

# EUCCHARIST HEART OF THE CHURCH

John Paul II's encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* in condensed form



**“They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42)**

**T**he Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates *the heart of the mystery of the Church*. In a variety of ways she joyfully experiences the constant fulfilment of the promise: “Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:20), but in the Holy Eucharist, through the changing of bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord, she rejoices in this presence with unique intensity. Ever since Pentecost, when the Church, the People of the New Covenant, began her pilgrim journey towards her heavenly homeland, the Divine Sacrament has continued to mark the passing of her days, filling them with confident hope.

The Second Vatican Council, in its *Constitution on the Church*, rightly proclaimed that the eucharistic sacrifice is “the source and summit of the Christian life.” And, as the document on priestly ministry states, “For the most holy Eucharist contains the Church’s entire spiritual wealth: Christ himself, our passover and living bread.”

The Church was born of the paschal mystery. For this very reason the Eucharist, which is in an outstanding way the sacrament of the paschal mystery, *stands at the center of the Church's life*. This is already clear from the earliest images of the Church found in the Acts of the Apostles: "They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (2:42).

Two thousand years later, we continue to relive that primordial image of the Church. At every celebration of the Eucharist, we are spiritually brought back to the paschal Triduum: to the events of the evening of Holy Thursday, to the Last Supper and to what followed it.

## Bread of life

**B**y the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the Church was born and set out upon the pathways of the world. Yet a decisive moment in her taking shape was certainly the institution of the Eucharist in the Upper Room. The Church's foundation and wellspring is the Holy Week Triduum, but this is as it were gathered up, foreshadowed and "concentrated" forever in the gift of the Eucharist. In this gift Jesus Christ entrusted to his Church the perennial making-present of the paschal mystery. With it he brought about a mysterious "oneness in time" between that Triduum and the passage of the centuries.

The thought of this leads us to profound amazement and gratitude. I would like to rekindle this Eucharistic "amazement" by the present Encyclical Letter, to contemplate the face of Christ, and to contemplate it with Mary. That is the program I have set before the Church at the dawn of the third millennium, summoning her to put out into the deep on the sea of history with the enthusiasm of the New Evangelization.

To contemplate Christ involves being able to recognize him wherever he manifests himself, in his many forms of presence, but above all in the living sacrament of his body and his blood. *The Church draws her life from Christ in the Eucharist*; by him she is fed and by him she is enlightened. Whenever the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the faithful can in some way relive the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: "Their eyes were opened and they recognized him" (Lk 24:31).

From the Eucharist the Church draws her life. From this "living bread" she draws her nourishment. How could I not feel the need to urge everyone to experience it ever anew? As Christ's saving presence in the community of the faithful and its spiritual food, the Eucharist is the most precious possession the Church can have in her journey through history.

Certainly *the liturgical reform inaugurated by the Council* has greatly contributed to a more conscious, active and fruitful participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Altar on the part of the faithful. In many places, *adoration of the Blessed Sacrament* is also an important daily practice and becomes an inexhaustible source of holiness. The devout participation of the faithful in the Eucharistic procession on the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ is a grace from the Lord which yearly brings joy to those who take part in it.

Unfortunately, alongside these lights, *there are also shadows*. In some places the practice of Eucharistic adoration has been almost completely abandoned. In various parts of the Church abuses have occurred, leading to confusion with regard to sound faith and Catholic doctrine concerning this wonderful sacrament.

## Mystery of faith

**W**hen the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of her Lord's death and resurrection, this central event of salvation becomes really present and "the work of our redemption is carried out." This sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only *after he had left us a means of sharing in it* as if we had been present there. Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits. This is the faith from which generations of Christians down the ages have lived.

The Church constantly draws her life from the redeeming sacrifice; she approaches it not only through faith-filled remembrance, but also through a real contact, since *this sacrifice is made present ever anew*, sacramentally perpetuated, in every community that offers it at the hands of the consecrated minister.

The Eucharist thus applies to men and women today the reconciliation won once for all by Christ for mankind in

every age. In the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are *one single sacrifice*." St. John Chrysostom put it well: "We always offer the same Lamb, not one today and another tomorrow, but always the same one. For this reason the sacrifice is always only one.... Even now we offer that victim who was once offered and who will never be consumed."

The universal charity of the Eucharistic Sacrifice is based on the words of the Savior himself. In instituting it, he did not merely say: "This is my body.... This is my blood," but went on to add: "which is given for you.... which is poured out for you" (Lk 22:19-20).

Jesus did not simply state that what he was giving them to eat and drink was his body and his blood; he also expressed *its sacrificial meaning* and made sacramentally present his sacrifice which would soon be offered on the Cross for the salvation of all. This is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council concerning all the faithful: "Taking part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which is the source and summit of the whole Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God, and offer themselves along with it."

## Real presence

**T**he sacramental representation of Christ's sacrifice, crowned by the resurrection, in the Mass involves a most special presence which—in the words of Paul VI—"is called 'real' not as a way of excluding all other types of presence as if they were 'not real,' but because it is a presence in the fullest sense: a substantial presence whereby Christ, the God-Man, is wholly and entirely present."

This sets forth once more the perennially valid teaching of the Council of Trent: "The consecration of the bread and wine effects the change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. And the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called this change transubstantiation." Truly the Eucharist is a mystery which surpasses our understanding and can only be received in faith.

The Eucharist is a straining towards

the goal, a foretaste of the fullness of joy promised by Christ (cf. Jn 15:11); it is in some way the anticipation of heaven, the "pledge of future glory." In the Eucharist, everything speaks of confident waiting "in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ."

Those who feed on Christ in the Eucharist need not wait until the hereafter to receive eternal life: *they already possess it on earth*, as the first-fruits of a future fullness which will embrace man in his totality. For in the Eucharist we also receive the pledge of our bodily resurrection at the end of the world: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn 6:54). With the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the "secret" of the Resurrection.

## Heaven and earth

The Eucharist spurs us on our journey through history and plants a seed of living hope

in our daily commitment to the work before us. Certainly the Christian vision leads to the expectation of "new heavens" and "a new earth" (Rev 21:1), but this increases, rather than lessens, *our sense of responsibility for the world today*. I wish to reaffirm this forcefully at the beginning of the new millennium, so that Christians will feel more obliged than ever not to

neglect their duties as citizens in this world. Theirs is the task of contributing with the light of the gospel to the building of a more human world, a world fully in harmony with God's plan.

Many problems darken the horizon of our time. We need but think of the urgent need to work for peace, to base relationships between peoples on solid premises of justice and solidarity, and to defend human life from conception to its natural end.

And what should we say of the thousand inconsistencies of a "globalized" world where the weakest, the most powerless and the poorest appear to have so little hope!

It is in this world that Christian hope must shine forth! For this reason too, the Lord wished to remain with us in the Eucharist, making his presence in meal and sacrifice the promise of a humanity renewed by his love.

Proclaiming the death of the Lord "until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26) entails that all who take part in the Eucharist be committed to changing their lives and making them in a certain way completely "Eucharistic."

The seeds of disunity, which daily experience shows to be so deeply rooted in humanity as a result of sin, are countered by *the unifying power* of the body of Christ. The Eucharist, precisely by building up the Church, creates human community.

the sacrifice and is directed towards communion, both sacramental and spiritual.

If in our time Christians must be distinguished above all by the "art of prayer," how can we not feel a renewed need to spend time in spiritual converse, in silent adoration, in heartfelt love before Christ present in the Most Holy Sacrament? How often, dear brothers and sisters, have I experienced this, and drawn from it strength, consolation and support!

The Eucharist is a priceless treasure: By not only celebrating it but also by praying before it outside of Mass we are enabled to make contact with the very wellspring of grace.

## Priest shortage

If the Eucharist is the center and summit of the Church's life, it is likewise the center and summit of priestly ministry. For this reason, with a heart filled with gratitude to our Lord

Jesus Christ, I repeat that the

Eucharist "is the principal and central *raison d'être* of the sacrament of priesthood, which effectively came into being at the moment of the institution of the Eucharist."

All of this shows how distressing and irregular is the situation of a Christian community that, despite having sufficient numbers and variety of faithful to form a parish, does not have a priest to lead it.

Parishes are communities of the baptized who express and affirm their identity above all through the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. But this requires the presence of a presbyter, who alone is qualified to offer the Eucharist *in persona Christi*.

When a community lacks a priest, attempts are rightly made somehow to remedy the situation so that it can continue its Sunday celebrations, and those religious and laity who lead their



Illustration by the artist of the Eucharist, showing the priest holding the chalice and the faithful gathered around him.

## Worshiping God

The *worship of the Eucharist outside of the Mass* is of inestimable value for the life of the Church. This worship is strictly linked to the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. The presence of Christ under the sacred species reserved after Mass—a presence which lasts as long as the species of bread and of wine remain—derives from the celebration of

brothers and sisters in prayer exercise in a praiseworthy way the common priesthood of all the faithful based on the grace of Baptism. But such solutions must be considered merely temporary, while the community awaits a priest.

## Mary, 'Woman of the Eucharist'

If we wish to rediscover in all its richness the profound relationship between the Church and the Eucharist, we cannot neglect Mary, Mother and model of the Church. In my apostolic letter *Rosary of the Virgin Mary*, I pointed to the Blessed Virgin Mary as our teacher in contemplating Christ's face, and among the mysteries of light I included *the institution of the Eucharist*. Mary can guide us towards this most holy sacrament, because she herself has a profound relationship with it.

At first glance, the gospel is silent on this subject. The account of the institution of the Eucharist on the night of Holy Thursday makes no mention of Mary. Yet we know that she was present among the Apostles who prayed "with one accord" (cf. Acts 1:14) in the first community which gathered after the Ascension in expectation of Pentecost. Certainly Mary must have been present at the Eucharistic celebrations of the first generation of Christians, who were devoted to "the breaking of bread" (Acts 2:42).

The Church, which looks to Mary as a model, is also called to imitate her in her relationship with this most holy mystery.

As a result, there is a profound analogy between the *Fiat* that Mary said in reply to the angel, and the *Amen* that every believer says when receiving the body of the Lord. Mary was asked to believe that the One whom she conceived "through the Holy Spirit" was "the Son of God" (Lk 1:30-35). In continuity with the Virgin's faith, in the eucharistic mystery we are asked to believe that the same Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, becomes present in his full humanity and divinity under the signs of bread and wine.

## Church of the Eucharist

The mystery of the Eucharist—sacrifice, presence, banquet—must be experienced and lived in its integrity. This is true both in its celebration and in the intimate converse with Jesus that takes place after receiving Communion or in a prayerful moment of Eucharistic adoration apart from Mass.

These are times when the Church is firmly built up and it becomes clear what she truly is: one, holy, catholic and apostolic; the people, temple and family of God; the body and bride of Christ, enlivened by the Holy Spirit; the universal sacrament of salvation and a hierarchically structured communion.

By giving the Eucharist the prominence it deserves, and by being careful not to diminish any of its dimensions or demands, we show that we are truly conscious of the greatness of this gift. We are urged to do so by an uninterrupted tradition, which

from the first centuries on has found the Christian community ever vigilant in guarding this "treasure."

Inspired by love, the Church is anxious to hand on to future generations of Christians, without loss, her faith and teaching with regard to the mystery of the Eucharist. There can be no danger of excess in our care for this mystery, for, as St. Thomas Aquinas wrote, "in this sacrament is recapitulated the whole mystery of our salvation."

In the humble signs of bread and wine, changed into his body and blood, Christ walks beside us as our strength and our food for the journey, and he enables us to become, for everyone, witnesses of hope. If, in the presence of this mystery, reason experiences its limits, the heart, enlightened by the grace of the Holy Spirit, clearly sees the response that is demanded, and bows low in adoration and unbounded love.

*This Update is adapted from the encyclical given in Rome, at St. Peter's, on Holy Thursday 2003.*

## Question Box

- 1) Describe how the Eucharist touches you.
- 2) What is meant in calling Eucharist "the source and summit of Christian life"?
- 3) How does the Eucharist make us better global citizens?

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