

The Sacrament of our Redemption

With the impending Eucharistic Congress only a few weeks away I have decided to take this opportunity to pen some thoughts on the Eucharist. These thoughts are not definitive, nor do they express the entirety of the truth of the Eucharist, for that in itself is surely an impossible task. These are instead the ruminations of a person who has the privilege of celebrating Eucharist.

If you ask any person on the street what does Eucharist mean, chances are you will hear that it is the body of Christ, the mass, Holy Communion or something similar to these. In truth, this is indeed correct. However, there is much more to this almost arcane¹ and profound truth, which, I believe, needs to be brought to lucidity. It is interesting to note, primarily that the word Eucharist derives from a Greek word, *Ευχαριστω*, which means to give thanks, to be grateful or to feel thankful. It is also important to note that the word Eucharist as we know it today never appears in any Gospel and we must wait until the later documents such as the *Didache* or *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* to read the first reference to the word Eucharist.²

In order to attain some sort of grounding let us turn to the 1983 Code of Canon Law which in c. 897 describes the Eucharist as *“The most venerable sacrament in which Christ the Lord himself is contained, offered and received and by which the Church continually lives and grows.”*³ From this deeply intricate *credo* one may begin to approach the impenetrable mystery set before us in the Eucharist. In the bread and wine presented on the altar during the offertory there lies the potentiality of each of our lives. Those offerings which we make, offerings from the earth, offerings of the work of our lives, will in time and through the grace of the Father become the Body and Blood of Christ, in the same way we as his people, we as his Church, the mystical body of Christ on earth, are called to become like him. That is why, in the offertory of the bread and wine at Mass, we should always take due care to not let the moment

¹ Herein is the greatest shame. The Eucharist, as the body of Christ, should be light of the world, the truth of which should be knowledge to all, not alone to theologians and the learned.

² When I mention the Eucharist in terms of how we know it today I am of course referring to the designation of the sacramental rite of the offering and consumption of the body and blood of Christ. John L. McKenzie, S.J., *Dictionary of the Bible*, (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1965), 249.

³ C. 897.

through the actions of the priest, offering to the Father the fruit of the vine and the work of our human hands. In other words, we are offering to the Father our lives, we place them, on the sacrificial table with the bread and wine which become symbols of our lives, our potentiality, our brokenness, our humanity which will, in time, be swept up in the divine mystery of the transubstantiation.

It is interesting at this point to note that the two items placed on the altar also have significant meaning. The word Host referring to the bread is from the Latin, *Hostia* meaning I kill, I slaughter and hence means *victim*. Wine was used by Christ at the Last Supper as a part of the Passover meal. Wine for the Jews of the Old Testament was a sign not only of festive joy but also of undisturbed possession of the land.⁴ However, it is important to realize that while the human movement of the Eucharist is important, that is the *anabatic* or upward movement of the Eucharist wherein we offer up, pray and present our lives before the Lord, there is also a very powerful and often misunderstood *katabatic* or downward movement wherein God is also active. Nowhere is this clearer than at the moment of transubstantiation when the movement of the earthly elements from the sphere of this world to the sphere of the divine is effected. In the *katabatic* movement of the Eucharist, in the changing of the earthly elements of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, God the Father reaches down to touch our lives at their most human and normal moments. In a wonderful moment, the two movements of the Eucharist unite in a connection of total and utter abandonment to each other, God to us and us to God. We receive him in his fullness yet he also receives us, in our weakness, our lives and our humanity. However, notice, that there is the movement of the earthly elements to the world of the divine. That means, that, if it is true that we present our lives on the altar at the offertory, then, it can only be true that our lives are swept up in that self same transubstantiation and we become what we receive, Indeed, according to David N. Power, any theology which posits a theological explanation of the elements of bread and wine that withholds their power to represent people, their history, their

⁴ These two points are raised at <http://blog.adw.org/2009/07/the-mass-in-slow-motion-the-offertory/>.

⁵ Edward J. Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 55.

a long way from the truth of the incarnation.⁶ The mystery of the Eucharist must be that through the double movement, we become what we receive in that moment of unity with the paschal mystery of Christ, re-presented to us in every single Eucharist which we celebrate. That is why the greatest scandal of all is the corruption of leaders which leads to the poverty of their people. Christ, in the divine *katabatic* movement offers us the richness of his divine life in the fullness of our own humanity. The scandal that dehumanizes any person is contrary to the great mystery we celebrate at the Eucharist.

There is much more to be said about this superlative mystery of unfathomable love, yet for the moment I think it would serve us well to reflect upon the fact that in the Eucharist, Christ desires unity with us so much that he makes himself small in order that we may be like him. It is indeed a humbling and dare one say, dangerous thought, to imagine that the almighty, omnipotent God, would wish to become something we can hold in our hand, in order that we might touch eternal life with our hands in a moment wherein we become what we are about to receive. Let us never lose sight of the wonder of the Eucharist and let us pray for the building up of Christ's body in the forthcoming Eucharistic Congress.

⁶ David N. Power, "Eucharist" in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives, Vol. II*, eds., John P. Galvin, Francis Schussler Fiorenza, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 284.