

Heart of the Church

'The Church draws her life from the Eucharist.' With these words, Pope John Paul II begins his fourteenth encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* ('On the Eucharist in its relationship to the Church'), which was published on Holy Thursday 2003.

The Pope expresses his 'amazement and gratitude' that the mystery of Christ's passion, death and resurrection, which was celebrated as a decisive moment at the Last Supper, is truly present to us today through the power of the Holy Spirit.

With this encyclical John Paul II wants to 'rekindle this Eucharistic "amazement"': He sees it as continuing the 'program' he has set before the Church for the new millennium: the commitment to contemplate the face of Christ (see *Novo Millennio Ineunte*), and to contemplate it with Mary (see *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*).

The mystery of faith

This is my body, this is my blood, given for you...

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus gave us the Eucharistic sacrifice of his body and blood. In the dramatic setting of the Last Supper in the Upper Room, a short time before Jesus surrendered his life on the cross, the Eucharist was born. 'The Eucharist is indelibly marked by the event of the Lord's passion and death, of which it is not only a reminder but the sacramental re-presentation. It is the sacrifice of the cross perpetuated down the ages' (n.11).

The Eucharist makes present not just the mystery of Christ's passion and death, but also his resurrection. It is the living and risen One who becomes for us the 'bread of life'. This is the faith which generations of Christians have lived and proclaimed: *Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*. The Church was born of this mystery of faith. The Eucharist is the sacrament of the paschal mystery and stands at the heart of the Church's life.

The Eucharist is not just one gift from Christ, but the gift *par excellence*. It is the gift of himself, of his person, a special presence which we call 'real'. (n.15) 'This is no metaphorical food: "My flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed" (Jn 6:55)' (n.16).

In the Eucharist we receive not only Christ but the Holy Spirit too. 'He who eats it with faith, eats Fire and Spirit,' said St. Ephrem (n.17). In the Mass we implore God to give us the Spirit when we pray, '*Grant that we who are nourished by his body and blood may*

be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ.'

Eucharistic memories

In Ecclesia de Eucharistia Pope John Paul II shares his own treasured memories of the Eucharist.

The Pope recalls the parish church where he started out as a young priest and, since then, the many times and places in which he has celebrated the Eucharist. 'I have been able to celebrate Holy Mass in chapels built along mountain paths, on lakeshores and seacoasts; I have celebrated it on altars built in stadiums and in city squares...' (n. 8)

Such variety has given him a profound awareness of the Eucharist's universal, cosmic character. 'Yes cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation.' (n. 8)

Talking point: Share one of your precious memories of the Eucharist.

Gift of love

Until you come in glory...

The Eucharist is a gift which transcends time and space. It expresses our communion with the whole Church, including the saints of heaven. That is why in the Mass we honour Mary, the angels, the apostles, the martyrs and all the saints. The Eucharist is a straining towards the fullness of heavenly joy. Those who feed on Christ and the Holy Spirit in the Eucharist have already begun to taste the fruits of God's kingdom.

The tension of living with eyes set on heaven while living in a sinful world spurs us on in our journey through history. Proclaiming the death of the Lord 'until he comes' (1 Cor 11:26) means being committed to changing our lives in the here and now so that we live 'eucharistic' lives, lives that contribute to the transformation of the world in God's love.

The Eucharist builds the church

'The Eucharist builds the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist...there is a profound relationship between the two.' (n.26)

We are united with Christ and one another in Baptism. The Eucharist constantly renews and consolidates that union. Not only does each of us receive Christ, but Christ receives each of us. He makes us his friends. He lives within us and we live in him (see Jn 15:4). The Eucharist confirms our identity as 'the body of Christ'.

This union between Christ and the community of faith is not a closing in upon itself. Rather the Church becomes a 'sacrament' for humanity, a sign of salvation, light to the world and salt for the earth.

The Church's mission flows from Christ's mission. The Eucharist is the source and summit of all evangelization, since its goal is to unite the whole of humankind with Christ and in him with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The gift of Christ and his Spirit which we receive in Eucharistic communion answers the yearning for unity deep in the human heart. And it answers it by being much more than a shared meal; it expresses an intimacy between human beings and God's very self.

Strength for the journey

The Pope reflects on the joy of spending time in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, drawing close to the Lord just as the beloved disciple did (cf. Jn 13:25). 'How often, dear brothers and sisters, have I experienced this, and drawn from it strength, consolation and support!'

Ecclesia de Eucharistia affirms the practice of Eucharistic adoration outside of Mass, noting that such worship is strictly linked to the celebration of the Eucharist.

Heart of the world

The Eucharist is a great mystery that 'stretches' our faith. 'With deep emotion' Pope John Paul II reaches out to us with his own testimony of faith in the Eucharist: In this sacrament lies 'the Church's treasure, the heart of the world, the pledge of the fulfillment for which each man and woman, even unconsciously, yearns.' (n.59)

One body in Christ

The Eucharist creates and fosters unity. Safeguarding and promoting the unity of the Church is a task for pastors and for every member of the faithful.

One important way to do this is to be present at Mass each Sunday. By sharing in the Eucharistic sacrifice, we strengthen our brothers and sisters in their faith. Together as one body in Christ we become a sign of loving unity to the world.

Another way is to work and pray for unity among all Christians, while at the same time treading carefully when it comes to ecumenical celebrations. The path of ecumenism in our times is a great gift of God! However, until Catholics and Christians of other churches and ecclesial communities resolve some important differences in their understanding and practice of faith, out of respect for the profound unity which the Eucharist expresses it is not possible to have intercommunion. (Note: n. 45 mentions exceptional circumstances.)

Gift of unity

The dignity of the Eucharistic celebration

Scripture tells the story of a woman at Bethany who anoints Jesus' head using a flask of expensive ointment. The disciples object: the money could have been better spent on the needs of the poor. Jesus, without denying their duty of care for the poor, praises the woman's gift and the honour she bestows on his person.

Like the woman at Bethany, 'the Church has feared no "extravagance", devoting the best of her resources to expressing her wonder and adoration before the unsurpassable gift of the Eucharist' (n.48). Thus over the centuries we have seen inspired works of architecture, sculpture, painting and music arising from Eucharistic devotion. 'It can be said that the Eucharist, while shaping the Church and her spirituality, has also powerfully affected "culture", and the arts in particular' (n.49).

The Eucharist and unity

The God we worship as Christians is the Trinity. The oneness of God involves a relational unity of three divine persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Through the Eucharist the Church lives, grows and expresses its very nature which is to live in communion with God and one another. It is not by chance that *communion* is one of the names we use to refer to the sacrament of Eucharist.

The communion we share in the Eucharist is the culmination of the communion which is celebrated in all the sacraments. This is why 'it is good to cultivate in our hearts a constant desire for the sacrament of the Eucharist' (n.34).

The celebration of the Eucharist presupposes that we are already enveloped in a communion of love: Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit, unites us to the Father and to one another. The sacrament is an expression of this bond in its visible and invisible dimensions.

Communion is 'visible' in our relationships with one another, in our unity with the teaching of the apostles, the sacraments and the Church's hierarchical order. And communion is 'invisible' in the sense that the faith, hope and love of communion

transcends the spatial and temporal limits of this world. The profound relationship between the invisible and visible elements of communion is what makes the Church 'the sacrament of salvation'. Only in this context can there be a legitimate celebration of the Eucharist.

Attending to both the visible and invisible elements of Church communion is the responsibility of every Christian. For example, to receive the Eucharistic host—the sacred sign of our unity with God and one another—and yet to be living in such a way as to seriously undermine that unity would be dishonest. The truth of the Eucharist must reflect the truth of our lives. That is why, when we are conscious of having committed a grave sin, we should receive the sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to communion (cf. n.36).

Through Reconciliation we 'come home' to God and to the Church, restoring the very unity which we celebrate in the Eucharist. The sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation are very closely connected.

Then again, to attend only to the love and faith 'in our heart' and to dismiss the importance of the outward expression of Eucharistic communion would be equally inadequate. The Eucharist must express communion as both an interior and a 'bodily' reality.

A communion of communions

Liturgy is never anyone's private property. Nor is the Eucharist a self-sufficient local celebration. Each Eucharistic celebration expresses the local community's participation in the wider Church communion, signified by its unity with its local bishop and with the Pope. Every valid Eucharist expresses this universal communion.

The Eucharist is a great mystery entrusted to our hands. We must value and respect it. This is why the Church insists that the Eucharist be celebrated according to certain liturgical norms. 'Communities which conform to those norms quietly but eloquently demonstrate their love for the Church' (n.52)

Further reading

Ecclesia de Eucharistia is published in booklet form by St Pauls Publications and costs around \$5. To obtain a copy contact your nearest Catholic bookshop or the adult education office in your diocese.

Gift of salvation

The Eucharist expresses the faith of the apostles

The Eucharist expresses the 'apostolic' identity of the church. That is, the Church was built on 'the foundation of the apostles' (Eph 2:20) and the faith of the communities that formed under their care. By being open to the renewing power of the Holy Spirit the Church keeps and hands on this faith. Although each generation draws on new forms of expression, the faith which we celebrate in the Eucharist today is the same faith proclaimed by the apostles, and the faith which we pass on to future generations of Christians.

The Eucharist cannot be separated from the ministry of the ordained priest. This minister is a gift which the community receives through its continuity with the witness of the apostles. Where a community

finds itself 'priestless', the encyclical praises those religious and laity who lead the community in prayer, while keeping in mind that such solutions are temporary. We must keep alive in the community a genuine 'hunger' for the Eucharist, and through prayer and witness raise up new priestly vocations.

Mary: Woman of Eucharistic faith

By the very fact that she offered her womb for the Word to become flesh, Mary lived her Eucharistic faith long before the events of the Last Supper. Just as Mary said 'Yes' to the Angel, so does each believer say 'Amen' when receiving the body of the Lord in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Just as Mary was asked to believe, so are we asked to believe that Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary, becomes present in the bread and wine.

When Mary bore the Word-made-flesh in her womb, she became the first 'tabernacle' in history. It was before this 'tabernacle' that Elizabeth adored the Lord at the Visitation.

In the Eucharist, all that Christ accomplished by his passion and death is present. Consequently, all that Christ did with regard to his Mother for our sake is also present. To her he gave the beloved disciple. To each of us he also says: '*Behold your mother!*' (Jn 19:26-27). To receive Christ in the Eucharist is to also receive the gift of his Mother.

Mary, Mother of the Church, is present at each of our celebrations of the Eucharist. If the Church and the Eucharist are inseparable, then the same is true of Mary and the Eucharist.

A question to take to prayer:
Do I 'hunger' for the Eucharist?

Everything we do as Christians, every pastoral and missionary activity of the Church, must draw strength from the Eucharistic mystery and in turn be directed to that mystery as its culmination.

The Pope urges us to give the Eucharist the prominence and reverence it deserves. Let us be careful not to diminish any of its dimensions or demands, conscious of the greatness of this gift. We can never be too careful, for in this sacrament is summed up the whole mystery of our salvation. Let us hand on our Eucharistic faith to future generations of Christians, just as this treasure has been passed on to us. Let us learn from the saints and 'catch' their Eucharistic faith in all its lived reality.

'Above all, let us listen to Mary... Gazing upon Mary, we come to know the transforming power present in the Eucharist' (n.62).

