

## THE EUCHARIST, A MYSTERY TO BE CELEBRATED

"Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven" (Jn 6:32)

34. The Synod of Bishops reflected at length on the intrinsic relationship between eucharistic faith and eucharistic celebration, pointing out the connection between the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi*, and stressing the primacy of the liturgical action. The Eucharist should be experienced as a mystery of faith, celebrated authentically and with a clear awareness that "the *intellectus fidei* has a primordial relationship to the Church's liturgical action." (105) Theological reflection in this area can never prescind from the sacramental order instituted by Christ himself. On the other hand, the liturgical action can never be considered generically, prescinding from the mystery of faith. Our faith and the eucharistic liturgy both have their source in the same event: Christ's gift of himself in the Paschal Mystery.

### Beauty and the liturgy

35. This relationship between creed and worship is evidenced in a particular way by the rich theological and liturgical category of beauty. Like the rest of Christian Revelation, the liturgy is inherently linked to beauty: it is *veritatis splendor*. The liturgy is a radiant expression of the paschal mystery, in which Christ draws us to himself and calls us to communion. As Saint Bonaventure would say, in Jesus we contemplate beauty and splendour at their source. (106) This is no mere aestheticism, but the concrete way in which the truth of God's love in Christ encounters us, attracts us and delights us, enabling us to emerge from ourselves and drawing us towards our true vocation, which is love. (107) God allows himself to be glimpsed first in creation, in the beauty and harmony of the cosmos (cf. Wis 13:5; Rom 1:19-20). In the Old Testament we see many signs of the grandeur of God's power as he manifests his glory in his wondrous deeds among the Chosen People (cf. Ex 14; 16:10; 24:12-18; Num 14:20-23). In the New Testament this epiphany of beauty reaches definitive fulfilment in God's revelation in Jesus Christ: (108) Christ is the full manifestation of the glory of God. In the glorification of the Son, the Father's glory shines forth and is communicated (cf. Jn 1:14; 8:54; 12:28; 17:1). Yet this beauty is not simply a harmony of proportion and form; "the fairest of the sons of men" (Ps 45[44]:3) is also, mysteriously, the one "who had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him" (Is 53:2). Jesus Christ shows us how the truth of love can transform even the dark mystery of death into the radiant light of the resurrection. Here the splendour of God's glory surpasses all worldly beauty. The truest beauty is the love of God, who definitively revealed himself to us in the paschal mystery.

The beauty of the liturgy is part of this mystery; it is a sublime expression of God's glory and, in a certain sense, a glimpse of heaven on earth. The memorial of Jesus' redemptive sacrifice contains something of that beauty which Peter, James and John beheld when the Master, making his way to Jerusalem, was transfigured before their eyes (cf. Mk 9:2). Beauty, then, is not mere decoration, but rather an essential element of the liturgical action, since it is an attribute of God himself and his revelation. These considerations should make us realize the care which is needed, if the liturgical action is to reflect its innate splendour.

### The eucharistic celebration, the work of "Christus Totus"

36. The "subject" of the liturgy's intrinsic beauty is Christ himself, risen and glorified in the Holy Spirit, who includes the Church in his work. (109) Here we can recall an evocative phrase of Saint Augustine which strikingly describes this dynamic of faith proper to the Eucharist. The great Bishop of Hippo, speaking specifically of the eucharistic mystery, stresses the fact that Christ assimilates us to himself: "The bread you see on the altar, sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ. The chalice, or rather, what the chalice contains, sanctified by the word of God, is the blood of Christ. In these signs, Christ the Lord willed to entrust to us his body and the blood which he shed for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have received them properly, you yourselves are what you have received." (110) Consequently, "not only have we become Christians, we have become Christ himself." (111) We can thus contemplate God's mysterious work, which brings about a profound unity between ourselves and the Lord Jesus: "one should not believe that Christ is in the head but not in the body; rather he is complete in the head and in the body." (112)

### The Eucharist and the risen Christ

37. Since the eucharistic liturgy is essentially an *actio Dei* which draws us into Christ through the Holy Spirit, its basic structure is not something within our power to change, nor can it be held hostage by the latest trends. Here too Saint Paul's irrefutable statement applies: "no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid, which is Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 3:11). Again it is the Apostle of the Gentiles who assures us that, with regard to the Eucharist, he is presenting not his own teaching but what he himself has received (cf. 1 Cor 11:23). The celebration of the Eucharist implies and involves the living Tradition. The Church celebrates the eucharistic sacrifice in obedience to Christ's command, based on her experience of the Risen Lord and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. For this reason, from the beginning, the Christian community has gathered for the *fractio panis* on the Lord's Day. Sunday, the day Christ rose from the dead, is also the first day of the week, the day which the Old Testament tradition saw as the beginning of God's work of creation. The day of creation has now become the day of the "new creation," the day of our liberation, when we commemorate Christ who died and rose again (113).

38. In the course of the Synod, there was frequent insistence on the need to avoid any antithesis between the *ars celebrandi*, the art of proper celebration, and the full, active and fruitful participation of all the faithful. The primary way to foster the participation of the People of God in the sacred rite is the proper celebration of the rite itself. The *ars celebrandi* is the best way to ensure their *actuosa participatio*.

(114) The *ars celebrandi* is the fruit of faithful adherence to the liturgical norms in all their richness; indeed, for two thousand years this way of celebrating has sustained the faith life of all believers, called to take part in the celebration as the People of God, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-5, 9) (115).

#### The Bishop, celebrant par excellence

39. While it is true that the whole People of God participates in the eucharistic liturgy, a correct *ars celebrandi* necessarily entails a specific responsibility on the part of those who have received the sacrament of Holy Orders. Bishops, priests, and deacons, each according to his proper rank, must consider the celebration of the liturgy as their principal duty (116). Above all, this is true of the Diocesan Bishop: as "the chief steward of the mysteries of God in the particular Church entrusted to his care, he is the moderator, promoter, and guardian of the whole of its liturgical life" (117). This is essential for the life of the particular Church, not only because communion with the Bishop is required for the lawfulness of every celebration within his territory, but also because he himself is the celebrant par excellence within his Diocese (118). It is his responsibility to ensure unity and harmony in the celebrations taking place in his territory. Consequently the Bishop must be "determined that the priests, the deacons, and the lay Christian faithful grasp ever more deeply the genuine meaning of the rites and liturgical texts, and thereby be led to an active and fruitful celebration of the Eucharist" (119). I would ask that every effort be made to ensure that the liturgies which the Bishop celebrates in his Cathedral are carried out with complete respect for the *ars celebrandi*, so that they can be considered an example for the entire Diocese (120).

#### Respect for the liturgical books and the richness of signs

40. Emphasizing the importance of the *ars celebrandi* also leads to an appreciation of the value of the liturgical norms. (121) The *ars celebrandi* should foster a sense of the sacred and the use of outward signs which help to cultivate this sense, such as, for example, the harmony of the rite, the liturgical vestments, the furnishings and the sacred space. The eucharistic celebration is enhanced when priests and liturgical leaders are committed to making known the current liturgical texts and norms, making available the great riches found in the General Instruction of the Roman Missal and the Order of Readings for Mass. Perhaps we take it for granted that our ecclesial communities already know and appreciate these resources, but this is not always the case. These texts contain riches which have preserved and expressed the faith and experience of the People of God over its two-thousand-year history. Equally important for a correct *ars celebrandi* is an attentiveness to the various kinds of language that the liturgy employs: words and music, gestures and silence, movement, the liturgical colours of the vestments. By its very nature the liturgy operates on different levels of communication which enable it to engage the whole human person. The simplicity of its gestures and the sobriety of its orderly sequence of signs communicate and inspire more than any contrived and inappropriate additions. Attentiveness and fidelity to the specific structure of the rite express both a recognition of the nature of Eucharist as a gift and, on the part of the minister, a docile openness to receiving this ineffable gift.

#### Art at the service of the liturgy

41. The profound connection between beauty and the liturgy should make us attentive to every work of art placed at the service of the celebration. (122) Certainly an important element of sacred art is church architecture, (123) which should highlight the unity of the furnishings of the sanctuary, such as the altar, the crucifix, the tabernacle, the ambo and the celebrant's chair. Here it is important to remember that the purpose of sacred architecture is to offer the Church a fitting space for the celebration of the mysteries of faith, especially the Eucharist. (124) The very nature of a Christian church is defined by the liturgy, which is an assembly of the faithful (*ecclesia*) who are the living stones of the Church (cf. 1 Pet 2:5).

This same principle holds true for sacred art in general, especially painting and sculpture, where religious iconography should be directed to sacramental mystagogy. A solid knowledge of the history of sacred art can be advantageous for those responsible for commissioning artists and architects to create works of art for the liturgy. Consequently it is essential that the education of seminarians and priests include the study of art history, with special reference to sacred buildings and the corresponding liturgical norms. Everything related to the Eucharist should be marked by beauty. Special respect and care must also be given to the vestments, the furnishings and the sacred vessels, so that by their harmonious and orderly arrangement they will foster awe for the mystery of God, manifest the unity of the faith and strengthen devotion (125).

#### Liturgical song

42. In the *ars celebrandi*, liturgical song has a pre-eminent place. (126) Saint Augustine rightly says in a famous sermon that "the new man sings a new song. Singing is an expression of joy and, if we consider the matter, an expression of love" (127). The People of God assembled for the liturgy sings the praises of God. In the course of her two-thousand-year history, the Church has created, and still creates, music and songs which represent a rich patrimony of faith and love. This heritage must not be lost. Certainly as far as the liturgy is concerned, we cannot say that one song is as good as another. Generic improvisation or the introduction of musical genres which fail to respect the meaning of the liturgy should be avoided. As an element of the liturgy, song should be well integrated into the overall celebration (128). Consequently everything – texts, music, execution – ought to correspond to the meaning of the mystery being celebrated, the structure of the rite and the liturgical seasons (129). Finally, while respecting various styles and different and highly praiseworthy traditions, I desire, in accordance with the request advanced by the Synod Fathers, that Gregorian chant be suitably esteemed and employed (130) as the chant proper to the Roman liturgy (131).

#### The structure of the eucharistic Celebration

43. After mentioning the more significant elements of the *ars celebrandi* that emerged during the Synod, I would now like to turn to some specific aspects of the structure of the eucharistic celebration which require special attention at the present time, if we are to remain faithful to the underlying intention of the liturgical renewal called for by the Second Vatican Council, in continuity with the great ecclesial tradition.

#### The intrinsic unity of the liturgical action

44. First of all, there is a need to reflect on the inherent unity of the rite of Mass. Both in catechesis and in the actual manner of celebration, one must avoid giving the impression that the two parts of the rite are merely juxtaposed. The liturgy of the word and the Eucharistic liturgy, with the rites of introduction and conclusion, "are so closely interconnected that they form but one single act of worship." (132) There is an intrinsic bond between the word of God and the Eucharist. From listening to the word of God, faith is born or strengthened (cf. Rom 10:17); in the Eucharist the Word made flesh gives himself to us as our spiritual food. (133) Thus, "from the two tables of the word of God and the Body of Christ, the Church receives and gives to the faithful the bread of life." (134) Consequently it must constantly be kept in mind that the word of God, read and proclaimed by the Church in the liturgy, leads to the Eucharist as to its own connatural end.

#### The liturgy of the word

45. Together with the Synod, I ask that the liturgy of the word always be carefully prepared and celebrated. Consequently I urge that every effort be made to ensure that the liturgical proclamation of the word of God is entrusted to well-prepared readers. Let us never forget that "when the Sacred Scriptures are read in the Church, God himself speaks to his people, and Christ, present in his own word, proclaims the Gospel"(135). When circumstances so suggest, a few brief words of introduction could be offered in order to focus the attention of the faithful. If it is to be properly understood, the word of God must be listened to and accepted in a spirit of communion with the Church and with a clear awareness of its unity with the sacrament of the Eucharist. Indeed, the word which we proclaim and accept is the Word made flesh (cf. Jn 1:14); it is inseparably linked to Christ's person and the sacramental mode of his continued presence in our midst. Christ does not speak in the past, but in the present, even as he is present in the liturgical action. In this sacramental context of Christian revelation (136), knowledge and study of the word of God enable us better to appreciate, celebrate and live the Eucharist. Here too, we can see how true it is that "ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ" (137).

To this end, the faithful should be helped to appreciate the riches of Sacred Scripture found in the lectionary through pastoral initiatives, liturgies of the word and reading in the context of prayer (*lectio divina*). Efforts should also be made to encourage those forms of prayer confirmed by tradition, such as the Liturgy of the Hours, especially Morning Prayer, Evening Prayer and Night Prayer, and vigil celebrations. By praying the Psalms, the Scripture readings and the readings drawn from the great tradition which are included in the Divine Office, we can come to a deeper experience of the Christ-event and the economy of salvation, which in turn can enrich our understanding and participation in the celebration of the Eucharist (138).

#### The homily

46. Given the importance of the word of God, the quality of homilies needs to be improved. The homily is "part of the liturgical action" (139), and is meant to foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful. Hence ordained ministers must "prepare the homily carefully, based on an adequate knowledge of Sacred Scripture" (140). Generic and abstract homilies should be avoided. In particular, I ask these ministers to preach in such a way that the homily closely relates the proclamation of the word of God to the sacramental celebration (141) and the life of the community, so that the word of God truly becomes the Church's vital nourishment and support (142). The catechetical and paraenetic aim of the homily should not be forgotten. During the course of the liturgical year it is appropriate to offer the faithful, prudently and on the basis of the three-year lectionary, "thematic" homilies treating the great themes of the Christian faith, on the basis of what has been authoritatively proposed by the Magisterium in the four "pillars" of the Catechism of the Catholic Church and the recent Compendium, namely: the profession of faith, the celebration of the Christian mystery, life in Christ and Christian prayer (143).

#### The presentation of the gifts

47. The Synod Fathers also drew attention to the presentation of the gifts. This is not to be viewed simply as a kind of "interval" between the liturgy of the word and the liturgy of the Eucharist. To do so would tend to weaken, at the least, the sense of a single rite made up of two interrelated parts. This humble and simple gesture is actually very significant: in the bread and wine that we bring to the altar, all creation is taken up by Christ the Redeemer to be transformed and presented to the Father. (144) In this way we also bring to the altar all the pain and suffering of the world, in the certainty that everything has value in God's eyes. The authentic meaning of this gesture can be clearly expressed without the need for undue emphasis or complexity. It enables us to appreciate how God invites man to participate in bringing to fulfilment his handiwork, and in so doing, gives human labour its authentic meaning, since, through the celebration of the Eucharist, it is united to the redemptive sacrifice of Christ.

#### The Eucharistic Prayer

48. The Eucharistic Prayer is "the centre and summit of the entire celebration" (145). Its importance deserves to be adequately emphasized. The different Eucharistic Prayers contained in the Missal have been handed down to us by the Church's living Tradition and are

noteworthy for their inexhaustible theological and spiritual richness. The faithful need to be enabled to appreciate that richness. Here the General Instruction of the Roman Missal can help, with its list of the basic elements of every Eucharistic Prayer: thanksgiving, acclamation, epiclesis, institution narrative and consecration, anamnesis, offering, intercessions and final doxology (146). In a particular way, eucharistic spirituality and theological reflection are enriched if we contemplate in the anaphora the profound unity between the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the institution narrative (147) whereby "the sacrifice is carried out which Christ himself instituted at the Last Supper" (148). Indeed, "the Church implores the power of the Holy Spirit that the gifts offered by human hands be consecrated, that is, become Christ's Body and Blood, and that the spotless Victim to be received in communion be for the salvation of those who will partake of it" (149).

#### The sign of peace

49. By its nature the Eucharist is the sacrament of peace. At Mass this dimension of the eucharistic mystery finds specific expression in the sign of peace. Certainly this sign has great value (cf. Jn 14:27). In our times, fraught with fear and conflict, this gesture has become particularly eloquent, as the Church has become increasingly conscious of her responsibility to pray insistently for the gift of peace and unity for herself and for the whole human family. Certainly there is an irrepressible desire for peace present in every heart. The Church gives voice to the hope for peace and reconciliation rising up from every man and woman of good will, directing it towards the one who "is our peace" (Eph 2:14) and who can bring peace to individuals and peoples when all human efforts fail. We can thus understand the emotion so often felt during the sign of peace at a liturgical celebration. Even so, during the Synod of Bishops there was discussion about the appropriateness of greater restraint in this gesture, which can be exaggerated and cause a certain distraction in the assembly just before the reception of Communion. It should be kept in mind that nothing is lost when the sign of peace is marked by a sobriety which preserves the proper spirit of the celebration, as, for example, when it is restricted to one's immediate neighbours (150).

#### The distribution and reception of the Eucharist

50. Another moment of the celebration needing to be mentioned is the distribution and reception of Holy Communion. I ask everyone, especially ordained ministers and those who, after adequate preparation and in cases of genuine need, are authorized to exercise the ministry of distributing the Eucharist, to make every effort to ensure that this simple act preserves its importance as a personal encounter with the Lord Jesus in the sacrament. For the rules governing correct practice in this regard, I would refer to those documents recently issued on the subject. (151) All Christian communities are to observe the current norms faithfully, seeing in them an expression of the faith and love with which we all must regard this sublime sacrament. Furthermore, the precious time of thanksgiving after communion should not be neglected: besides the singing of an appropriate hymn, it can also be most helpful to remain recollected in silence. (152)

In this regard, I would like to call attention to a pastoral problem frequently encountered nowadays. I am referring to the fact that on certain occasions – for example, wedding Masses, funerals and the like – in addition to practising Catholics there may be others present who have long since ceased to attend Mass or are living in a situation which does not permit them to receive the sacraments. At other times members of other Christian confessions and even other religions may be present. Similar situations can occur in churches that are frequently visited, especially in tourist areas. In these cases, there is a need to find a brief and clear way to remind those present of the meaning of sacramental communion and the conditions required for its reception. Wherever circumstances make it impossible to ensure that the meaning of the Eucharist is duly appreciated, the appropriateness of replacing the celebration of the Mass with a celebration of the word of God should be considered. (153)

#### The dismissal: "Ite, missa est"

51. Finally, I would like to comment briefly on the observations of the Synod Fathers regarding the dismissal at the end of the eucharistic celebration. After the blessing, the deacon or the priest dismisses the people with the words: Ite, missa est. These words help us to grasp the relationship between the Mass just celebrated and the mission of Christians in the world. In antiquity, missa simply meant "dismissal." However in Christian usage it gradually took on a deeper meaning. The word "dismissal" has come to imply a "mission." These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church. The People of God might be helped to understand more clearly this essential dimension of the Church's life, taking the dismissal as a starting-point. In this context, it might also be helpful to provide new texts, duly approved, for the prayer over the people and the final blessing, in order to make this connection clear (154).

#### Authentic participation

52. The Second Vatican Council rightly emphasized the active, full and fruitful participation of the entire People of God in the eucharistic celebration (155). Certainly, the renewal carried out in these past decades has made considerable progress towards fulfilling the wishes of the Council Fathers. Yet we must not overlook the fact that some misunderstanding has occasionally arisen concerning the precise meaning of this participation. It should be made clear that the word "participation" does not refer to mere external activity during the celebration. In fact, the active participation called for by the Council must be understood in more substantial terms, on the basis of a greater awareness of the mystery being celebrated and its relationship to daily life. The conciliar Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* encouraged the faithful to take part in the eucharistic liturgy not "as strangers or silent spectators," but as participants "in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing, actively and devoutly" (156). This exhortation has lost none of its force. The Council went on to say that the faithful "should be instructed by God's word, and nourished at the table of the Lord's Body. They should give thanks to God. Offering the immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to make an offering of themselves. Through Christ, the Mediator, they should be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and each other" (157).