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SECOND SERMON, LENT 2022

TAKE AND EAT: THIS IS MY BODY

FRIDAY MARCH 18, 2022

The object of our mystagogical catechesis today is the central part of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer, or the Canon, which has consecration at its center. We make two types of consideration on it: one liturgical and ritual, the other theological and existential.

From a ritual and liturgical point of view, today we have a new resource that the Fathers of the Church and medieval doctors did not have. The new resource we have is the rapprochement between Christians and Jews. From the earliest days of the Church, various historical factors led to accentuate the difference between Christianity and Judaism, to the point of contrasting them with each other, as Ignatius of Antioch already does. Distinguishing oneself from the Jews – on the date of Easter, on fasting days, and in many other things – becomes a kind of password. An accusation often leveled against one's adversaries and heretics is that of "Judaizing".

The tragedy of the Jewish people, the Shoa, and the new climate of dialogue with Judaism, initiated by the Second Vatican Council, have made possible a better understanding of the Jewish matrix of the Eucharist. Just as the Christian Passover cannot be understood if it is not considered as the fulfillment of what the Jewish Passover foretold, so the Eucharist is not fully understood if it is not seen as the fulfillment of what the Jews did and said in the course of their ritual meal. A first important result of this turnaround was that today no serious scholar advances the hypothesis that the Christian Eucharist is explained in the light of the dinner in vogue at some mystery cults of Hellenism, as has been tried for over a century.

The Fathers of the Church retained the Scriptures of the Jewish people, but not their liturgy, which they no longer had access to, after the separation of the Church from the Synagogue. They

therefore used the figures contained in the Scriptures – the paschal lamb, the sacrifice of Isaac, that of Melchizedek, the manna – but not the concrete liturgical context in which the Jewish people celebrated all these memories, that is the ritual meal celebrated, once a year in the Passover supper (the Seder) and weekly in the synagogue worship. The first name with which the Eucharist is designated in the New Testament by Paul is that of “meal of the Lord” (kuriakon deipnon) (1 Cor 11:20), with evident reference to the Jewish meal from which it now differs for the faith in Jesus. The Eucharist is the sacrament of continuity – not of the opposition – between the Old and New Testaments, between Judaism and Christianity.

The Eucharist and the Jewish Berakah

This is the perspective that Benedict XVI also takes in the chapter on the institution of the Eucharist in his second book on Jesus of Nazareth. Following the prevailing opinion of scholars today, he accepts the Johannine chronology according to which Jesus’ Last Supper was not a Passover meal but a solemn farewell meal. With Louis Bouyer, he holds in addition that one can *“trace the development of the Christian eucharistic liturgy [that is, of the canon] from the Jewish berakah.”*

Because of various cultural and historical reasons, from the time of scholasticism onwards, theology attempted to explain the Eucharist in the light of philosophy, in particular using the Aristotelian notions of substance and accidents. This too was a way of placing the new understanding of their time at the service of faith and thus of imitating the methodology of the Fathers. In our day, we need to do the same with our new knowledge—in our case, historical and liturgical knowledge rather than philosophical knowledge. In the context of some research already begun in this direction, especially by Louis Bouyer, I would like to show the bright light that is falling on the Christian Eucharist when we consider the Gospel accounts of its institution against the background of what we know about the Jewish ritual meal. The innovation of Jesus’ action will not be diminished but will be highly enhanced.

The link between the old and the new rite is given by the Didachè, a writing of the apostolic era that we can consider the first sketch of a Eucharistic anaphora. The synagogal rite was composed of a series of prayers called “Berakah” which in Greek is translated as “Eucharist”. At the beginning of the meal, each in turn took a cup of wine in his hand and, before bringing it to his lips, repeated a blessing that the current liturgy makes us repeat almost verbatim at the moment of the offertory: “Blessed be you, Lord, our God, King of the ages, you have given us this fruit of the vine...”.

But the meal officially began only when the father of the family, or the head of the community, had broken the bread that was to be distributed among the diners. And, in fact, Jesus takes the bread, recites the blessing, breaks it and distributes it saying: *“This is my body which will be given up for you.”* And here the rite – which was only a preparation – becomes reality. The figure becomes the event.

After the blessing of the bread, the usual dishes were served. When the meal is about to end, the

diners are ready for the great ritual act that concludes the celebration and gives it the deepest meaning. Everyone washes their hands, as in the beginning. Having finished this, having in front of him a cup of wine mixed with water, he intones the three prayers of thanksgiving: the first for God the Creator, the second for liberation from Egypt, the third because he continues his work at the present time. At the conclusion of the prayer, the cup passed from hand to hand and everyone drank. This, the ancient rite performed so many times by Jesus in life. Luke says that Jesus, after having eaten, takes up the chalice and says, "This chalice which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk 22:20). Something decisive occurs at the moment when Jesus adds these words to the formula of the prayer of thanksgiving, that is, to the Jewish Berakah. That ritual was a sacred feast in which people celebrated and thanked God as their Savior for having redeemed his people in order to form a covenant of love with them that was sealed by the blood of a lamb. Now, at the very moment in which Jesus, as the true Lamb of God, decides to give his life for his own, he declares that the Old Covenant that they were all celebrating liturgically has been concluded. At that moment, with a few simple words, he makes the new and eternal Covenant in his Blood.

By adding the words "*do this in memory of me,*" Jesus gives a lasting significance to his gift. From the past, the gaze is projected towards the future. Everything he has done so far in the supper is placed in our hands. By repeating what he did, that central act of human history which is his death for the world is renewed. The figure of the paschal lamb which becomes an event on the cross is given to us in the supper as a sacrament, that is, as a perennial memorial of the event.

Priest and victim

This, I said, with regard to the liturgical and ritual aspect of the consecration. Let us now move on to the other consideration, that of a personal and existential kind, in other words to the role that we, priests and faithful, play at that moment of the Mass. To understand the role of the priest in consecration, it is of vital importance to know the nature of the sacrifice and of the priesthood of Christ because it is from them that the Christian priesthood derives, both the baptismal one common to all, and that of ordained ministers.

We are no longer, in reality, "*priests according to the order of Melchizedek*"; we are priests "*according to the order of Jesus Christ*"; at the altar we act "*in persona Christi*", that is, we represent the High Priest who is Christ. The Symposium on the priesthood, held in this Hall last month, said infinitely more on this topic than I can say in my brief reflection (prepared, by the way, before that date), but it is necessary say something here for the understanding of the Eucharist.

The Letter to the Hebrews explains in what the novelty and uniqueness of Christ's priesthood consists: "He entered the sanctuary once and for all, not by the blood of goats and calves, but by virtue of his own blood, thus obtaining an eternal redemption" (Heb 9: 12). Every other priest offers something external to himself, Christ offered himself; every other priest offers victims, Christ offered himself a victim! St. Augustine summed up in a few words the nature of this new kind of priesthood in which priest and victim are the same person: "*Ideo sacerdos quia*

sacrificium”, priest because victim. The French scholar René Girard defined this novelty of Christ’s sacrifice as “the central fact in the religious history of humanity”, which put an end forever to the intrinsic alliance between the sacred and violence.

In Christ it is God who becomes victim. It is no longer human beings who offer sacrifices to God to appease him and make him favorable; it is God who sacrifices himself for humanity, delivering his only-begotten Son to death for us (cf. Jn 3:16). Jesus did not come with the blood of others, but with his own blood; he did not put his sins on the shoulders of others – animals or human creatures – but he put the sins of others on his shoulders: “He carried our sins in his body on the wood of the cross” (1 Pt 2, 24). All this means that in the Mass we must be priests and victims at the same time.

In light of this, let us reflect on the words of the consecration: “*Take, eat: this is my body offered as a sacrifice for you*”. On this regard I should like to share my little experience, that is, how I came to discover the ecclesial and personal significance of the Eucharistic consecration. This is how I lived the moment of consecration in Holy Mass the first years of my priesthood: I closed my eyes, I bowed my head, I tried to estrange myself from everything around me to identify with Jesus who, in the Upper Room, pronounced those words for the first time: «*Accipite et manducate: Take and eat...*». The liturgy itself instilled this attitude, making the words of the consecration pronounced in a low voice and in Latin, bent over the species.

Then there was the liturgical reform of Vatican II. Mass began to be celebrated while watching the assembly; no longer in Latin, but in the language of the people. This helped me to understand that my attitude did not express the full meaning of my participation in the consecration. That Jesus of the Cenacle no longer exists! The risen Christ now exists: the Christ, to be exact, who was dead but now lives forever (cf. Rev 1:18). But this Jesus is the “total Christ”, Head and Body inseparably united. Therefore, if it is this total Christ who pronounces the words of the consecration, I too pronounce them with him. Yes, I pronounce them “in persona Christi”, in the name of Christ, but also “in first person”, that is, in my name.

From that day when I understood this, I began to no longer close my eyes at the moment of consecration, but to look – at least sometimes – the brothers in front of me, or, if I celebrate alone, I think of those I have to meet during the day and to whom I have to dedicate my time, or I even think of the whole Church and, turning to them, I say with Jesus: “*Take, eat all of you: this is my body that I want to give for you ... Take, drink: this is my blood that I want to shed for you*».

Later St. Augustine came to remove all doubts from me. “*In what the Church offers she offers herself*”, he writes in a famous passage from *De civitate Dei*: *In ea re quam offert, ipsa [Ecclesia] offertur*. Closer to us is the Mexican mystic Concepcion Cabrera de Armida, called Conchita, who died in 1937 and was beatified in 2015. To her Jesuit son, about to be ordained priest, she wrote: “Remember, my son, when you hold in your hands the Holy Host, you will not say: ‘Behold the Body of Jesus and Behold His Blood,’ but you will say: ‘This is my Body, This is my Blood, that is, there must be worked in you a total transformation, you must lose yourself in Him, to be ‘another Jesus.’”

All this applies not only to ordained bishops and priests, but to all the baptized. A famous text of the Council puts it this way:

The faithful, by virtue of their royal priesthood, contribute to the oblation of the Eucharist ... By participating in the Eucharistic sacrifice, source and summit of all Christian life, they offer the divine Victim to God and themselves with it; so everyone, both with the oblation and with Holy Communion, fulfills their part in the liturgical action, but not equally, but some in one way and some in another.

There are two bodies of Christ on the altar: there is his real body (the body “born of the Virgin Mary”, dead, risen and ascended to heaven) and there is his mystical body which is the Church. Well, his real body is really present on the altar and his mystical body is mystically present, where “mystically” means: by virtue of his inseparable union with the Head. There is no confusion between the two presences, which are distinct but inseparable.

Since there are two “offerings” and two “gifts” on the altar – the one that is to become the body and blood of Christ (the bread and the wine) and the one that is to become the mystical body of Christ – there are also two “epiclesis” in the Mass, that is, two invocations of the Holy Spirit. In the first it is said: “Now we humbly pray to you: send your Spirit to sanctify the gifts we offer you, so that they become the body and blood of Jesus Christ”; in the second, which is recited after the consecration, it is said: *«Give the fullness of the Holy Spirit so that we become one body and one spirit in Christ. May the Holy Spirit make us a perennial sacrifice pleasing to you ».*

This is how the Eucharist makes the Church: the Eucharist makes the Church, making the Church a Eucharist! The Eucharist is not only, generically, the source or the cause of the holiness of the Church; it is also its “form”, that is, its model. The holiness of the Christian must be realized according to the “form” of the Eucharist; it must be a Eucharistic holiness. The Christian cannot limit himself to celebrating the Eucharist, he must be a Eucharist with Jesus.

The Body and the Blood

Now we can draw the practical consequences of this doctrine for our daily life. If in the consecration it is we too who, turning to our brothers and sisters, say: «Take, eat: this is my body. Take and drink: this is my blood”, we must know what “body” and “blood” mean, to know what we offer.

The word “body” does not indicate, in the Bible, a component, or a part, of man which, combined with the other components which are the soul and the spirit, form the complete human being. In biblical language, and therefore in that of Jesus and Paul, “body” indicates the whole of a person, insofar as he or she lives his or her life in a body, in a corporeal and mortal condition. “Body” therefore indicates the whole of life. By instituting the Eucharist, Jesus left us his whole life as a gift, from the first instant of the incarnation to the last moment, with everything that concretely filled that life: silence, sweat, toil, prayer, struggles, humiliations. ...

Then Jesus says: "This is my blood". What does he add with the word "blood" if he has already given us his whole life in his body? He adds death! After giving us life, he also gives us the most precious part of it, his death. In fact, the term "blood" in the Bible does not indicate a part of the body, that is, a part of a part of a person; indicates an event: death. If blood is the seat of life (so it was thought then), its "pouring" is the plastic sign of death. The Eucharist is the mystery of the Lord's body and blood, that is, of the Lord's life and death!

Now, coming to us, what do we offer, offering our body and our blood, together with Jesus, in the Mass? We too offer what Jesus offered: life and death. With the word "body", we give everything that concretely constitutes the life we lead in this world: time, health, energy, skills, affection, maybe just a smile. With the word "blood", we too express the offer of our death. Not necessarily definitive death, martyrdom for Christ or for the brothers. All that in us, right now, prepares and anticipates death: humiliations, failures, diseases that immobilize, limitations due to age, health, all that, in a word, "mortifies" us.

All this requires, however, that we, as soon as we come out of Mass, do our best to realize what we have said; that we really strive, with all our limitations, to offer to our others and sisters our "body", that is, time, energy, attention; in a word, our life. It is therefore necessary that, after having said: "Take, eat", we really let ourselves "be eaten" and let ourselves be eaten above all by those who do not do it with all the delicacy and grace that we would expect. St. Ignatius of Antioch, going to Rome to die there as a martyr, wrote: "I am Christ's wheat: may I be ground from the teeth of the beasts, to become pure bread for the Lord". Each of us, if you look carefully around, has these sharp teeth of fairs that grind it: they are criticisms, contrasts, hidden or open oppositions, differences of views with those around us, diversity of character.

Let's try to imagine what would happen if we celebrated Mass with this personal participation, if we all really said, at the moment of consecration, some aloud and some silently, according to the ministry of each one: "Take, eat". A parish priest and, even more so, a bishop, celebrates his Mass in this way, then goes: he prays, preaches, confesses, receives people, visits the sick, listens, teaches... His day is also a Eucharist. A great French spiritual teacher, Pierre Olivaint (1816-1871), used to say: "In the morning, at Mass, I am the priest and Jesus the victim; throughout the day, Jesus is the priest and I the victim ». Thus, a priest imitates the "good Shepherd", because he really gives his life for his sheep.

Our signature on the gift

I would like to summarize, with the help of a human example, what happens in the Eucharistic celebration. Let's think of a large family in which there is a son, the firstborn, who admires and loves his father beyond measure. For his birthday he wants to give him a precious gift. Before presenting it to him, however, he secretly asks all his brothers and sisters to put their signature on the gift. This therefore arrives in the hands of the father as a sign of the love of all his children, without distinction, even if, in reality, only one has paid the price for it.

This is what happens in the Eucharistic sacrifice. Jesus admires and loves the Heavenly Father endlessly. He wants to give him every day, until the end of the world, the most precious gift that one can think of, that of his own life. In the Mass he invites all his brothers and sisters to put their signature on the gift, so that it reaches God the Father as the indistinct gift of all his children, even if only one has paid the price for this gift. And what a price!

Our signature are the few drops of water that are mixed with the wine in the chalice. They are nothing but water, but mixed in the cup they become a single drink. The signature of all is the solemn Amen which the assembly pronounces, or sings, at the end of the doxology: "Through him, and with him, and in him, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, forever and ever". "AMEN!"

We know that those who have signed a commitment then have the duty to honor their signature. This means that, leaving Mass, we too must make our lives a gift of love to the Father for the good of our brothers and sisters. We, I repeat, are not only called to celebrate the Eucharist, but also to make ourselves a Eucharist. May God help us with this!

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1. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Magnesians, 10,3.
 2. Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI), Jesus of Nazareth, Part II: Holy Week: From the Entrance to Jerusalem to the Resurrection (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 311, and see all of ch. 5, pp. 103-144. See also Louis Bouyer, Eucharist: Theology and Spirituality of the Eucharistic Prayer (1966; University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).
 3. Augustine, Confessions, X, 43
 4. R. Girard, Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde, Grasset, Paris 1978.
 5. Augustine, De civitate Dei, X, 6.
 6. Conchita. A Mother's Spiritual Diary, ed. by M.-M. Philippon, New York, Alba House 1978, p. 87.
 7. Lumen gentium, 10-11.
 8. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Romans, 4,1.