

The Eucharist, the Bishop and Spiritual Fatherhood

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This evening we begin our symposium on “Interiority for Mission: Spiritual Formation for Priests of the New Evangelization.” We will explore over the next few days the place of spiritual formation as the integrating element for the formation of seminarians and priests. John Paul II in his 1979 apostolic exhortation, *Catechesi Tradendae* (CT), states: “...the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity (CT 5).” I believe that this definitive aim for catechesis is the starting point for the spiritual, human, intellectual and pastoral formation of men preparing for the priesthood. All aspects of seminarian formation must enable the student to live Jesus’ own life in the power of the Holy Spirit. Through appropriating contemplative interior Trinitarian relationships the future priest discovers that “Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear (*Guadium et Spes* 22).” Every formator must have and actively cultivate the desire to bring the seminarian into “communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ.” Thus the formator can guide the seminarian into experiencing love and truth which are at the heart of Trinitarian relationships.

This evening I will provide a reflection on “The Eucharist, the Bishop and Spiritual Fatherhood” as a prelude to a time of Eucharistic adoration. For us as Catholics the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life (*Lumen Gentium* [LG] 11).” The sacraments instituted by Christ and lived in the Church, flow to and flow from the Eucharist. For the priest, “... the Eucharistic Sacrifice...is...the center and root of the whole priestly life (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* [PO] 14).”

This past July I made the Spiritual Exercises, a 30-day silent directed Ignatian Retreat in Omaha, Nebraska. One summer evening, early on in the retreat, I had a hankering for ice cream. We were told we were permitted to go out as long as we did not engage in conversation. I went

downtown and began about a 20-minute search for ice cream. I was kicking myself inside for taking so long and interiorly debating whether I should be taking the time to find ice cream. “What kind of example am I setting as a bishop?” Yet, tenaciously I searched until I found the ice cream shop.

As I was walking back to my car I noticed a young couple in front of me and the young woman was wearing a Life Teen tee shirt. I heard the young man mention the words, “Eucharistic adoration.” My attention was caught and I began to listen. The young man was explaining to the young woman how he would regularly go to Eucharistic adoration at his parish church. He spoke how sometimes he would go alone and at other times with friends. His enthusiasm was palpable. He explained to her how when he would go with friends they would drive silently to church and back. The young woman asked incredulously “Why in silence?”

The young man stopped and became more animated. I had to stop too pretending not to be eavesdropping. He stated, “Because we go to meet Jesus. Jesus is truly present and we have to prepare ourselves. We have to get ready.” He paused, and then said with great ardor “Because, you know, it is all in the surrender! We have to be ready to surrender and listen.” I wanted to shout out “You’re right! Young man you are not far from the Kingdom of God (Mk 12, 34).” My heart filled with quiet joy and gratitude for the witness of the young man. His words became a theme for my retreat which played over and over again in my heart. And I discovered that the hankering for ice cream was really providence.

It is all in the surrender. The words sum up well the action of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist and our response to him. In the Eucharist the once for all sacrifice of Christ on the cross is made present—his surrender and his total self-gift to the Father for us. “This is my body, given for you.” “This is my blood, poured out for you.” On the cross he utters his last words “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit (Lk 23, 46).” All of these are words of surrender, which reflect what is happening within the heart of Jesus, giving himself totally and confidently to the Father for us. Every Eucharist is a prayer addressed to the Father in which we join ourselves to Jesus Christ, offering our lives with his as a gift to the Father. We too can experience interiorly that same confidence through the love that is the Holy Spirit living within our hearts and souls, as we make in faith our personal self-offering to the Father.

My sisters and brothers look at how great the surrender of love is **for us** in the Eucharist. It was not enough that in the Incarnation Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave (Phil 2, 7).” It was not enough that he surrendered himself on the cross, once and for all for the forgiveness of our sins and the salvation of the world. Jesus loves us so much that he continues to surrender himself for us each time the Eucharist is celebrated. He surrenders himself to simple gifts of bread and wine, which through the action of the Holy Spirit and the words of Jesus, truly become his body, blood, soul and divinity (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] #1374).

This surrender is the Father’s gift to us. In the wonderful discourse of John 6, Jesus reminds us, “... my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world (Jn 6, 32b-33).” That “true bread” is Jesus Christ on the cross, for the bread that he gives is his flesh for the life of the world (Jn 6, 51). That same flesh given for the life of the world is given to us at every Mass in the Eucharist.

For every bishop and priest, ordained to act “in the person of Christ the head (PO 2),” the Eucharist must be at the center of his priestly life for it nourishes and reminds him each day of his call to serve Jesus Christ and the Church. The bishop and priest must be able to say personally with Jesus, to the Father and to his people, “this is my body given for you,” and “this is my blood poured out for you.” The priest is called to make the same surrender as Jesus did. By laying his life down for Christ and the people he serves, the priest will taste the same magnanimous love of the Father for him, engendering the gifts of confidence and joy in the priest’s heart. Only in making himself a self-gift to the Father, through, with and in Jesus Christ, and to the people he serves, will the priest embrace his call and be able to cry out with Saint Paul, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me (Gal 2, 20).” The pastoral charity which the priest and bishop are called to exercise in their ministry is nourished by the Eucharist (PO 14). The Eucharist as an act of charity, an act of love, enables the priest to go forth into the parish entrusted to him, into his diocese and into the world in order to love as Christ loved.

Many priests offer Mass each day yet do not taste in faith the activity of the Holy Spirit indwelling in their hearts. Seminary formators must ensure that priests of the new evangelization taste and see the goodness of the Lord (Ps 34, 8) in their lived experience. If a man's heart is not awake to personally experiencing Trinitarian love for him, once ordained he is in grave danger of not understanding his true identity as beloved son. The heart of a priest if not awake will fall into a functional understanding of priesthood and will not serve the lives of his parishioners who hunger to receive and experience the Father's love in their hearts.

The seminarian in his formation must be invited to recognize and live this great truth of surrender. As a layman preparing to serve Christ and the Church as an ordained minister, he must have a thorough understanding of the Eucharist firmly rooted in his heart and mind. The formation staff, whether in the seminarians' courses on the Eucharist, Holy Orders, and the liturgy, or in his spiritual direction sessions, or in his apostolic works, or in his human formation, guides the student to this surrender, the offering of his total person as gift to Christ and to the diocese he will serve. It is all in the surrender. Therefore, the seminary staff must have experienced for themselves this Eucharistic surrendering because you cannot give what you do not possess.

"... [B]ishops have succeeded to the place of the apostles as shepherds of the Church, and... he who hears them, hears Christ, while he who rejects them, rejects Christ and Him who sent Christ (Lk 10:16) (LG 20)." The bishop is called to be a shepherd to his people entrusted to his care. Like Jesus, the bishop as a good shepherd must know his sheep (Jn 10, 14) and lay down his life for his sheep (Jn 10, 11). He makes himself a total self gift to his bride, the local Church. As Christ loved the Church by giving himself totally for her, so is the bishop to do the same for his particular Church (Eph 5).

May 31st, 2001, the Feast of the Visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, will forever be imprinted in my memory. I received a call from Archbishop Chaput of Denver informing me that he wanted to meet with me that evening. I was rector of the seminary in Denver. I thought he wanted to discuss some seminary concerns I had e-mailed to him earlier that day. Upon arriving at his home I immediately brought up the seminary and we spoke for about half an hour. There was a pause in the conversation. He then looked at me and said, "Now the real reason I have called

you over tonight is that the Holy Father has called you to be the coadjutor bishop of Fargo.” I sat in stunned silence. He looked at me and said, “I am serious.” I told him I knew he was serious and the reality was taking time to sink in.

That evening as I went to prayer, I recognized that my life was forever changed. As I sat in front of the Eucharist in prayer I was learning what it meant to give my life completely to Christ and the Church. I was called by Peter, by Christ, to leave everyone and everything I had known for 25 years as a priest and go to a new land and to a new people that I knew very little about. I truly belonged to the Church and I was hers to send wherever I was needed. My heart was filled with wonder and with some fear about going into the unknown. While on a spiritual level I experienced the peace of the Lord, on the human level there was angst for the future. Interiorly I was called to a deeper level of trust and surrender to the will of the Father.

Pope John Paul II referred to his own experience of this in his book *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, a book primarily addressed to bishops. “I say this from the place to which the love of Christ Our Saviour has led me, asking me that I should leave my native land so as to bring forth fruit elsewhere through His grace—fruit that will last (cf. John 15:16). Echoing the words of Our Lord and Master, I too say to each one of you, dear brothers in the episcopate: ‘Rise, let us be on our way!’ Let us go forth full of trust in Christ. He will accompany us as we journey toward the goal that He alone knows (pgs. 215-216).” The love of Christ calls each bishop to serve in Christ’s place in his particular diocese.

Within his heart the bishop must place his complete trust and confidence in Jesus Christ, recognizing that he is actually able to live Jesus’ own life in the power of the Holy Spirit. Like Jesus, it is the Father’s work and not his work that he is to accomplish (Jn 4, 34). The bishop who is truly in Christ will bear much fruit (Jn 15, 5). The bishop and his priests are called to live in an interior personal relationship with the Father as beloved son. Through this relationship they will reveal the Father’s own glory, shepherding the People of God.

In the surrender of oneself to the love of Christ a bishop is able to move forward towards a goal that Christ alone knows. The bishop cannot count the cost, nor for that matter, can any priest who is in ministry count the cost. The priest’s focus is to be on Christ and his ongoing interior

relationship with the Father's Spirit, who will sustain him no matter what he experiences in caring for the flock. In 2 Corinthians 11, St. Paul speaks of all he endured for love of Christ and his people, "countless beatings, shipwrecks, adrift at sea, hunger, thirst, danger from robbers and false brethren" and eventual martyrdom in Rome. As bishops and priests, and those who are seminarians, we can expect no less in our own time. Ours may be a different cross, yet the cross will always be there as a gift to experience what Jesus experienced in his total self-offering and obedience to the Father.

Bishops, like all the faithful, are called to holiness. "... [T]he shepherds of Christ's flock ought to carry out their ministry with holiness, eagerness, humility, and courage... (LG 41)." The bishop, by living these qualities in his daily ministry, becomes an example for his priests and seminarians on what it means to belong to Christ and the Church. Bishops are to be actively involved in the formation of both their priests and seminarians, and they do this especially by the witness of their lives. As priests and seminarians observe their bishop, they come to know how to be a good shepherd. Whether the bishop is celebrating the Eucharist in his Cathedral, or visiting the sick, those in prison, a school, a parish, or praying in front of an abortion clinic, or in quiet Eucharistic adoration, or participating in a meeting, he is to be an icon of the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.

Pastores Gregis (PG) reminds the bishop, "No bishop can fail to realize that the summit of Christian holiness is the crucified Christ in his supreme self-oblation to the Father and to his brothers and sisters in the Holy Spirit. For this reason configuration to Christ and a share in his sufferings (cf. 1 Pet 4:15) becomes the royal road of the Bishop's holiness in the midst of his people (PG 13)." To grow in holiness means to surrender my life to the Father as a living image of Jesus. In this interior surrender I give testimony to the Holy Spirit praying in my weakness and always providing me with courage and new life.

Let us now turn to the spiritual fatherhood. The fathers of the Church, especially St. Ignatius of Antioch, the Documents of Vatican II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, and especially *Pastores Gregis* all speak of this spiritual fatherhood. The documents do so most especially for bishops. Bishops are to know their priests as sons, brothers, and friends (LG 28). The bishop, "acting as father, brother and friend to all ... will stand beside everyone as the living image of Christ (PG 4).

Priests are to “exercise the most excellent and necessary office of father and teacher among the People of God (PO 9).”

While the Sacred Scriptures and Church documents speak so clearly and beautifully about fatherhood, we must recognize as formators of future priests the times in which we live. Over the past forty years we have seen the understanding and concept of fatherhood come under attack both culturally and theologically. David Blankenhorn in his book, *Fatherless America*, addresses the cultural problem and refers to it as one “of the most urgent” of our times. Many of the young men who are preparing for the priesthood have not experienced being fathered through Christian virtues and thus may not have a good understanding of fatherhood.

As bishops and priests we must honestly confront the way our own spiritual fatherhood has been possibly compromised or defined by the spirit of the day. We must examine our lives and ask ourselves am I more a “spiritual buddy” to the faithful rather than a “spiritual father”? Have we adopted a false sense of privacy by which we do not confront, discipline or visit with our spiritual children? Do we abandon our spiritual children by defining our call to the priesthood as 9-5 profession, with an attitude of don’t call me after hours? These attitudes prevent us from acting as true spiritual fathers.

Furthermore, another cultural influence present today is the confusion around the truth, dignity and meaning of human sexuality and intimacy. Some of our seminarians, as well as some priests and bishops, are influenced by the secular view of sexuality which is hedonistic and nihilistic, and completely counter to the intention of God. To complicate matters further is the fact that some theologians, especially those who have accepted the radical feminist critique in their theological reflections, have rejected God the Father. In essence, though some would argue they have not, I think they have rejected Jesus Christ as man, as the Word made flesh—he who is the very revelation of the Father. The radical feminist critique of the Trinitarian doctrine provides a Gnostic approach to human and spiritual maturation in the Holy Spirit. In recent studies that attend to and develop Pope John Paul II’s theology of the body, we can say that in the nuptial understanding of the human body the dignity of man and woman are strengthened when they relate to Jesus Christ. In relating to Jesus Christ—the Word made flesh—healing occurs between the two genders (1 Jn 4, 2). A woman is strengthened in her femininity and maternal

affections in her relationship with Christ and a man is strengthened in his masculinity and paternal affections in his relationship with Christ.

Sensitive to these influences of our times, we are to guide young men to a true understanding of spiritual fatherhood which comes to us primarily from the Gospels and Jesus' relationship to the Father. All four areas of formation need to adequately address fatherhood and how to be the spiritual father the Church calls her priests and bishops to be. If some of the seminarians have never had fathers, or if there are concerns about their relationship with their fathers, this will need to be addressed both on the human and spiritual level, especially if the man is ever to develop a relationship with God the Father. Furthermore, we need to be willing to forthrightly address the area of human sexuality and help seminarians develop a healthy masculinity. As a priest, a man is to be a living sacrament of Christ the Head, Shepherd, and Bridegroom of the Church. Essential to the living out of that sacrament is a personal relationship with the Father, knowing oneself as son, in Christ.

God the Father is the one who best teaches priests and bishops how to be a father. Every priest and bishop interiorly in faith must know how to receive and experience in his heart the eternal love of the Father for him if he is to communicate that love to others. God the Father is the only Father who loves each one of us unconditionally and who desires each one of us to be his sons and daughters. The story of the prodigal son (Lk 15) reveals to us this eternal love of the Father, as he patiently waits for his son who is steeped in sin to return to him. Only love leaves one free to reject or accept the other. Take note, too, that the son must follow—surrender to—his interior desire to return to the father in order to receive his love. The Father will never force his love on us. The son returns thinking he will be treated as a servant and instead the father welcomes him as a son. This is an important lesson for all of us.

When we look at the Sacred Scriptures and the life of Jesus we detect many aspects of what it means to be a father. A father has a real love for his children no matter how they may respond to him. A father's deepest desire is for his children to know and experience his love. He desires their well-being and teaches them how to love others by his example. A father must at times correct, admonish and warn for protection sake. A father always speaks the truth with love, even

when difficult. A Christian father must know how to teach his children to receive God's love in prayer and to taste and see God at work in everyday life.

We recognize these qualities in the life of Jesus in his preaching, in his teaching, in his healing and deliverance ministry, and especially in his loving relationship with the apostles. He speaks of his love for his apostles, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love (Jn 15, 9)." Jesus calls them friends (Jn 15, 14). He corrects them when he overhears them arguing over who is the greatest (Lk 9, 46ss). In order to remain faithful to the Father's ways, Jesus strongly rebukes Peter with the words, "Get behind me Satan (Mk 8, 33)." He prays for Peter personally (Lk 22, 32) and for the well-being of all the apostles and those who will believe in him in the future (Jn 17). Jesus teaches his disciples to pray the Our Father (Mt 6, 9ss) and teaches them to go off in quiet prayer by his example. Jesus promises the Advocate who will instruct the apostles in all matters and keep them in the truth (Jn 14, 26; 15, 26). Jesus calls us to trust the Father's sovereign power in his providence for us.

Another example of fatherhood offered by Pope John Paul II in his book, *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*, is that of St. Joseph. "For Saint Joseph, life with Jesus was a continuous discovery of his own vocation as a father. He became a father in an extraordinary way, without begetting his son in the flesh. Isn't this, perhaps, an example of the type of fatherhood that is proposed to us, priests and bishops, as a model? Everything I did in the course of my ministry I saw as an expression of this kind of fatherhood—baptizing, hearing confessions, celebrating the Eucharist, preaching, admonishing, encouraging. For me these things were always a way of living out that fatherhood (p. 141)." Seminarians, priests and bishops would do well to meditate on the chaste generative life of St. Joseph.

During my 30-day retreat, one of the great graces I received was a prayer which came about through a conversation with Saint Joseph. During the prayer, he encouraged me to see everything through the eyes of the Father. I received that encouragement in my heart and responded with a "yes", not knowing the fruit it would bear. A consistent prayer for me throughout the retreat as I entered into prayer, or read scriptures, and one that even continues today is "Father help me to see all through your eyes and with your heart." Throughout the retreat as I surrendered seeing with my eyes, which tended to be blind and self-seeking, to seeing

with the eyes of the Father, I experienced the love of the Father in ways I never thought possible (See Office of Readings Wednesday 3rd week of Lent). I experienced the omnipotent and eternal love of the Father which I came to understand as only a pinhead of the vastness of his love for me. Through that interior experience, I now know that it is in seeing with the eyes of the Father that I can best be a father for those I serve as bishop—and this came to light for me at the end of the retreat.

All through the course of the retreat I did not preach nor was I the main celebrant at any of the Masses. For me as a bishop this was a great sacrifice and one that gave me a deep appreciation for the role of the bishop. We usually celebrated Mass with over 100 seminarians and the other priests and deacons who were participating in the 30-day retreat. After we finished the retreat I was the main celebrant and preached the homily. During the homily I referred to the seminarians and priests there as “my dearest sons” urging them to deeper desire for union with the heart of the Trinity, with the God who is love (1 Jn 4, 16). Aware of the spiritual fatherhood of bishops, I have used those words in homilies for ordinations and the Chrism Masses with my priests. They are said with love, but I never have realized the possible impact of them.

After the Mass some of the seminarians came up to me and thanked me for referring to them as sons. Through those simple words they sensed the love of the Father. A priest, who was on the 30-day retreat with me, was quietly weeping and asked to speak to me. He came from a diocese that has been rocked by the sexual abuse scandal. He told me how over the last few years he had grown to not trust bishops, to resent them, and he was angry with bishops especially for the way they treated priests. When he had seen me on the first day of the retreat and found out that I was a bishop, he immediately transferred his deep feelings of anger, betrayal and resentment onto me. He prayed during the retreat, wondering why these feelings were so strongly planted in his heart. Then it struck him, he felt so deeply because in his heart he understood that I represented the spiritual father that had abandoned and betrayed him. He then went on to say that he experienced healing by watching me during the retreat and then hearing me call the seminarians and priests during the homily “my dear sons.” He wept with compunction and joy for he experienced the love of a bishop as father. I was overwhelmed, for the Father had responded to my prayer, “to see all through the eyes of the Father,” in ways unknown to me and healed the

wounded heart of a priest. I could only lift up my heart in deep wondrous gratitude to the Father, “from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named (Eph 3, 14).”

In conclusion, in the Eucharist the bishop, and also priests, learns what it means to be a spiritual father for those entrusted to his care. As he stands in the fullness of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, in the person of Christ the Head, Shepherd, and Bridegroom of the church, he makes himself a total self-gift to Jesus Christ and to the faithful he serves. He offers himself to the Father, through, with, and in Jesus Christ and he lays down his life for his flock. It is all in the surrender, most fully imaged in the Eucharist, that every disciple of Christ, no matter what the calling, discovers what it means to call God Father and to live in intimacy with Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

As we move to Eucharistic adoration I wish to close with a prayer by Charles de Foucauld. I pray the prayer everyday before the Eucharist. I hope you will come to understand why as you pray from your hearts and make it your own by listening for and receiving the Father’s eternal love for you.

Father, I abandon myself into your hands;
do with me what you will.
Whatever you may do, I thank you;
I am ready for all, I accept all.
Let only your will be done in me,
and in all your creatures.
I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hands I commend my soul;
I offer it to you
with all the love of my heart,
for I love you, Lord,
and so need to give myself,
to surrender myself into your hands,
without reserve,
and with boundless confidence,
for you are my Father.