

The Most Holy Eucharist – Sacrifice, Presence, Banquet

‘The Eucharist is the centre and source of grace: therefore it must be the very keystone of the legionary scheme.’ (*Handbook* 49) Our understanding of this supreme sacrament cannot be reduced to what is grasped from just one perspective. On this Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, we reflect on *three* basic perspectives from which we must view the Eucharistic mystery in its richness: ‘**sacrifice, presence, banquet**’. (Pope St John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* [EE] 61)

So firstly, ‘the Eucharist is above all else a Sacrifice’. (John Paul II, *Dominicae Cena* 9) ‘It is the Sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages.’ (EE 11) ‘The victim is one and the same: the same now offers through the ministry of priests, who then offered himself on the cross; only the manner of offering is different.’ (Council of Trent, *Doctrine on the Sacrifice of the Mass*, quoted in *Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 1367) Christ obviously does not die again in the Mass, but the separate consecration of bread and of wine shows forth the Sacrifice of the Cross by symbolising the ‘separation’ of his blood from his body on the cross, when all his blood was poured out for us. (cf. Pope Pius XII, *Mediator Dei* 70) In the Mass, ‘the one true God receives the greatest worship the world can give him, for it is Christ himself who is offered’. (Pope Francis, *Gaudete et Exsultate* [GE] 157)

Secondly, the Eucharist is Presence – the *real* and *substantial* presence of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine. The term ‘Real Presence’ should convey to us the supreme greatness of this gift, but even ‘real presence’ is sometimes explained in a watered-down way. The term ‘substantial presence’ prevents this. The ‘substance’ of a thing is that which answers the question, ‘What *is* this, most basically?’ Regarding the Eucharist, Jesus himself has given the answer from the start: ‘This *is* my body... This *is* my blood’. What is before us in the Eucharist, most basically, *is* simply Christ himself and nothing else: the substance of the bread and the wine have ceased to exist, being entirely transformed.

Thus Blessed Pope Paul VI explained why, among all the different ways Christ is present to us, the Eucharist ‘surpasses all the others’. (*Mysterium Fidei* [MF] 38) This presence, he wrote, ‘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’. (MF 39)

‘After the change of the substance or nature of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, nothing remains of the bread and wine but the appearances under which Christ, whole and entire, in His physical “reality” is bodily present, although not in the same way that bodies are present in a given place.’ (MF 46) This is the mystery of ‘transubstantiation, one of the articles of faith’. (MF 54) And because the Eucharist *is* Jesus, God the Son made man, we can and must give to it the supreme honour called *latría* – worship and adoration that may be given to God alone. (MF 55)

Finally, the Eucharist is Banquet: receiving Christ in the Sacred Banquet of Holy Communion. Some special aspects of the power of this Banquet shine forth in some vibrant

images Pope John Paul draws from the Church Fathers: ‘He who eats it with faith, eats Fire and Spirit’. (*EE* 17, quoting St Ephrem) ‘With the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the “secret” of the resurrection. For this reason Saint Ignatius of Antioch rightly defined the Eucharistic Bread as “a medicine of immortality, an antidote to death”.’ (*EE* 18)

Pope Francis reminds us that ‘when we receive [Christ] in Holy Communion, we renew our covenant with him’. (*GE* 157) In this renewal of the covenant, we’re pledging once again to Christ that we believe his truth and that we will do his will.

This is a helpful perspective for explaining why those consciously persisting in a state of mortal sin must not receive Communion until they’ve repented and received the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Rather than condemning anyone, the Church is more saying, ‘Please, don’t do this to yourself, don’t spiritually damage yourself by setting up this lie in your heart. Don’t pretend to God that you’re renewing the covenant with him to do his loving will, while at the same time determining to keep acting in a way that you know to be gravely *contrary* to his will.’

This helps us understand that, contrary to a common accusation, the Church’s Eucharistic practice is totally welcoming. She invites all people equally to share the Bread of Life – but for our own good, we first receive all necessary sacramental preparation in the fruitful reception of Baptism and Reconciliation, so that the powerful divine fire of the Eucharist will help us, not harm us.

From these reflections on the Eucharist as Sacrifice, Presence and Banquet, we can see what a terrible wound is inflicted on someone, should anyone draw them away from the centrality of the Eucharist in faith and life. We listen again to the words of St John Paul II on ‘the Divine Sacrament’ (*EE* 1): ‘Here is the Church’s treasure, the heart of the world, the pledge of the fulfilment for which each man and woman, even unconsciously, yearns.’ (*EE* 59)

‘In the Eucharist we have Jesus, we have his redemptive sacrifice, we have his resurrection, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have adoration, obedience and love of the Father. Were we to disregard the Eucharist, how could we overcome our own deficiency?’ (*EE* 60)

‘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.’ (*EE* 62)