not know what it meant to be married and have children. And now through our receiving of the Eucharist, all these experiences become his; our body becomes the body of Jesus. Therefore, nobody should say that Jesus Christ does not know what it means to be a woman nowadays; he does not know what it means to have lost a child because if we know then Jesus also knows our situation.¹² Through the Eucharist, our humanity becomes a prolonged humanity of Christ. And this why we should always in every Eucharistic celebration make a personal offertory alongside the offertory of bread and wine. Together with the bread and wine, we must put on the paten our lives and experiences, more especially the experience we may be going through at that particular moment.

And so when the priest says to the congregation, 'The Lord be with you', he means to say, 'The Lord be with all of you, my brothers and sisters, and not only the host on the paten'; it is not only the chalice with the wine but all of us that the priest lifts up and offers to God. And so when we see the collection plate going round and we have nothing else to offer except a coin, it means it is time to offer somebody we know is suffering, afflicted, a mother who has lost a child, a person without food, a girl forsaken by her boyfriend, or a sick person. These people and situations belong to God and so we should not deprive him of that which is his own. Like wine and bread, these are the materials for God's sacrifice; indeed, that is what God thirsts and hungers for, and that is what makes him shed tears.

¹¹ Cf. R. CANTALAMESSA, 'The Eucharist, Communion with God and with One Another'.

¹² Cf. R. CANTALAMESSA, 'The Eucharist, Communion with God and with One Another'.

F. The Eucharist, Communion with the Church

Because we share in the same bread, we are one body. There is no perfect Eucharistic communion unless we are in communion with one another. In his Letter for Holy Thursday 1980, On the Mystery and Worship of the Eucharist, John Paul II tells us that 'In fact Christian life is expressed in the fulfilling of the greatest commandment, that is to say in the love of God and neighbor, and this love finds its source in the Blessed Sacrament, which is commonly called the Sacrament of Love'.¹³ That is why it is so important that we live in harmony with one another. Jesus said clearly that if we are at the altar, and we remember that between us and our brothers and sisters there is some issue, we must first go and reconcile with them and then return later to come and make our offering (cf. Mt 5: 23-24). 'Where we do not dialogue and do not discuss, compromise, forgive, and accept what we might not prefer for the sake of the common good, the Eucharist itself may not help much'.¹⁴ The reason is that Jesus Christ cannot be divided; we cannot receive the head without the body. Equally, St Paul warns the Corinthians from dividing Jesus Christ when he writes to say:

My dear friends, as a follower of our Lord Jesus Christ, I beg you to get along with each other. Don't take sides. Always try to agree in what you think. Several people from Chloe's family have already reported to me that you keep arguing with each other. They have said that some of you claim to follow me while others claim to follow Apollos or Peter or Christ. Has Christ been divided up? Was I nailed to a cross for you? Were you baptised in my name? (1 Cor 1: 10-13).

There is a special category of persons we have to take into consideration when we speak about communion with others, and those are the poor with whom Jesus identified himself. LaVerdiere writes, 'Those who break bread are expected to offer their lives for others in the way Jesus the Christ did throughout his life but especially in the passion'.¹⁵ As such, the Holy Eucharist is a challenge for mission, i.e. for reaching out to the poor, needy, and hungry.

¹³ JOHN PAUL II, On the Mystery and Worship of the Eucharist, 5, par. 1.

¹⁴ E. RINERE, 'Eucharist Mirrored in Religious Life', 391.

¹⁵ E. LaVERDIERE, 'Eucharist', 358.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we could safely say that in living out the Eucharist, sharing in the bread is sharing in the body of Jesus Christ, and receiving the wine is receiving the blood of Jesus Christ. 'Body' in the language of Jesus Christ does not mean a certain part of a person but the whole human being. So when Jesus said, 'This is my body', and equally when the priest says, 'The body of Christ', we should know that Jesus is giving us his life from the moment he was conceived in the womb of Mary until his last moment. And when Jesus said, 'This is my blood', and also when the priest says, 'The blood of Christ', we should know that it is not just a liquid of the body which is called 'blood', but we receive the death of Jesus because, according to the biblical language, blood is the seed of life, and the shedding of blood is the sign of death.

Each time we receive the Eucharist, we should identify ourselves with one of the moments of the life of Christ. For example, if we are priests who are engaged in the ministering to the people, we could identify ourselves with the Jesus who went around Galilee and Judea proclaiming the Kingdom of God. And if we are in anguish, we could identify ourselves with Jesus in great pain, praying so sincerely that his sweat falls to the ground like drops of blood (Cf Lk 22: 44). Communion with the body of Jesus causes us to get in touch with the reality of his life. This communion is stronger than the one between the mother and child she bears in her womb. The child receives everything from the mother, breath and food, but after nine months, this communion must be broken; otherwise, if the child stays in the womb of the mother for more than nine months, it could die. To continue to live, the child must detach itself from the mother after nine months. However, with Jesus, we must never detach ourselves from him. If we separate ourselves from him, we die.

What we are talking about here is more than mere communion; it is assimilation and transformation. Through the reception of the Holy Eucharist, we are transformed into Jesus Christ and not just united with him.

What is all this we have deliberated on? It is truly an invitation to live out the Eucharist as an aspect of our on-going formation.

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