



His Eminence Cardinal Raniero Cantalamessa,
Pontifical Household Preacher

THIRD SERMON, LENT 2022

COMMUNION WITH THE BODY AND BLOOD OF CHRIST **FRIDAY MARCH 25, 2022**

In our mystagogical catechesis on the Eucharist – after the Liturgy of the Word and the Consecration – we have reached the third moment, that of communion.

This is the moment of the Mass that most clearly expresses the unity and fundamental equality of all the baptized, below any distinction of rank and ministry. Till this moment the distinction of the ministry is present: in the liturgy of the Word, the distinction between the teaching Church and the learning Church; in consecration, the distinction between ministerial priesthood and universal priesthood. At communion there is no distinction whatsoever. The communion received by the simple baptized is identical to that received by a priest or a bishop. Eucharistic communion is the sacramental proclamation that *koinonia* comes first in the Church and it is more important than the hierarchy.

Let us reflect on the Eucharistic Communion starting from a text of St. Paul: *The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a communion with the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a communion with the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.* (1Cor 10:16-17)

The word “body” occurs twice in the two verses, but with a different meaning. In the first case (“the bread that we break, is it not a communion with the body of Christ?”), body indicates the real body of Christ, born of Mary, died and risen; in the second case (“we are one body”), body indicates the mystical body, the Church. It could not be said in a clearer and more synthetic way that Eucharistic communion is always communion with God and communion with the brothers

and sisters; that there is a vertical dimension in it, so to speak, and a horizontal dimension. Let's start with the first.

Communion with Christ

What kind of communion is established between us and Christ in the Eucharist? In John 6:57 Jesus says: "As the Father, who has life, sent me and I live for the Father, so also he who eats me will live for me". The preposition "for" (in Greek, διὰ) has a causal and final value here; it indicates both a movement of origin and a movement of destination. It means that whoever eats the body of Christ lives "from" him, that is, because of him, by virtue of the life that comes from him, and lives "for" him, that is, for his glory, his love, his Kingdom. As Jesus lives of the Father and for the Father, so, by communicating ourselves to the holy mystery of his body and his blood, we live of Jesus and for Jesus.

In fact, it is the strongest vital principle that assimilates the less strong one to itself, not vice versa. It is the vegetable that assimilates the mineral, not vice versa; it is the animal that assimilates both the vegetable and the mineral, not vice versa. So now, on the spiritual level, it is the divine that assimilates the human to itself, not vice versa. So that while in all other cases the one who eats assimilates what he eats, here it is the one who is eaten who assimilates to himself whoever eats it. To the one who approaches to receive him, Jesus repeats what he said to Augustine: *"It will not be you who will assimilate me to you, but it will be I who will assimilate you to me"*. An atheist philosopher said: "Man is what he eats" (F. Feuerbach), meaning that in man there is no qualitative difference between matter and spirit, but that everything boils down to the organic and material component. An atheist, without knowing it, gave the best formulation of a Christian mystery. Thanks to the Eucharist, the Christian is truly what he eats! Saint Leo the Great wrote a long time ago: *"Our participation in the body and blood of Christ tends to make us become what we eat"*.

In the Eucharist, therefore, there is not only communion between Christ and us, but also assimilation; communion is not just the union of two bodies, of two minds, of two wills, but it is assimilation to the one body, the one mind and will of Christ. *"Whoever unites himself with the Lord forms one Spirit with him"* (1 Cor 6:17).

That of nutrition – of eating and drinking – is not the only analogy we have of Eucharistic communion, even if it is irreplaceable. There is something that it cannot express, just as the analogy of the communion between the vine and the branch cannot: they are communion between things, not between people. They communicate, but without knowing it. I would like to insist on another analogy that can help us understand the nature of Eucharistic communion as a communion between people who know and want to be in communion.

The Letter to the Ephesians says that human marriage is a symbol of the union between Christ and the Church: "This is why a man will leave his father and mother and unite with his woman and the two will form one flesh. This mystery is great. I say this in reference to Christ and the Church!" (Eph 5: 31-33) The Eucharist – to use a bold but true image – is the consummation of

the marriage between Christ and the Church. Therefore Christian life without the Eucharist is marriage which has been ratified, but not consummated. At the moment of Communion the celebrant says: *“Blessed are those called to the supper of the Lamb” (Beati qui ad coenam Agni vocati sunt)*, and the book of Revelation, from which the expression is taken, says even more explicitly: *“Blessed are those called to the nuptial supper of the Lamb.” (Rev 19:9)*.

Now – again according to St Paul – the immediate consequence of marriage is that the body (that is, the whole person) of the husband becomes the wife’s and, vice versa, the wife’s body becomes the husband’s (cf. 1 Cor 7: 4). This means that the incorruptible and life-giving flesh of the Incarnate Word becomes “mine”, but also my flesh, my humanity, becomes Christ’s, is made his own by him. In the Eucharist we receive the body and blood of Christ, but Christ also “receives” our body and our blood! Jesus, writes Saint Hilary of Poitiers, “assumes the flesh of him who assumes his.” He says to us: “Take, this is my body”, but we too can say to him: “Take, this is my body”.

Let’s try to understand the consequences of all this. In his earthly life, Jesus did not have all possible and imaginable human experiences. To begin with, he was a man, not a woman: he did not experience the condition of half of humanity; he was not married, he did not experience what it means to be united for life with another creature, to have children, or, worse, to lose children; he died young, he did not know old age ...

But now, thanks to the Eucharist, he has all these experiences. He leaves the feminine condition in the woman, the sickness in the sick, the old age in the elderly, the precariousness in the emigrant, the terror in the bombed...

There is nothing in our life that does not belong to Christ. No one should say, “Ah, Jesus doesn’t know what it means to be married, to be a woman, to have lost a child, to be sick, to be old, to be a black person!” What Christ was unable to live “according to the flesh”, he lives and “experiences” now “according to the Spirit”, thanks to the spousal communion of the Mass. St. Elizabeth of the Trinity understood the profound reason for this when she wrote to her mother: “The bride belongs to the bridegroom. My Bridegroom has taken me. He wants me to be an added humanity for him “.

What an inexhaustible reason for amazement and consolation at the thought that our humanity becomes the humanity of Christ! But also, what responsibility from all of this! If my eyes have become the eyes of Christ, my mouth that of Christ, what reason not to allow my gaze to linger on lascivious images, my tongue not to speak against my neighbor, my body not to serve as an instrument of sin. “Shall I then take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute?” St. Paul wrote to the Corinthians (1 Cor 6:15).

And yet, that’s not all yet; the most beautiful part is missing. The bride’s body belongs to the bridegroom; true, but the body of the bridegroom belongs in his turn to the bride. From giving one must pass immediately, in communion, to receiving. Receive none other than Christ’s holiness! Where will that “marvelous exchange” (admirabile commercium) of which the liturgy

speaks of will actually take place in the life of the believer, if it is not carried out at the moment of communion?

There we have the opportunity to give Jesus our dirty rags and receive from him the “mantle of righteousness” (Is 61, 10). Indeed, it is written that “through the work of God he became wisdom, justice, sanctification and redemption for us” (cf. 1 Cor 1:30). What he has become “for us” is destined for us, belongs to us. “Since – writes Cabasilas – we belong to Christ more than to ourselves, having bought us back at a high price (1 Cor 6:20), inversely what belongs to Christ belongs to us more than if it were ours”. We only need to remember one thing: we belong to Christ by right, he belongs to us by grace!

It is a discovery capable of giving wings to our spiritual life. This is the daring blow of faith and we should pray to God not to allow us to die before we have achieved it.

Communion with the Trinity

Reflecting on the Eucharist is like seeing ever wider horizons opening up in front of oneself as one advances, as far as the eye can see. In fact, the Christological horizon of communion that we have contemplated up to now opens onto a Trinitarian horizon. In other words, through communion with Christ we enter into communion with the whole Trinity. In his “priestly prayer”, Jesus says to the Father: “May they be one as we are. I in them and you in me” (Jn 17:23). Those words: “I in them and you in me” mean that Jesus is in us and that the Father is in Jesus. Therefore, one cannot receive the Son without also receiving the Father with him. The word of Christ: “Whoever sees me sees the Father” (Jn 14: 9) also means “whoever receives me receives the Father”.

The ultimate reason for this is that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one and inseparable divine nature, they are “one”. In this regard, Saint Hilary of Poitiers writes: “We are united with Christ who is inseparable from the Father. While remaining in the Father, he remains united with us; thus we too arrive at unity with the Father. In fact, Christ is connaturally in the Father, insofar as he is generated by him; but, in a certain way, we too, through Christ, are connaturally in the Father. He lives by virtue of the Father and we live by virtue of his humanity”.

In the Eucharist there is a sacramental replica of what happened historically in the earthly life of Christ. At the moment of her earthly birth, it is the Holy Spirit who gives Christ to the world (Mary conceived by the work of the Holy Spirit!); at the moment of death, it is Christ who gives the world the Holy Spirit (by dying, he “sent forth the Spirit”). Similarly, in the Eucharist, at the moment of consecration it is the Holy Spirit who gives us Jesus (it is by the action of the Spirit that the bread is transformed into the body of Christ!), at the moment of communion it is Christ who, coming into us, he gives us the Holy Spirit.

Saint Irenaeus (eventually Doctor of the Church!) says that the Holy Spirit is “our very communion with Christ”. In communion Jesus comes to us as the one who gives the Spirit. Not as the one who one day, long ago, gave the Spirit, but as the one who now, having consummated his

bloodless sacrifice on the altar, again “emits the Spirit” (cf. Jn 19:30). All I have said about the Trinity and the Eucharist is visually summarized in Rublev’s icon of the three Angels around the altar. The whole Trinity gives us the Eucharist and is given to us in the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not only our daily Easter; it is also our daily Pentecost!

Communion with one another

From these dizzying heights, let us now return to earth and pass to the second dimension of Eucharistic communion: communion with the body of Christ which is the Church. Let us recall the words of the Apostle: “Since there is only one bread, we, although many, are one body: in fact, we all share in the one bread”.

Developing a thought already sketched in the Didache, St. Augustine sees an analogy in the way in which the two bodies of Christ are formed: the Eucharistic and the ecclesial. In the case of the Eucharist, we have the wheat first scattered on the hills, which threshed, ground, mixed in water and cooked over the fire becomes the bread that reaches the altar; in the case of the Church, we have the multitude of people who, united by evangelical preaching, ground by fasting and penance, kneaded in water in baptism and cooked in the fire of the Spirit, form the body which is the Church.

In this regard, the word of Christ immediately comes to meet us: “Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift.” (Mt 5, 23-24). If you go to receive communion, but you have offended a brother and you are not reconciled, you have a grudge, you resemble – St. Augustine said to the people – to a person who sees a friend arriving whom he has not seen for years. He runs to meet him, gets up on tiptoe to kiss him on the forehead... But in doing this he doesn’t notice that he’s stepping on his feet with nailed boots. The brothers and sisters are the feet of Jesus who still walks the earth.

Communion with the Poor

This is especially true with regard to the poor, the afflicted, the marginalized. He who said of the bread: “This is my body”, also said it of the poor. He said it when, speaking of what was done for the hungry, the thirsty, the prisoner and the naked, he solemnly declared: “You did it to me!”. This is like saying: “I was the hungry, I was the thirsty, I was the stranger, the sick, the prisoner” (cf. Mt 25, 35 ff.). I have remembered other times the moment when this truth almost exploded inside me. I was on a mission in a very poor country. Crossing the streets of the capital I saw everywhere children covered by a few dirty rags, running after the garbage trucks to look for something to eat. At a certain moment it was as if Jesus was saying to me: “Look carefully: that is my body!”. It was breathtaking.

The sister of the great philosopher Blaise Pascal relates this fact of his brother. In his last illness, he was unable to retain anything of what he ate and for this reason they did not allow him to receive the viaticum that he insistently asked for. Then he said: “If you cannot give me the

Eucharist, at least let a poor person into my room, so that if I can't communicate with the Head, I want to at least communicate with his body “.

The only impediment to receiving communion that St. Paul explicitly names is the fact that, in the assembly, “one is hungry and another is drunk”: “When you meet in one place, then, it is not to eat the Lord's supper, for in eating, each one goes ahead with his own supper, and one goes hungry while another gets drunk.”(1 Cor 11: 20-21). Saying “this is not eating the Lord's Supper” is like saying: yours is no longer a true Eucharist! It is a strong statement, even from a theological point of view, to which we perhaps do not pay enough attention.

Nowadays, the situation in which one is hungry and another bursts with food is no longer a local problem, but a global one. There can be nothing in common between the Lord's supper and the rich man's lunch, where the master feasts lavishly, ignoring the poor Lazarus outside the door (cf. Lk 16:19 ff.). The concern to share what one has with those in need, near and far, must be an integral part of our Eucharistic life.

There is no one who, willingly, cannot, during the week, perform one of those gestures of which Jesus says: “You did it to me”. Sharing does not simply mean “giving something”: bread, clothing, hospitality; it also means visiting someone: a prisoner, a sick person, an elderly person alone. It is not only giving of one's money, but also of one's time. The poor and the suffering need solidarity and love, no less than bread and clothing, especially in this time of isolation imposed by the pandemic.

Jesus said: “For you always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me” (Mt 26:11). This is also true in the sense that we cannot always receive the body of Christ in the Eucharist and even when we do, it only lasts a few minutes, while we can always receive it in the poor. There are no limits here, it just requires that we want it. We always have the poor at hand. Whenever we meet someone who suffers, especially if we are dealing with certain extreme forms of suffering, if we are attentive, we will hear, with the ears of faith, the word of Christ: “This is my body!”.

I conclude with a little story that I read somewhere. A man sees a malnourished girl, barefoot and shivering with cold, and almost angrily shouts to God: “Oh God, why don't you do something for that little girl?”. God replies: “Of course I did something for that little girl: I made you!

1. See Augustine, Confessions, VII, 10.

2. Leo the Great, Sermo 12 on the Passion, 7 (CCL 138A, p. 388).

3. Hilaire of Poitiers, De Trinitate, 8, 16 (PL 10, 248): “Eius tantum in se adsumptam habens carnem, qui suam sumpsit”.

4. Elisabeth of the Trinity, Letter 261, to her mother

5. N. Cabasilas, Vita in Christo, IV, 6 (PG 150, 613)

6. Hilaire of Poitiers, De Trinitate, VIII, 13-16 (PL 10, 246 ss).

7. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses*, III, 24, 1.
8. Augustine, *Sermo Denis 6* (PL 46, 834 f).
9. See. Augustine, *On the First Letter of John*, 10,8.
10. Life of Pascal, in B. Pascal, *Oeuvres complètes*, Parigi 1954, pp. 3 f.