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The Eucharist: the Heart of Holy Week and Easter

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In a short time, the Church will celebrate its holiest days and recall the paschal mystery of our Lord's passion, death, and resurrection. However, there is one event or reality that encompasses the whole celebration of Holy Week and Easter: the Eucharist. These mysteries in their entirety are contained in that greatest sacrament, which we celebrate throughout the year. In the Eucharist, the fullness of our faith is present, because Jesus himself is present.

On Holy Thursday, Jesus gathered his closest companions together at the Last Supper. During that Passover meal, he gave them the customary bread and wine, but forever transformed that ritual when he said, "This is my body... This is my blood." As he gave the Eucharist to his apostles, he was anticipating his sacrificial death, the gift of his life that he would offer for the salvation of the world. On Good Friday, Jesus gave us his body and blood on the cross, and he forever united his crucifixion and death to the sacrament of the altar that we celebrate at every Mass. Pope Francis says, "As we enter the church to celebrate Mass, let us think about this: I am going to Calvary, where Jesus gave his life for me." Finally, on Easter Sunday, he rose from the dead to glory, and the Eucharist becomes the sacrament of his resurrection as well. As our Holy Father says, "Every celebration of the Eucharist is a ray of that never setting sun that is the Risen Jesus." When we receive the Eucharist, we unite ourselves to the whole saving mystery that unfolded in those sacred days, and more importantly, Jesus unites us to himself.

Is it any wonder then, that Jesus told his apostles to "Do this in memory of me?" He commanded them to continue what he has done, to carry on this sacramental celebration in his body and blood so that all who believe in him might be personally united with him. "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day" (Jn 6:53-54). He urges us to celebrate the Eucharist so that we might always experience the grace of his paschal mystery, his saving death and glorious resurrection. By receiving the Eucharist, we are made one with Christ, who even now lives in glory at the right hand of the Father.

It's no secret that the number of those attending Sunday Mass has declined, and thus fewer of the faithful are receiving the Eucharist. The reasons for this are many, but one reason is surely a misunderstanding of what the Eucharist truly is. Some see the Eucharist merely as a symbol and the Mass as a ritual that represents in some way what Jesus did for us. But this is not what the Church believes. Pope Francis tells us: "It is not merely a remembrance, no. It is more: it is making present what happened twenty centuries ago."

The Church has always taught the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist, that the Eucharist is a re-presentation of the sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of Christ. It is the real presence of Christ himself under the appearances of bread and wine. When we participate in the Mass and receive the Eucharist, we receive the same Christ who died on the cross and rose on Easter morning. This is why initiation into the Church at Easter culminates in the reception of the Holy Eucharist. It is the completion of our union with Jesus.

The Holy Father has been speaking in recent weeks about the Eucharistic liturgy, and he pulls no punches about attending and participating in the Mass. It is not enough, he tells us, to live a good life and treat others well. We must also remain in communion with Christ through the Eucharist. "How can we practice the Gospel without drawing the energy necessary to do so... from the inexhaustible source of the Eucharist? We do not go to Mass in order to give something to God, *but to receive what we truly need from him.*" We need the Eucharist "because only with Jesus' grace, with his living presence within us and among us, can we put his commandment into practice, and thus be his credible witnesses."

Through the Eucharist, we are formed and drawn together as the Church, the family of those whom our Lord has called as his disciples. We might come to the church by ourselves and even sit by

ourselves, but through the Eucharist, we are always part of something bigger than ourselves. We are members of the mystical Body of Christ, joined to God and our fellow believers by the paschal mystery of Christ's death and resurrection. Through the Eucharist, we are sent out just as the apostles were sent forth from Jerusalem after Easter.

As we approach the days of Holy Week and Easter, I hope each one of us will enter more deeply into these mysteries through the Eucharist. It will be our portal into the fullness of Christ's love. But that portal doesn't close on Easter Sunday; it is open to us always. Through the Mass and the Eucharist let us live the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection throughout the year. If we have been sporadic in our attendance at Mass, now is the perfect time to start anew, to keep the Lord's day holy by making time for him every week. Even after Easter has passed, the Eucharist will still join us to the Risen Christ every day of the year. May this Holy Week and Easter be for all of us an encounter with the love of Christ in the Eucharist.