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**FOURTH Sermon, Lent 2022**

***The Real Presence of christ***

***in the Eucharist***

**Friday APRIL 1st, 2022**

After our mystagogical catecheses on the three main parts of the Mass – the Liturgy of the Word, Consecration and Holy Communion – we shall reflect today on the Eucharist as the real presence of the risen Christ in the Church.

How can we deal with such a deep and incomprehensible mystery? Memories of the numerous theories and discussions on it, the dissensions between Catholics and Protestants, between the Latin and Orthodox Churches, which filled our theology books at one time, assail us. All of which makes it seem impossible to add anything to this mystery that might edify our faith and warm our hearts, without inevitably slipping into interdenominational polemics.

And yet this is the wonder being worked by the Holy Spirit today among all Christians. He is prompting us to admit to what extent our Eucharistic disputes were based on the human presumption that this mystery could be enclosed in a theory, or even in a word, and on the will to prevail over our adversaries. He is prompting us to repent for having reduced the supreme pledge of love and unity left to us by Our Lord to our favorite topic of discussion.
The way to Eucharistic ecumenism is the way to mutual recognition, the Christian way of agape, or sharing. We are not asked to ignore the real differences that exist or to break faith with any point of authentic Catholic doctrine. It is a question of bringing together the positive aspects and authentic values in every tradition so as to form a “mass” of common truths that will gradually lead us to unity.

It is unbelievable how some Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant points of view on the real presence appear to be so divergent and destructive whenever they are seen in contrast or as alternatives, and how they appear wonderfully convergent when they are carefully brought together. We must therefore set about making a synthesis. We must, as it were, sift the great Christian traditions to take out what is not good and, as St. Paul exhorts us, to “hold fast what is good” (cf. 1 Thess 5:21).

**The Catholic tradition: a real but hidden presence**

In this spirit, let us now take a close look at the three main Eucharistic traditions — Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant — to be edified by the treasures they contain and unite them in the common treasure of the Church. As a result we shall find that our understanding of the mystery of the real presence is richer and more vivid.

In Catholic theology and liturgy, the consecration is the indisputable heart of the Eucharist, from which we have Christ’s real presence. At the consecration, Jesus himself acts and speaks. St. Ambrose wrote:

The bread is bread before the sacramental words are pronounced. . . Which words make the consecration effective and whose words are they? They belong to the Lord Jesus! Everything said before that moment is said by the priest who praises God, prays for the people, for the king and others. But when it is time for the vener¬able sacrament to be effected, the priest no longer uses his own words, but Christ’s. Therefore, it is the words that work (conficit) the sacrament. . . . See how efficacious (operatorius) are Christ’s words. The body of Christ was not present before the consecration but after it the body of Christ is present. For he spoke and it came to be, he commanded and it stood forth (cf. Ps 33:9).

From the Western Catholic viewpoint we can talk of a Christological realism. “Christological” because attention is centered on Christ seen both in his historical and incarnate state and as the Risen One. Christ is both the object and subject of the Eucharist, and that is to say, he is fulfilled in the Eucharist and he fulfills the Eucharist. “Realism” because Jesus is not seen as present on the altar simply in a sign or symbol but in truth and in his reality. This Christological realism is clear, for example, in the hymn “Ave Verum,” com¬posed for the elevation of the Host. It says:

Hail to thee! true body, sprung From the Virgin Mary’s womb!
The same that on the cross was hung,
And bore for man the bitter doom.
Thou whose side was pierced and flow’d
Both with water and with blood. . . .

Later on, the Council of Trent gave a more precise explanation of this approach to the real presence. Three adverbs were used: *vere, realiter, substantialiter*. Jesus is truly present and not simply through image or form, he is really present, and not only subjectively through the faith of believers; he is substantially pres¬ent, that is, in his profound reality, which cannot be seen by the senses, and not in the appearances which remain that of bread and wine.

It is true that the risk of falling into a “crude” or exaggerated realism existed. The remedy to this risk is to be found in tradition itself. St. Augustine made it clear, once and for all, that the presence of Jesus in the Eu¬charist is “in the sacrament.” In other words, it is a sacramental and not a physical presence, mediated by signs, and precisely, by bread and wine. However, in this case the sign does not exclude the reality but makes it present to us, in the only way in which the risen Christ, living “in the Spirit,” can be present to us as long as we are on this earth.

Another great master of Western Eucharistic spirituality, St. Thomas Aquinas, says the same thing when he talks about Christ’s presence “in substance” under the species of bread and wine. In fact, to say that Jesus is substantially present in the Eucharist, is to say that he is present in his true reality which nourishes us only through faith. In the hymn *Adoro te devote*, attributed to the same St. Thomas, we sing:

Sight, touch, and taste in thee are each deceived;
The ear alone most safely is believed.

Jesus is therefore present in the Eucharist in a totally unique way. No single word can suitably describe this presence, not even the adjective “real.” The word real is derived from res (thing) and means, as a thing or an object. But Jesus is not present in the Eucharist as a “thing” or an object, but as a person. If we really want to name this presence, it would be better to simply say “Eucharistic” presence, because it occurs only in the Eucharist.

**The Orthodox Tradition: the action of the Holy Spirit.**

The Western theology is very rich but it is not, nor could it be, exhaustive. In the past, at least, the importance due to the Holy Spirit and essential to an understanding of the Eucharist was neglected. And so we turn to the East to see what the Orthodox tradition has to offer us. However, our attitude today is different; we are no longer worried about the differences but grateful for what is offered to help complete our own views.

In fact, the Orthodox tradition has always given great importance to the action of the Holy Spirit in Eucharistic celebration. Since Vatican Council II, this sharing has already shown results. Up to then, the Roman Canon of the Mass only mentioned the Holy Spirit incidentally in the final doxology: “Through him, with him, in him … in the unity of the Holy Spirit . . . .” Now, instead, all the new canons have a double invocation to the Holy Spirit: one on the gifts before the consecration and another on the Church after the consecration.

Oriental liturgies have always attributed the actual real presence of Christ on the altar to the particular action of the Holy Spirit. In the “anaphora of St. James,” in use in the Antiochian Church, the Holy Spirit is invoked with these words:

Send forth upon us and upon these gifts, your most Holy Spirit, Lord and giver of life, who reigns with you, God the Father, and with your only Son. He reigns con- substantially and co-eternally; he spoke through the law and the prophets and the New Testament; he descended in the form of a dove upon our Lord Jesus Christ in the river Jordan, he descended upon the Apostles on the day of Pentecost, in the form of tongues of fire. Send, O Lord, your thrice Holy Spirit upon us and upon these gifts, so that by his holy, gracious and glorious coming, he may sanctify this bread and make it into the sa¬cred Body of Christ (Amen), and sanctify this chalice and make it into the precious Blood of Christ (Amen).

This is much more than a simple addition to the invocation to the Holy Spirit. It is a wide-ranging and penetrating look at the history of salvation that opens a new dimension on the Eucharistic mystery. Starting with the words of the Nicene Constantinople Creed which define the Holy Spirit as “Lord and giver of life . . . who spoke through the prophets,” the perspective then widens to outline a real “history” of the action of the Holy Spirit.

The Eucharist brings this series of wonderful events to fulfillment. The Holy Spirit, who at Easter

bursts into the sepulcher, touches Christ s Body and gives him life again, repeats this wonder in the Eucharist. He comes upon the dead elements of bread and wine and gives them life; he makes them into the Body and Blood of the Redeemer. Truly, as Jesus himself says of the Eucharist, “it is the Spirit that gives life” (John 6:63). Theodore of Mopsuestia, a master of Eastern Eucharistic tra¬dition, wrote:

By virtue of the liturgical action, it is as if Our Lord were risen from the dead and pours his grace on all of us, through the Holy Spirit. . . . When the priest declares that the bread and wine are the Body and Blood of Christ, he affirms that this has come about through the Holy Spirit. It is the same as what happened to Christ’s natural body when it received the Holy Spirit and his unction. At the moment the Holy Spirit comes, we believe that the bread and wine receive a special unction of grace. And from then on we believe they are the Body and Blood of Christ, immortal, incorruptible, impassible and immutable by nature, like the Body of Christ at the resurrection.
However, we must not lose sight of one fact which shows that also the Catholic tradition has something to offer to the Orthodox brothers. The Holy Spirit does not act independently of Jesus; he acts within his words. Jesus says of the Spirit: “He will not speak on his own author-ity, but whatever he hears he will speak. … He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you” (John 16:13-14). That is why we must not separate the words of Jesus (“This is my Body”) from the epiclesis (“May the Holy Spirit make this bread into the Body of Christ”).

The call to unity, for both Catholic and Orthodox faithful, springs from the very heart of the Eucharistic mystery. Even if, for obvious reasons, the memorial of the institution and the invocation to the Holy Spirit take place at two distinct moments (mortals cannot express the mystery at just one instant), their action is, nevertheless, simultaneous. Its effectiveness undoubtedly comes from the Spirit (and not from the priest or the Church), but it works within and through Christ’s words.

I have said that the effectiveness that makes Jesus present on the altar does not spring from the Church but neither does it take place without the Church. The Church is the living channel through which and with which the Holy Spirit acts. It is the same for the coming of Jesus on the altar as it will be for the final coming in glory: The Spirit and the Bride (the Church) say to Jesus: Come! (cf. Rev 22:17). And he comes.

**Protestant spirituality: the importance of faith.**

The Roman tradition highlights “who” is present in the Eucharist, Christ; the Orthodox tradition highlights “by whom” this presence is effected, the Holy Spirit; Protestant theology highlights “on whom” this presence is effective; in other words, the conditions that make the sacrament really effective in those that receive it. The conditions are many but they can be summed up under one heading: faith.

Let us not concern ourselves immediately and exclusively with the negative aspects which have been criticized at certain times in the Protestant principle that the sacraments are only “signs of faith.” Let us forget misunderstandings and controversies and we shall find that this energetic recall to faith is beneficial to saving the sacrament and preventing it from becoming just another “good work,” or something that works mechanically or magically as it were, almost without human knowledge. In the end, it is a question of discovering the profound meaning of the exclamation that re-echoes in the liturgy at the end of the consecration and which was once placed at the center of the consecration formula, as if to emphasize that faith is intrinsic to the mystery: “Mysterium fidei,” mystery of faith!

Faith doesn’t “make” the sacrament but it “receives” it. Only Christ’s words repeated by the Church and rendered effective by the Holy Spirit “make” the sacrament. But what would a sacrament “made” and not received avail? Concerning the incarnation, men like Origen, St. Augustine and St. Bernard said: “What advantage is it to me that Christ was born of Mary in Bethlehem if he is not born through faith in my heart too?” We can say the same of the Eucharist; what advantage is it to me that Christ is really present on the altar, if to me he is not present? Faith was necessary even when Jesus was physically present on this earth; otherwise — as he himself repeated many times in the gospel — his presence was of no use, if not to condemn: “Woe to you Chorazin, woe to you Capernaum!” (Matt 11:21f.).

Faith is essential to make the presence of Jesus in the Eucharist not just “real” but “personal,” a one-to-one presence. “Being there” is one thing, “being present” another. Presence presup-poses someone present to someone else; it presupposes reciprocal communication, an exchange between two free persons who are aware of and open to each other. There is much more involved, therefore, than simply staying in a given place.

Such a subjective and existential dimension of the Eucharistic presence does not annul the objective presence that precedes human faith, it actually presupposes it and gives it value. Luther, who raised the role of faith to such heights, was also one of the staunchest defenders of the doctrine of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist. In the course of a debate on the subject with other Reformers, he stated:

I cannot interpret the words ‘This is my Body’ differently from how they sound. It is up to others, therefore, to prove that, where the words ‘This is my Body’ are said, Christ’s Body is not present. I do not want to hear explanations based on reason. In front of such clear words, there can be no question; I refuse logical reasoning and plain common sense. I totally refuse practical demonstrations and analytical argumentation. God is above all kinds of mathematical certainties and we must adore the Word of God in wonder.

This quick look at the wealth of riches contained in the various Christian traditions is sufficient to see the immense gift that unfolds for the Church when the various Christian denominations accept to unite their spiritual assets, as the first Christians did, who “had all things in common” (Acts 2:44). This is the true agape, encompassing the whole Church, which the Lord makes us want to see realized, for the glory of our common Father and the good of his Church.

**The sentiment of the presence**

We have now terminated our little Eucharistic pilgrimage through the different Christian denominations. We have collected a few baskets of crumbs from the big multiplication of bread in the Church. But we cannot conclude here our reflections on the mystery of the real presence. It would be like collecting the crumbs and not eating them. Faith in the real presence is a wonderful thing, but it is not enough; at least, faith taken in a certain way is not enough. It is not enough to have an exact and theologically perfect idea of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharist. Many theologians know all about the mystery, yet they do not know the real presence. In biblical terms you “know” something only when you have experienced it. To know fire, you would have to have been, at least once, so close to a flame to risk being burnt.

St. Gregory of Nyssa left us an amazingly profound expression of this higher kind of faith; he speaks of a “sentiment of the presence (aesthesis parousias) . This happens when a person is seized by God’s presence and has a certain perception (not just an idea) that God is there. It is not a natural perception; it is the fruit of grace. There is a strong analogy between this and what happened when, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared to someone. It was something sudden that unexpectedly and absolutely changed the person’s state of mind.

One day after the resurrection the apostles were fishing in the lake; a man stood on the beach. He started talking from a distance: “Children, have you any fish?” and they answered him, “No!” But then, in a flash of understanding, John cried out: “It is the Lord!” Everything is different after this recognition and everybody hurries ashore (cf. John 21:4f.). The same thing happened, even if in a quieter way, to the disciples of Emmaus. Jesus was walking with them, “but their eyes were kept from recognizing him”; finally, when he broke the bread, “their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (Luke 24:13ff.). The same thing happens when a Christian, who has received Jesus in the Eucharist numerous times, one day, finally, through grace, “recognizes” him.

From faith and the “sentiment” of the real presence, reverence must spring spontaneously, and, indeed, a sense of tenderness for Jesus in the Sacrament. This is such a delicate and personal sentiment that words might even destroy it. St. Francis of Assisi has something to tell us at this point. His heart overflowed with the sentiments of reverence and tenderness. He was overcome with pity before Jesus in the Sacrament, just as he was moved before the Child in Bethlehem. He saw him so helpless, so entrusted to humanity, so humble. In his Letter to all the Friars he writes words of fire that we want to hear now as addressed to us at the end of our meditation on the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist:

Consider your dignity, brothers, priests, and be holy because He Himself is holy… It is a great misery and a deplorable weakness when you have Him thus present to care for anything else in the whole world. Let the entire man be seized with fear; let the whole world tremble; let heaven exult when Christ, the Son of the Living God, is on the altar in the hands of the priest. O admirable height and stupendous condescension! O humble sublimity! O sublime humility! that the Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under a morsel of bread. Consider, brothers, the humility of God and “pour out your hearts before Him, and be ye humbled that ye may be exalted by Him. Do not therefore keep back anything for yourselves that He may receive you entirely who gives Himself up entirely to you.

1.De sacramentis, IV, 14-16 (PL 16, 439 ss).
2.Cf THOMAS AQUINAS, Summa theologiae III, q. 75, a. 4.
3.THEODORUS OF MOPSUESTIA, Catechetical homilies, XVI, 11 s.
4.Cf Acts of the colloquy of Marburg of 1529 (Weimar Ed., 30, 3, p. 110 ss).
5.GREGORY OF NYSSA, On the Canticle, XI, 5, 2 (PG 44, 1001) .