

Eucharistic Devotion in the Teachings of John Paul II

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Neither the time I have been able to find to prepare this talk, nor the time frame within which it must be delivered, has allowed me to examine the entirety of John Paul II's teaching and to set out everything in it that relates to the Eucharist. I have therefore confined myself to a few texts that struck me as most significant, and I have tried to identify in them a characteristic orientation of the thought of our Holy Father the Pope. I therefore ask for your indulgence regarding the limited nature of this presentation. And if you will allow me, before addressing the subject itself that has been proposed to me, I would like to thank the organisers of this conference for asking me to speak, and also to emphasise the significance that I myself attach to this request, and to the response I am giving to it. It is quite clear that it is not because of my particular expertise on the proposed subject that you have asked me to speak at your conference: it is obviously in my capacity as the local bishop that you have extended this invitation to me.

Furthermore, if you are asking me to speak to you about the piety (and therefore also the doctrine) of our Holy Father Pope John Paul II, this demonstrates your intention—should anyone doubt it—to situate your reflection on “the veneration and administration of the Eucharist” at the heart of the Catholic Church today, in union with the Successor of Peter, by whose will I am Bishop of Gap. Far more than what I shall feebly attempt to convey to you—at least as far as my own thoughts are concerned, for I shall do little more than quote texts from John Paul II—it is the very fact that, at your request, I am addressing you today on this subject that strikes me as significant. I see in this, indeed, your desire to affirm that it is truly as sons of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, in union with its hierarchy and with the teaching of its Magisterium, that you are undertaking this reflection.

1. The Eucharist and the Priesthood

Obviously, John Paul II's thinking on the Eucharist is first and foremost that of the Church in its entire Tradition, but it is hardly surprising that it is strongly influenced by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, to which he refers very often. And it is undoubtedly here that we must seek the source of that point of emphasis which struck me as constituting the originality of the Pope's teaching on the Eucharist, namely the close link between the Eucharist and the priesthood, and a priesthood conceived

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in accordance with the doctrine of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasised both the close link and the clear distinction between the common priesthood and the hierarchical priesthood. We are familiar with the passage from the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, in paragraph 10:

The common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial priesthood, although there is an essential difference between them, and not merely one of degree, are nevertheless ordered to one another: for both, each in its own way, share in the one priesthood of Christ. He who has received the ministerial priesthood possesses the sacred power to form and lead the priestly people, to celebrate, in the person of Christ (*in persona Christi*), the Eucharistic sacrifice and to offer it to God on behalf of the whole people; the faithful, for their part, by virtue of the royal priesthood which is theirs, contribute to the offering of the Eucharist and exercise their priesthood through the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life, and through their self-denial and active charity.

2. The Eucharist, Redemption and Penance

But first of all, I would like to emphasise the central place occupied, in the whole teaching of John Paul II, by the mystery of Redemption. Without being able to go into an analysis of everything the Holy Father has said and written on this subject, I shall simply mention the papal documents which, in their titles, include the words '*Redemption*' or '*Redeemer*', beginning with his first encyclical, which, for every pope, is indicative of his major orientations and is generally regarded as a programme encyclical. For Paul VI, this was *Ecclesiam suam*, and for John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*, in March 1979. In 1984, during the Holy Jubilee Year of Redemption, it was the Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptionis donum*, on religious consecration in the light of Redemption, followed by the Apostolic Letter *Redemptionis anno* on Jerusalem, the sacred heritage of all believers. Then *Redemptoris Mater* in 1987, *Redemptoris custos* in 1989 and *Redemptoris missio* in 1990. This emphasis is clearly reflected in John Paul II's thinking on the Eucharist, which he likes to link with the sacrament of penance, as for example in paragraph 20 of *Redemptor hominis*:

“Let each one examine himself, and so eat of this bread and drink from this cup.” This exhortation of the Apostle indicates, at least indirectly, the close link that exists between the Eucharist and penance... The Eucharist and penance thus become, in a certain sense, two closely related dimensions of authentic life in the spirit of the Gospel, of truly Christian life. Christ, who invites us to the Eucharistic banquet, is

always the Christ who exhorts us to penance, who repeats “Repent”. Without this constant and ever-renewed effort towards conversion, participation in the Eucharist would be deprived of its full redemptive efficacy; in it, the particular readiness to offer God the spiritual sacrifice—in which our participation in the priesthood of Christ is expressed in an essential and universal way—would be lacking or at least weakened.

This text is important because it brings together John Paul II’s essential teachings on the Eucharist in relation to Redemption, penance, and the priesthood of Christ, from which flow the baptismal priesthood and the ministerial priesthood, ordered to one another to unite the spiritual sacrifice of the baptised with the perfect sacrifice of Christ.

The following year, in his second encyclical, **Dives in misericordia**, the Pope took up this perspective once more:

Constant meditation on the Word of God, and above all conscious and reflective participation in the Eucharist and in the sacrament of penance or reconciliation, are of great significance. [...] “For whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup,” we not only proclaim the death of the Redeemer, but we also proclaim his Resurrection. (No. 13)

Important details on the links between the Eucharist, penance and Redemption are, of course, to be found in the Apostolic Exhortation **Reconciliatio et pœnitentia**, following the Synod of Bishops on Penance:

- in paragraph 7:

It is [...] legitimate [...] to focus reflection on the whole mystery of Christ on his mission as Reconciler. And the Church’s faith in Christ’s redemptive act must be proclaimed once again. [...] I invite you precisely to look upon *the mystery of the Cross* as the supreme drama in which Christ perceives in depth – and experiences the suffering of – the very tragedy of man separated from God.[...] Our gaze fixed on the mystery of Golgotha must constantly remind us of the ‘vertical’ dimension of the division and reconciliation between man and God, which, in a vision of faith, always takes precedence over the ‘horizontal’ dimension, that is, over the reality of division and the need for reconciliation among men.

- In paragraph 27, the Holy Father recalls the definition of the Eucharist given by Saint Augustine in his commentary on Saint John: “*sacramentum pietatis, signum unitatis, vinculum caritatis*”, which

highlights the effects of personal sanctification (*pietas*) and communal reconciliation (*unitas and caritas*), which flow from the very essence of the Eucharistic mystery as the bloodless renewal of the sacrifice of the Cross, the source of salvation and reconciliation for all people". But he does not fail to remind us that "no Christian who is aware of having committed a grave sin may receive the Eucharist before having obtained God's forgiveness.

Then, quoting the instruction *Eucharisticum Mysterium* (May 1967):

[...] that no one, if he is aware of a mortal sin, however contrite he may consider himself to be, should approach the Eucharist without prior sacramental confession; if he finds himself in a situation of necessity and it is not possible for him to confess, let him first make an act of perfect contrition.

It should also be noted that, regarding the family founded on the sacrament of marriage—a subject so dear to his heart—John Paul II, in the admirable Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, emphasises the close bond between the Eucharist and marriage:

- in paragraph 57:

The duty of sanctification incumbent upon the Christian family has its primary root in Baptism and its highest expression in the Eucharist, to which Christian marriage is intimately linked. [...] The Eucharist is the very source of Christian marriage. The Eucharistic sacrifice, in fact, represents the covenant of love between Christ and the Church, as it was sealed by the blood of his cross. It is in this sacrifice of the new and eternal covenant that Christian spouses find the gushing spring which inwardly shapes and constantly enlivens their marital covenant. As a representation of Christ's sacrifice of love for the Church, the Eucharist is the source of charity. And in the Eucharistic gift of charity, the Christian family finds the foundation and the soul of its 'communion' and its 'mission'.

3. The letter *Dominicæ Cenæ*

But it is the Supreme Pontiff's letter to all the bishops of the Church on the mystery and worship of the Holy Eucharist, for Holy Thursday 1980, which remains, to this day, John Paul II's most comprehensive document on the Eucharist, under the title *Dominicæ Cenæ*.

Right from the start of his letter, the Pope is keen to establish a close link with the one from the previous year, in which he had dealt with the priesthood: “Once again this year, for Holy Thursday, I am sending you all a letter that is directly linked to the one you received last year.”

He returns to this in paragraph 2:

This letter which I am addressing to you, dear brothers in the episcopate, is in a certain sense, as I have told you, a continuation of the previous one. It also remains closely connected with the mystery of Holy Thursday, and it relates to the priesthood. I intend, in fact, to devote it to the Eucharist and, in particular, to certain aspects of the Eucharistic mystery and its impact on the life of those who minister it. [...]

In reality, the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood—the priesthood of bishops and priests, and, alongside them, the ministry of deacons—ministries which normally begin with the proclamation of the Gospel—are very closely linked to the Eucharist. It is the principal and central *raison d’être* of the sacrament of the priesthood. [...] Our Eucharistic worship, both in the celebration of Mass and in relation to the Blessed Sacrament, is thus like a life-giving current that unites our ministerial or hierarchical priesthood with the common priesthood of the faithful, and presents it in its vertical dimension, with its central value. The priest exercises his principal mission and manifests himself in all his fullness by celebrating the Eucharist.

In paragraph 4, where he recalls that whilst “the Church makes the Eucharist, so too the Eucharist makes the Church”, he again emphasises the primacy of the “vertical” dimension:

The coming together and union, the prototype of which is the union of the Apostles around Christ during the Last Supper, express and bring about the Church. But the Church is not brought about merely by the union among people, through the experience of brotherhood made possible by the Eucharistic banquet. The Church is realised when, in this fraternal union and communion, we celebrate the sacrifice of Christ’s Cross, when we proclaim “the Lord’s death until he comes”. [...] It is only in this way, through such faith and such a disposition of the soul, that the building up of the Church is realised; the Church which, in the Eucharist, truly finds its source and summit, according to the well-known expression of the Second Vatican Council.

Source and summit of the Church’s life, centre and summit of the whole of Christian life: ultimately, it becomes clear that John Paul II, following in the footsteps of Vatican II, shows that the Eucharist attains its full greatness only through the key role it plays in relation to the whole of the Christian mystery. All things considered, the same applies to every aspect of the faith,

every event in the history of salvation, every sacrament. And this is precisely what makes it difficult to explain a particular point, which only makes full sense when situated within the whole. Each time, one would have to restate everything, in a synthetic overview. As this is in fact impossible, one assumes a priori that this synthesis is known to all and that everyone shares the same synthesis. Yet, in reality, this is not always the case. And misunderstandings or differences of opinion on a particular issue are, more often than not, due to the fact that, in the background, we are operating from different syntheses. But setting out and discussing an entire synthesis would take an enormous amount of time. How can we break this deadlock?

This central role of the Eucharist is clearly highlighted in this letter to the bishops.

For example, in paragraph 5, we read:

Eucharistic worship is the soul of the whole of Christian life. For whilst Christian life is expressed in the fulfilment of the greatest commandment—that is, in love for God and neighbour—this love finds its source precisely in the Holy Sacrament, which is commonly called the sacrament of love [...] By thus becoming worshippers of the Father “in Spirit and in Truth”, we grow in an ever more perfect union with Christ. [...]

And in paragraph 6: “*The authentic meaning of the Eucharist becomes, in itself, a school of effective love for one’s neighbour.* [...] We learn to discover with respect the truth about the inner man, because this inner man becomes precisely the dwelling place of God present in the Eucharist.”

And in number 7:

It is from this idea of Eucharistic worship that the whole *sacramental style of the Christian’s life* then flows. [...] Among all the sacraments, it is the Holy Eucharist that brings the Christian’s initiation to its fullness. [...] Eucharistic worship is thus the centre and goal of the whole sacramental life. The sacraments of Christian initiation, Baptism and Confirmation, resound continually within it like a deep echo.

And the Pope then mentions the links between the Eucharist “and the sacrament of family life and the sacrament of the sick”, and then “the close link between the sacrament of Penance and that of the Eucharist. *It is not only Penance that leads to the Eucharist, but the Eucharist also leads to Penance.* For when we realise who it is that we receive in Eucharistic communion, a sense of unworthiness arises within us almost spontaneously, accompanied by regret for our sins and an inner need to purify ourselves. We

must, however, always ensure that this great encounter with Christ in the Eucharist does not become a routine matter for us, and that we do not receive Him unworthily, that is to say, in a state of mortal sin."

Today, when so many Christians receive Communion so readily whilst rarely approaching the sacrament of Penance, such a remark cannot but give us cause for concern regarding our awareness of the greatness of the One we receive in the Eucharist. And this leads us to the second part of this letter, which deals with the sacredness of the Eucharist and the sacrifice.

In paragraph 8, the Supreme Pontiff highlights the concept of *the sacrum*, recalling that throughout history "secondary elements have undergone certain changes, but the essence of *the mysterium*, instituted by the Redeemer of the world during the Last Supper, has remained unchanged". He continues:

The Second Vatican Council also introduced some changes, as a result of which the current liturgy differs, in certain respects, from that which we knew before the Council. I do not intend to speak of these differences: for the moment, it is appropriate to focus on what is essential and unchanging in the Eucharistic liturgy.

Closely linked to this is the *sacred* character of the Eucharist, that is to say, its nature as a holy and sacred act. Holy and sacred, because in it Christ, 'the Holy One of God', is continually present and continually at work. [...] It is He, in fact, who, represented by the celebrant, enters the sanctuary and proclaims his Gospel. It is He who is both the one offering and the one offered, the consecrator and the consecrated. A holy and sacred act, because it constitutes the holy species of *the sancta sanctis*, that is to say, holy things – Christ, the Holy One – given to the saints. [...] The *sacrum* of the Mass is therefore not a "sacralisation", that is to say, an addition by man to Christ's action in the Upper Room. [...] The *sacredness* of the Mass is a reality instituted by Him. The words and action of each priest, to which corresponds the conscious and active participation of the entire Eucharistic assembly, echo those of Holy Thursday.

The priest offers the holy sacrifice of the Mass *in persona Christi*, which means more than "in the name of" or "in the place of" Christ. *In persona Christi*: that is to say, in the specific, sacramental identification with the "high priest of the eternal covenant", who is the author and principal subject of his own sacrifice. [] The Eucharistic mystery, if separated from its sacrificial and sacramental nature, simply ceases to be such. It admits of no "profane" imitation, which would very easily (even if this is not an absolute rule) become a desecration. This must always be remembered, perhaps especially in our

age when there is a tendency to blur the distinction between *the sacred* and *the profane*, given the widespread general trend (at least in certain places) towards the desacralisation of everything. Consequently, the Church has a particular duty to safeguard and affirm the *sacredness* of the Eucharist. [...] The sacredness of the Eucharist has found, and continues to find, its expression in theological and liturgical terminology.”

In paragraph 9, the concept of *sacrificium* is highlighted:

The Eucharist is above all a sacrifice. [...] This is precisely why, by making present this unique sacrifice of our salvation, man and the world are restored to God through the paschal newness of Redemption. [...] Being a true sacrifice, the Eucharist thus brings about restoration to God.

It follows that the celebrant, as minister of this sacrifice, is the authentic priest, performing—by virtue of the specific power of ordination—the sacrificial act that brings beings back to God. Conversely, all those who participate in the Eucharist, without offering sacrifice as he does, offer with him, by virtue of the common priesthood, their own spiritual sacrifices, represented by the bread and wine from the moment of their presentation at the altar. [...] This corresponds to what is known as the procession of the gifts, provided for by the recent liturgical reform and accompanied, according to ancient tradition, by a psalm or a hymn. [...] Awareness of the act of presenting the offerings should be maintained throughout the Mass. [...] It seems useful here to recall certain expressions from the third Eucharistic Prayer, which particularly highlight the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist and link the offering of ourselves to that of Christ: “Look, Lord, upon the sacrifice of your Church, and deign to recognise in it that of your Son. [...] May the Holy Spirit make us an eternal offering to your glory.” [...] It is therefore necessary and entirely appropriate to undertake once more an intensive programme of education to help people discover the riches contained in the current liturgy.

In paragraph 10, a section on the “table of the Word of God” refers specifically to one of the concerns of your conference:

The fact that these texts are read and sung in the vernacular allows everyone to participate with a better understanding. But there are also people who, having been educated according to the old Latin liturgy, feel the absence of this “single language” which, throughout the world, was also an expression of the unity of the Church and which, through its dignified character, evoked a profound sense of the

. We must therefore show not only understanding, but also genuine respect for these feelings and desires, and satisfy them as far as possible, as is indeed provided for in the new provisions. The Roman Church has particular obligations towards Latin, the splendid language of ancient Rome, and must demonstrate these today whenever the opportunity arises.”

In paragraph 11, after lamenting that there is sometimes a lack of Eucharistic “hunger” and “thirst”, the Holy Father once again condemns the laxity of some who approach the Eucharist without having taken the necessary care to purify their consciences, and he continues: “But another conviction may also lie hidden in this, at least in some cases: regarding Mass merely as a banquet, in which one participates by receiving the Body of Christ, primarily to express fraternal communion.”

Regarding Communion in the hand, John Paul II says that he “sometimes hears of regrettable displays of disrespect towards the Eucharistic species”.

It even happens sometimes, he continues, that no account is taken of the free choice and free will of those who, where the distribution of Communion in the hand has also been authorised, prefer to stick to the practice of receiving it in the mouth. [...] Touching the sacred species and distributing them with one’s hands is a privilege of the ordained, indicating active participation in the ministry of the Eucharist. There is no doubt that the Church may grant this faculty to persons who are neither priests nor deacons [...] or to other laypeople authorised to do so for a just cause, and always after adequate preparation.

In the following paragraph, it is recalled that “every priest who offers the Holy Sacrifice must remember that it is not he alone with his community who prays, but the whole Church which prays, thus expressing, particularly through the use of the approved liturgical text, its spiritual unity in this sacrament”.

And he continues:

“I would like to ask forgiveness—in my own name and in the name of all of you, venerable and dear brothers in the episcopate—for anything which, due to some human weakness, impatience, negligence of any kind, and also as a result of a sometimes partial, one-sided or erroneous application of the prescriptions of the Second Vatican Council, may have caused scandal and unease regarding the interpretation of the doctrine and the veneration due to this great sacrament.”

And finally, the conclusion states:

We shall continue to devote particular care to promoting and following the renewal of the Church in accordance with the teachings of Vatican II, in the spirit of a tradition that is ever-living. [...] It is particularly important to me to emphasise that issues concerning the liturgy, and in particular the Eucharistic liturgy, must not be a cause of division among Catholics or a threat to the unity of the Church.

4. A few other texts

One might find, in many other texts, an emphasis on these same broad guidelines of John Paul II concerning the Eucharist, including in his Wednesday catechesis. To give just a few examples, I quote:

- 13 July 1988, catechesis on “Jesus, Founder of the Sacramental Structure in the Life of the Church”:

The full expression of this communion of life with Christ is the Eucharist. [...] This sacrament constitutes the enduring sign of the presence of his body given up to death and of his blood shed ‘for the forgiveness of sins’; whenever it is celebrated, it makes present the saving sacrifice of the Redeemer of the world.

- 18 March 1992, catechesis on “The Eucharist in the Church, a priestly and sacramental community”:

According to Vatican II, it is in the Eucharist that the truth of the Church as a priestly community, realised through the sacraments, is fully realised. [...] Participation is common to the whole “priestly people”, who are called to unite in oblation and communion. But it differs according to the status of the members of the Church as defined by the sacramental institution. The priestly minister has a specific role which does not abolish but rather promotes the role of the common priesthood.

Conclusion

To summarise the essence of all that these texts from our Holy Father the Pope have told us, let us say that the Eucharist sacramentally fulfils what is the very heart of God’s eternal plan as it unfolds in the history of salvation: the glory which, according to Jesus’ priestly prayer in chapter 17 of St John, the Son, within the Trinity, receives from his Father and renders to his Father: “Glorify your Son so that the Son may glorify you”; and according to Gregory of Nyssa: “That the Holy Spirit is called glory, none of those who examine the question can contradict” (*Homily on the*

Song of Songs). The Son, having taken on human nature, comes to restore this very glory to his Father at the heart of the world, so that the vocation of creation—which is to give glory to God (as defined by the First Vatican Council)—may be fully fulfilled; thus is redeemed the sin of man, which is not to have given God the glory and thanksgiving due to Him (Romans 1:21). Thus is effected the ‘restitution to God’ of creation. This was fully accomplished on the cross where Christ ‘gave up His Spirit’. And it is this supreme offering that is made present *here and now* in every Eucharistic celebration, and with which every baptised person unites when they receive Communion in the proper disposition. This perfect offering, consummated on the cross in the earthly body of Christ, continues without end in the risen body of Christ, the Lamb who was slain, and is communicated to mankind in the Eucharistic body of Christ, thus constituting his ecclesial body, the earthly seed of the kingdom of heaven where Christ will be, in all truth, “all in all” (1 Cor 12:28).