

In receiving the Eucharist, we become Christ

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This evening we begin the most sacred three days of our liturgical year in which we celebrate our Lord's passion, death and resurrection. We begin with the celebration of the Lord's Supper. The mystery of the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ is made present in our midst.

On the evening before he died, our Lord celebrated the Passover meal with his disciples and he gave that meal a new significance in that he identified the bread and the wine with his body and with his blood. Tonight we celebrate that meal, which provides us an opportunity to reflect on the one who "loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1).

In the last few weeks, the church was blessed to receive Pope Benedict's apostolic exhortation on the Eucharist, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, "The Sacrament of Charity" (SC). His reflections were based on the 2005 Synod of Bishops, a meeting of bishops throughout the world, held in Rome, which focused on the Eucharist. The purpose of his exhortation was to encourage "Christian people to deepen their understanding of the relationship between the *eucharistic mystery*, the *liturgical action* and the *new spiritual worship* which derives from the Eucharist as the *sacrament of charity*" (SC 5). The bishops and our Holy Father's deepest desire is that there be a renewal in the hearts of the Catholic faithful, a new ardor and a new enthusiasm for the Eucharist.

Benedict places this exhortation next to his first encyclical, "God is Love". He notes in his reflections that there is a problem today, and I quote, "It must be acknowledged that one of the most serious effects of the secularization [of the world] is that it has relegated the Christian faith to the margins of life as if it were irrelevant to everyday affairs. The futility of this way of living – "as if God did not exist" -- is now evident to everyone. Today there is a need to rediscover that Jesus Christ is not just a private conviction or an abstract idea, but a real person, whose becoming part of human history is capable of renewing the life of every man and woman (SC 77)." The Holy Father's hunger is for the renewal of the human person, a renewal that can only occur in, with and through Jesus Christ and a personal encounter with him.

This evening I wish to reflect on three points of that encounter. First is the encounter with love in the heart of the Trinity. Second is the encounter with the total gift of Jesus Christ to the church, to his body. And, finally, are the practical implications of the encounter.

First, let us look at the encounter with love. From the New Testament, and most especially the Gospel of John and in John's letters, we learn that "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8), a communion of three divine persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a communion into which every baptized and confirmed person is called. At the heart of this love is the total gift of self of each divine person to the other -- of the Father to the Son and the Spirit, of the Son to the Father and the Spirit, and of the Spirit to the Father and the Son.

Jesus has loved us totally and completely. We see that the Holy Trinity's desire is for us to share their love with us. "As the father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in that love" (Jn 15:9). Jesus commands us and his disciples to live in that love, to trust in that love, to have faith in that love. Trinitarian love is not a concept, it is not an idea, and it is not abstract. Trinitarian love is coming to know each person of the Trinity, entering into personal relationship with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, knowing and believing that we have truly become the beloved daughters and sons of God, that we can call God "Abba, Father" (Mt 6:9).

The question that each of us must ask within our own hearts is "Do I personally know and believe in the Father's, Son's and Holy Spirit's love for me? Am I receptive to that love and do I believe in the depth of my own heart that I am God's favored one, that I am beloved?", for that is what is revealed to us in our God. If that relationship only exists at the level of the head and never transfers to the heart, then we will never come to know salvation, we will never come to know Jesus as our friend, as our brother, as "the one who has laid down his life for me" (Jn 15:13).

The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit eternally desire to bestow that love on every human being, but they leave each of us free to receive that love and to believe in that love for us. We must desire to receive the love of the Trinity and to cooperate with their love, and this is most fully done within the Eucharist. This brings us to the second point of the encounter, the total gift of Jesus Christ to the Church.

This love is revealed most fully to humanity in the laying down of Jesus' life for us on the cross. Jesus makes himself a total self gift to the Father and to us. My dearest sisters and brothers, look at the words that we heard within the second reading for this evening, of St. Paul in writing to the Corinthians, "I have handed on to you what I received from the Lord, that on the night before he was betrayed, he took bread, broke it and said 'This is my body that is for you' ...and he took the cup and said, 'This is my blood...'" (1 Cor 11:23-25). What more evidence do we need to know the total self gift that our God has made of himself for us?

Every time you and I gaze upon a crucifix, the revelation of love is there – not just in a general way, not just for some people, but for sinners. The Cross is not just for saints, but for the greatest sinner. It is precisely that total self gift that Pope Benedict reminds us of, that "[i]n the Eucharist Jesus does not give us a 'thing,' but himself; he offers his own body and pours out his own blood. He thus gives us the totality of his life and reveals the ultimate origin of this love. He is the eternal Son, given to us by the Father" (SC 7). Do you believe in and have you received that total self gift of the only Son of the Father?

Jesus loves each of us even to death on the cross. He speaks words of love from the cross: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). “Behold your son...Behold your mother” (Jn 19:26-27). “This day you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:43). Words of tremendous love for the other, for us! We are called in the Eucharist to encounter the total self gift of Jesus Christ for us in a personal manner. It takes two persons to communicate with each other, and we are called into that relationship.

Jesus himself reminds us in the Gospel of John that “no greater love has one than to lay down one’s life for his friends, and I call you friends” (Jn 15:13). That is his depth of love for you. He desires your friendship! He gives himself totally and completely! And in receiving this gift of our Lord, we too are transformed, we too become Christ in that communion.

Our Holy Father in his exhortation quotes from St. Augustine’s *Confessions*. St. Augustine wrote that he heard the Lord in prayer saying to him, “I am the food of grown men; grow, and you shall feed upon me; nor shall you change me, like the food of your flesh, into yourself, but you shall be changed into me” (SC 70). That is the promise that is given to us.

Benedict continues in his exhortation in his own words, “It is not the Eucharistic food that is changed into us, but rather we who are mysteriously transformed by it. Christ nourishes us by uniting us to himself; ‘he draws us into himself’” (SC 70).

This is the fulfillment of the words given to us by Jesus in John 6, that his body is real food and his blood is real drink and “he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him” (Jn 6:56). My dearest sisters and brothers, those words are fulfilled every time we celebrate the Eucharist. It is that total gift of Jesus Christ for us and for the church, and we are called into that intimacy each time we celebrate the Eucharist.

Pope John Paul II, when he would speak on the Eucharist, would refer to the nuptial meaning of the Eucharist. He would call it the “nuptial sacrament” because it is Christ’s total self gift of himself for us. In Ephesians 5 we hear that husband and wife are called to be a total self gift to each other, to give their lives to each other just as Christ gave his life for the Church. So too is the Eucharist a total self gift of Christ to us! Everyone who receives the Eucharist is called into that union!

This brings us to the practical implications from our faith in the Eucharist and from our encounter with the love of Jesus Christ.

The first is the call to holiness. It is the moral transformation to which each and every one of us is called. Jesus reminds us in John’s Gospel, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (Jn 15:10) and so we must strive out of love to keep the commandments, not out of fear, not out of fear of going to hell, but rather of choosing the good, because I know how much God loves me and I believe in that love.

John writes in his first letter, “Perfect love casts out all fear” (1 Jn 4). God does not want us to be afraid of him or to obey his commandments out of fear. God wants us to enter into love with him, so that in love we will boldly proclaim, “I choose to avoid stealing. I choose to avoid cursing. I choose to avoid gossip or slander. I choose to avoid adultery or promiscuous behavior. I choose these behaviors because I love God and I know it is for my own good that I choose them.” Our actions are rooted in love -- “if you love me, you will keep my commandments”. We are called, first, to moral transformation – to holiness.

Second, we are called to ensure that our homes are truly places of encounter with Christ. As husbands and wives, in your relationship with one another, you are the first teachers of your children in the ways of faith and the ways of love. How well you love each other as husband and wife will be how well your children learn about love. How well you forgive each other, how you treat one another, how you live in that communion and put the other first, communicates everything to your children. Thus, your homes, too, must be places of encounter and transformation with the love of Christ.

Third, we must recognize that we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are called to work for peace and justice within the world and the dignity of the human person. In a parable on judgment given by Jesus in Matthew 25, he reminds us that we will be judged by how well we have fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited those in prison. We will be judged by how well we forgive and if we have truly prayed and meant the words, “Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” He reminds us that we must put his love into action in the world.

Pope Benedict forcefully reminds us, “I therefore urge all the faithful to be true promoters of peace and justice: ‘All who partake of the Eucharist must commit themselves to peacemaking in our world scarred by violence and war, and today in particular, by terrorism, economic corruption and sexual exploitation’” (SC 89). We see, especially in the liturgy of this evening, in the washing of the feet, that Jesus calls us to be servants. “You call me ‘teacher’ and ‘master’ and rightly so, for so indeed I am. If I, therefore, the master and teacher have washed your feet, you ought to wash one another’s feet. I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (Jn 13:13-15). And we are called to put the Eucharist into action.

Fourth, we also must look at the place that we give to the Eucharist within our own lives, and I speak of Sunday Eucharist and the priority that we give to Sunday Eucharist. When we look at 50 years ago and where we are today, it is vastly different. Fifty years ago most stores were closed on Sundays, sports were rarely played, there were only three television stations, and so forth. For those of us who are old enough, we can remember our mothers rushing to the stores on Saturday morning to buy food for Sunday, because every grocery store was closed and, certainly, every department store was closed.

Today we have the distraction of multiple sports events, we have the distraction of television with hundreds of stations, the distraction of computers, the distraction of cell phones, the distraction of Game Boys and iPods and so on. All of these are distractions and oftentimes, sadly, they take priority over Sunday Eucharist.

The most important thing that you and I can plan, if we are truly in love with Jesus Christ and receive his love, is Sunday Eucharist. We must truly make it a holy day. And, parents, I realize it will be challenging for you. I realize that your children may complain, but put up with the complaints and teach them how much Jesus loves them. Help them to receive that love by making the Eucharist a priority.

Finally, another implication, and there are many others, is that we as a Christian people, in receiving the Eucharist as the food of truth, must live that truth in the world. Jesus reminds us that “you are in the world but not of the world”. Whether we are Catholic parents, school teachers, politicians, lawyers, whether we are doctors, nurses, business persons, whatever state of life and whatever occupation we may be in, we must be formed by Christ and live that out. We must stand for that truth no matter what the cost! The implication of the Eucharist is that we will live our faith. We must believe and say, “Because I have personally experienced the love of Jesus for me, I will invite others by my actions to come to know the Lord.” As Catholics, we cannot have one foot in the world and one foot with the Lord. We must be totally for the Lord and live our lives out of that truth in all our words and actions.

My deepest hunger for you, my brothers and sisters, is that you come to know and receive the love that Jesus Christ so desires to give you in the Eucharist. In this “sacrament of charity”, this “sacrament of love,” I desire that you, in the most personal and intimate way, may come to know and receive the love and presence of Jesus that he gives to you.

I ask you over the next three days to reflect upon, first, the question, “Do I know and believe and receive the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for me personally each day?” Search in your own hearts and ask yourself that question. Use your name -- John, Mary, Jack, Teresa. “Do I personally know and believe and receive the love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit for me?” Take that to prayer, because only if you personally believe and receive the love of Jesus for you, will you bring him to others.

Second, I have made copies for all of you of John 6. They will be distributed at the end of Mass. I ask you, my brothers and sisters, to take John 6 home with you and to spend an hour in prayer upon it. Have a heart-to-heart conversation with Jesus. You may want to do it this evening during adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. And that includes the young people who are present here. As you reflect upon the reading, listen to Jesus speaking to you personally. Prepare yourself. Pray for the gifts of knowledge, of understanding, of wisdom as you read. Pray that your heart will hear what the Lord so desires to speak to you personally in that passage. And let the Lord address you. Enter into that passage, asking yourself, “Where am I in this? Do I have doubts about the Eucharist? Or am I like Peter who knows and recognizes that it is the Lord who is present, that it is only he who can give eternal life?”

Finally, I encourage you over the next three days, and most especially tomorrow, to spend the day in quiet. I encourage you on Good Friday, and I realize, for some of the young people, you may be upset with what I have to say, but no television, no computers,

no cell phones, no iPods -- spend the day in quiet. Certainly participate in the various services, but try to spend the day in quiet, listening for the Lord. Our days are so distracted and so helter-skelter. You may say to me, "Well, bishop, we're on vacation. We deserve a break." You know what? You've got all summer.

These three days are not going to kill you. Jesus died for you. Jesus desires to share his life with you. Jesus has loved you and only he and he alone can give you eternal life. Your iPod, your computer, your sports, your Game Boys, all of those material things that you have will never love you, will never lay down their lives for you, and will never give you salvation or eternal life and the forgiveness of your sins. Only Jesus Christ and he alone can do that.

As we continue to celebrate this evening the "sacrament of charity", I pray for you as your bishop, my beloved daughters and sons, that each one of you may come to know, to receive and to live the love of Jesus Christ more fully in your hearts; that you may come to know him in the breaking of the bread. I pray that Mary our mother will help you to learn from her and understand what it means to know and receive the love of the Trinity and live in the infinite beauty of the holy mystery of God revealed in the Eucharist that we celebrate.