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Combat, Closeness, Mission (13): Eucharistic Heart

Frequenting the Eucharist is our living response to his promise to remain with us: if He is with me always, I want to be with Him, too.

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Ubi amor ibi oculus: “Where there is love, there is power to see.”^[1] Love always seeks the presence of the beloved; it hardly has eyes for anyone else. Yet sometimes

separation and absence become inevitable. Powerless, we resign ourselves to waiting and longing, and we cling to anything that might evoke the other's presence or remind us of the love we've experienced. This nostalgia has inspired countless songs and poems throughout history: enduring attempts to overcome loneliness.

I will be with you always

Every Sunday, Christians profess their faith in eternal life and the resurrection of the body. For us, the memory and sorrow caused by the absence of a loved one cannot have the last word. "Do not ever forget that after death you will be welcomed by Love itself. And in the love of God you will find as well all the noble loves which you had on earth."^[2] Still, as we journey through this "valley of tears," the ache of

absence never fades from the human heart.

Saint Josemaría would often refer to these movements of the heart – this natural resistance to parting – as a way to illuminate the mystery of the Eucharist. The astonishing and magnificent reality that God Himself chose to remain in a piece of bread can be understood when we think of “the human experience of two people who love each other, and yet are forced to part. They would like to stay together forever, but duty – in one form or another – forces them to separate. They are unable to fulfil their desire of remaining close to each other, so man's love – which, great as it may be, is limited – seeks a symbolic gesture. People who make their farewells exchange gifts or perhaps a photograph with a dedication so ardent that it seems almost enough to burn that piece of paper. They can do no more, because

a creature's power is not so great as its desire. What we cannot do, our Lord is able to do. Jesus Christ, perfect God and perfect man, leaves us, not a symbol, but a reality. He himself stays with us. He will go to the Father, but he will also remain among men. He will leave us, not simply a gift that will make us remember him, not an image that becomes blurred with time, like a photograph that soon fades and yellows, and has no meaning except for those who were contemporaries. Under the appearances of bread and wine, he is really present, with his body and blood, with his soul and divinity.”^[3] —

A short book on the sorrow of separation caused by death, written when the author's grief was still fresh and his pain acute, powerfully conveys our human helplessness. Having lost his wife, the author refuses to settle for a photo or mere

memento of her presence: “I want H.,” he writes, “not something that is like her.”^[4] For love, memory is not enough. The human heart longs for more, though its power is limited. But *nothing is impossible for God* (Lk 1:37), and Jesus’ words at the end of his earthly life ring true: *I am with you always, to the end of the age* (Mt 28:20). Through the power of the Spirit, He remains in history and in our personal lives. He departs, and yet remains, with a “new closeness,”^[5] invisible, yet deeper and more encompassing.

The Eucharist is not merely a memory or the hope of a future reunion; it is a real presence and closeness. Jesus of Nazareth is present in the Mass, the same Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, who walked the lands of Galilee, and who died on the Cross for us. This reality gives light to the whole Christian life, which is nothing other than Christ’s

life in us (cf. *Gal* 2:20): “To follow Christ — that is the secret. We must accompany him so closely that we come to live with him, like the first Twelve did; so closely, that we become identified with him.”^[6] —

Going to the Eucharist every day arises from the desire to remain close to Him. It is our living response to his promise to remain with us: if He is with me *always*, I want to be with Him, too. When we know about Jesus’ burning desire to share his Passover with us (cf. *Lk* 22:15), his constant prayer, his suffering, his love for each of us... we do not want to leave Him alone. If we can, we go to Him every day. It is not enough to know that millions of others are waiting for Him at the foot of the altar; we know that Jesus would notice if we, when we could choose to be with Him, went about our own business instead.

Saint Manuel González, a friend of Saint Josemaría and a great lover of the Eucharist, wrote these words near the end of his life: “The Mass is Jesus gathering all the fragrance of his good deeds and good words into his Heart; all the echoes of his heart (...), all his sweat and tears in seeking out sinners, all the bitterness of affection repaid with ingratitude, of generosity met with misunderstanding, envy, and malice... That bitterness was with Him from Bethlehem to Calvary, and, when his Heart was full of all this, He took upon his shoulders a heavy cross and allowed Himself to be nailed to it, letting a lance pierce Him even after death, like a rose that opens in spring...”^[7] —

In the Eucharist, the living person of the Lord comes to meet us, the Love of all loves, the origin and goal of our existence and of all creation (cf. *Col* 1:16–19). This is why the Holy Mass is

“the centre and root of your interior life.”^[8] — It is the *centre* because my life revolves around the glorious Cross: work and rest, sorrow and joy, love received and given... At Mass, I share my feelings, desires, and difficulties with Him: I share everything, and with Jesus, I offer it all to the Father. The Holy Mass is also the *root* because it places me in contact with the Author of grace, with the very life of God. *No one comes to the Father except through me (Jn 14:6)*. Without the Eucharist, no human work could be imbued with “a lively awareness of eternity.”^[9] — Only to the extent that I let Jesus into the boat of my life can I “work as He worked and love as He loved.”^[10] —

The Holy Mass is something immense, yet it usually appears (apart from a few more solemn or large-scale celebrations) as something quiet, simple, familiar; like the Last Supper, the Risen Jesus’

encounters with the apostles, or the breaking of bread among the first Christians. Yet we are surrounded by angels and we touch heaven. We touch God Himself. We do not see it, but faith tells us that it is so.^[11] For our part, we bring our attention, wonder, and desire for God to draw us into his mystery. And He does the rest.

I am the living Bread

It happened in Abitinae, in Africa, during the early centuries of the Church's history. A group of forty-nine Christians was condemned to death for defying the imperial ban on celebrating the Eucharist. When the judge asked why they were risking their lives, one of them responded simply, *sine dominico non possumus* ("because without Sunday," without the Eucharist, "we cannot live").^[12] These men and women's faith in Jesus' real presence

is striking. They were willing to risk their lives because they believed with all their heart that Jesus Christ, the Son of God made flesh, was truly present in what appeared to be nothing more than a piece of bread. They risked their lives because, for them, it was a matter of life or death: without Jesus, without receiving Communion, their lives lost all meaning; their hearts were plunged once more into a world without light, salvation, or a love stronger than death. The faith of these martyrs challenges us: do we too believe that we cannot live without the Eucharist? Do we hunger for the word of God, for receiving Him within us? What are we willing to do in order to be with Him more often?

Each Mass is an encounter with the risen Jesus, an opportunity to receive Him in our weakness, but also with the purity, humility, and devotion of the saints. The line between fervour

and routine in daily Communion is at once thin and very broad. That's why we need to prepare ourselves, attending to the different layers of our being, from our bodily senses (especially sight and hearing) to our inner faculties, like imagination and memory. Interior silence is indispensable if we want to savour the beauty of Christ. It is hard for the word of God to resound in a heart full of noise.

Just as the seed bears fruit when it falls on good soil (cf. *Mt* 13:1–23), Communion becomes a source of life for us to the extent that our hearts, purified by humility and sacrifice, become generous soil ready to receive the Lord: “We should receive Our Lord in the Eucharist as we would prepare to receive the great ones of the earth, or even better: with decorations, with lights, with new clothes... And if you ask me what sort of cleanliness I mean, what

decorations and what lights you should bring, I will answer you: cleanliness in each one of your senses, decoration in each of your powers, light in all your soul.”^[13] —

Saint Augustine, pondering the greatness of the gift of receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, heard the Lord tell him: “You will not transform me into yourself, as happens with bodily food, but you will be transformed into me.”^[14] —

Again, with Saint Paul: *It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me* (Gal 2:20). In the few minutes during which the sacramental species remain in our bodies, we become one with Him; we are “Christified.” He comes into our hearts, and we enter into his. These two movements form a single act of love. God becomes bread; He makes Himself small in order to enter into the fabric of our daily lives: He in me, and I in Him (cf. Jn 6:56). This opens up

immense horizons before us. Entering his Heart means entering into all that is his, opening ourselves to his logic, and discovering that his Heart is wounded for me. At the same time, allowing Jesus to enter into my life and the things that belong to me means allowing his love to disarm me, burn away my wretchedness, and transfigure my dreams.

Hidden God

God's love always comes first; it takes the initiative, as Pope Francis says.^[15] We exist because we are loved with an everlasting love (cf. *Jer* 31:3), and that love embraces us, goes before us, and overwhelms us (cf. *Pss* 139:5–6). The Father often reminds us of this: “It fills us with security to know that God's infinite Love is to be found not only at the origin of our existence but also at every moment in our lives. For God is closer to us than we

are to ourselves.”^[16] With the same conviction, Saint Josemaría wrote: “Go perseveringly to the Tabernacle, either bodily or in your heart, so as to feel safe and calm: but also to feel loved... and to love!”^[17]

Jesus wanted Christians down through the centuries to discover the value of his presence among us after the celebration of the Eucharist. Every church with a tabernacle radiates the warmth of a home, the heartbeat of a heart where He is waiting for us. We go there to love and to feel loved, to ask and to give thanks, to adore and to make reparation. “My children,” Saint Josemaría once said, “the Lord is always in the Tabernacle. It may seem like He doesn’t hear us, but He listens with loving care, with the tenderness of a father and a mother, hiding both his Divinity and his Humanity. The Lord speaks when He wishes to, when we least expect it,

and He speaks directly. Then He falls silent, because He wants us to respond with faith and loyalty.”^[18] —

Experiencing God’s silence in the Tabernacle is part of the path that leads to a deep life of prayer. That silence can, at times, be painful, but it saves us from the temptation to make God in our own image, as a kind of idol that simply meets our expectations and can therefore be controlled. The Lord hides Himself so that we will seek Him, so that He can respect our freedom and we can respect his, so that we may love Him as free children, and allow Him to be God, our God.

In a Christmas Eve homily in Germany, Joseph Ratzinger turned to a beautiful tale to explain this logic of the hidden God’s love. “Jeshiel, a little boy, rushed into the room of his grandfather, the famous Rabbi Baruch, crying. Tears were streaming

down his cheeks as he poured out his heart: ‘My friend has abandoned me. He is very unfair and very mean to me.’ ‘Come now,’ said the rabbi. ‘Can you explain a little more?’ ‘Yes,’ the boy replied. ‘We were playing hide-and-seek, and I hid so well that he couldn’t find me. But then, he simply gave up and went home. Isn’t that mean?’ Then the rabbi stroked his grandson’s cheeks, and his own eyes filled with tears. He said: ‘Yes, that’s certainly unkind. You see, with God it’s just the same. He hides... And we don’t look for him.’”^[19]

But God looks for us: He never stops. And He always finds ways to awaken in us the desire to search for Him, even in times of darkness: “If God allows you to experience his presence in a tangible way... fine. But don’t go seeking it. Ask him for clarity of mind, ask for faith, which in the midst of God’s silences fills us with hope, and with hope enables us

to live in love.”^[20] Love and hope can be born in God’s silence, because when a soul in love loses its beloved, it searches and longs for him. Thus, with the intensity of a search sustained by desire for union, our gaze widens and becomes capable of finding him.

Mary Magdalene embodies this search. On Sunday, before dawn, she sets out toward the Lord’s tomb. There is no light; it is still night. But she searches, longs, and walks. She does not yet have Jesus, but she is not going to stop until she finds Him. Not even the presence of an angel is enough to distract her heart’s movement. Mary has lost Jesus, but she seeks Him with all her strength, with tears that open and water the soil of her soul until the flower of the vision of the Risen One blossoms. The Bride in the Song of Songs seeks the same way: *At night on my bed I sought the one my heart loves; I*

sought him, but did not find him. I will get up and go about the city, through its streets and squares; I will seek the one my heart loves. So I looked for him, but did not find him. The watchmen found me as they made their rounds in the city. I asked them, 'Have you seen the one my heart loves?' (Song 3:1–3).

This search sets us on the path toward contemplation. “Seek him then, hungrily; seek him within yourselves with all your strength. If you act with determination, I am ready to guarantee that you have already found him, and have begun to get to know him and to love him, and to hold your conversation in heaven.”

“Seek him with hunger, seek him within yourself with all your strength. If you do so with this determination, I dare say you have already found him, and have begun

to know and love him, and to have your conversation in heaven.”^[21] To seek is already to love. This is Mary Magdalene’s secret, and the secret of every man or woman who, in the night of the world and of their own soul, seeks Christ sincerely. But how should we seek? Saint Augustine, echoing the hearts of many saints, teaches us to look with desire, a *free* act that rises from the depths of the soul: “The whole life of a good Christian is a holy desire. Now what you long for, you do not yet see: howbeit by longing, you are made capable, so that when that has come which you may see, you shall be filled (...). God, by deferring our hope, stretches our desire; by the desiring, stretches the mind; by stretching, makes it more capacious. Let us desire therefore, my brethren, for we shall be filled.”^[22]

When we come to adore Jesus in the Tabernacle in this spirit, our hearts

will expand and begin to feel the need for his presence, the need to be with Him and speak to Him, more and more deeply. Then “A thirst for God is born in us, a longing to understand his tears, to see his smile, his face... ‘Like the deer that seeks for running waters, so my heart yearns for thee, my God!’ The soul goes forward immersed in God, divinised: the Christian becomes a thirsty traveller who opens his mouth to the waters of the fountain.”^[23]

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^[1] Richard of Saint Victor, *The Book of the Patriarchs*, XIII.

^[2] Saint Josemaría, *Friends of God*, no. 221.

^[3] Saint Josemaría, *Christ is Passing By*, no. 83.

[4] C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, San Francisco, Harper Collins, 2001, chapter IV.

[5] J. Ratzinger, “El comienzo de una nueva cercanía,” in *El resplandor de Dios en nuestro tiempo*, Barcelona: Herder, 2008, pg. 185 (our translation).

[6] *Friends of God*, no. 299.

[7] Saint Manuel González, *¡Si viviéramos nuestras Misas!*, Palencia, El Granito de Arena, 1941, pg. 32-33 (our translation).

[8] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 69.

[9] *Friends of God*, no. 239.

[10] *Christ is passing By*, no. 154.

[11] “Sight, touch, taste fail with regard to thee, but only by hearing does one believe surely” (Adoro Te Devote).

[12] Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Homily on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, 29-V-2005.

[13] *The Forge*, no. 834.

[14] Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 7, 10, 16.

[15] Cf. Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium*, no. 24.

[16] F. Ocáriz, Pastoral letter, 9-I-2018, no. 4.

[17] *The Forge*, no. 837.

[18] Saint Josemaría, Oral preaching, *Crónica* 1972, pg. 759 (AGP, biblioteca, P01).

[19] J. Ratzinger, Christmas Eve homily, cathedral of our Lady, Munich, 24-XII-1980.

[20] Saint Josemaría, Oral preaching, *Crónica* 1972, pg. 759 (AGP, biblioteca, P01).

^[21] *Friends of God*, no. 300.

^[22] Saint Augustine, Commentary on the First Letter of Saint John, 4, 6.

^[23] *Friends of God*, no. 310. Cf. Ps 42:2.

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