

The Eucharist, Mystery of Faith and Love

On 14 April 1960, Thursday of Holy Week, St Josemaría gave a beautiful homily about the Holy Eucharist which has since been published both singly and in the collection 'Christ is Passing By'. St Josemaría's reflections on the prayers of the Mass then in common use show the depth of his own love for the Eucharist. Here we present the full text of the homily.

07/04/2009

"Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end." The reader of this verse from St John's Gospel is brought to understand that a great event is about to take place. The introduction, full of tender affection, is similar to that which we find in St Luke: "I have earnestly desired," says our Lord, "to eat this Passover with you before I suffer."

Let us begin by asking the Holy Spirit, from this moment on, to give us the grace to understand every word and gesture of Christ. Because we want to live a supernatural life, because our Lord has shown his desire to give himself to us as

nourishment for our soul, and because we acknowledge that only he has "words of eternal life."

Faith makes us profess in the words of Peter that "we have come to believe and to know that you are the Christ, the Son of God." It is this faith, together with our devotion, that leads us to emulate the daring of John, to come close to Jesus and to rest on the breast of the Master, who loved those who were with him ardently, and who was to love them, as we have just read, to the end.

Any words we might use to explain the mystery of Holy Thursday are inadequate. But it is not hard to imagine the feelings of Jesus' heart on that evening, his last evening with his friends before the sacrifice of Calvary.

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.

The joy of Holy Thursday

How well we understand the song that Christians of all times have unceasingly sung to the sacred host: "Sing, my tongue, the mystery of the glorious body and of the precious blood, that the king of all nations, born of the generous womb of the Virgin, has offered for the redemption of the world." We must adore devoutly this God of ours, hidden in the Eucharist — it is Jesus himself, born of the Virgin Mary, who suffered and gave his life in the sacrifice of the cross; Jesus, from whose side, pierced by a lance, flowed water and blood.

This is the sacred banquet, in which we receive Christ himself. We renew

the memory of his passion, and through him the soul is brought to an intimate relationship with God and receives a promise of future glory. The liturgy of the Church has summarised, in a few words, the culminating points of the history of our Lord's love for us.

The God of our faith is not a distant being who contemplates indifferently the fate of men — their desires, their struggles, their sufferings. He is a Father who loves his children so much that he sends the Word, the Second Person of the most Blessed Trinity, so that by taking on the nature of man he may die to redeem us. He is the loving Father who now leads us gently to himself, through the action of the Holy Spirit who dwells in our hearts.

This is the source of the joy we feel on Holy Thursday — the realization that the creator has loved his

creatures to such an extent. Our Lord Jesus Christ, as though all the other proofs of his mercy were insufficient, institutes the Eucharist so that he can always be close to us. We can only understand up to a point that he does so because Love moves him, who needs nothing, not to want to be separated from us. The Blessed Trinity has fallen in love with man, raised to the level of grace and made "to God's image and likeness." God has redeemed him from sin — from the sin of Adam, inherited by all his descendants, as well as from his personal sins — and desires ardently to dwell in his soul: "If anyone love me, he will keep my word; and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our abode with him."

The Eucharist and the mystery of the Trinity

The Blessed Trinity's love for man is made permanent in a sublime way through the Eucharist. Many years ago, we all learned from our catechism that the Eucharist can be considered as a sacrifice and as a sacrament; and that the sacrament is present to us both in communion and as a treasure on the altar, in the tabernacle. The Church dedicates another feast to the eucharistic mystery — the feast of the body of Christ, Corpus Christi, present in all the tabernacles of the world. Today, on Holy Thursday, we can turn our attention to the holy Eucharist as our sacrifice and as our nourishment, in the holy Mass and in communion.

I was talking to you about the love of the Blessed Trinity for man. And where can we see this more clearly than in the Mass? The three divine Persons act together in the holy sacrifice of the altar. This is why I like to repeat the final words of the

collect, secret and postcommunion:
"Through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord," we pray to God the Father,
"who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. Amen."

In the Mass, our prayer to God the Father is constant. The priest represents the eternal high priest, Jesus Christ, who is, at the same time, the victim offered in this sacrifice. And the action of the Holy Spirit in the Mass is truly present, although in a mysterious manner. "By the power of the Holy Spirit," writes St John Damascene, "the transformation of the bread into the body of Christ takes place."

The action of the Holy Spirit is clearly expressed when the priest invokes the divine blessing on the offerings: "Come, Sanctifier, almighty and eternal God, and bless this sacrifice prepared in honour of your

holy name" — the holocaust that will give to the holy name of God the glory that is due. The sanctification we pray for is attributed to the Paraclete, who is sent to us by the Father and the Son. And we also recognize the active presence of the Holy Spirit in this sacrifice, as we say, shortly before communion: "Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the will of the Father, with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, by your death have brought life to the world..."

The three divine Persons are present in the sacrifice of the altar. By the will of the Father, with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, the Son offers himself in a redemptive sacrifice. We learn how to personalise our relationship with the most Blessed Trinity, one God in three Persons: three divine Persons in the unity of God's substance, in the unity of his love and of his sanctifying action.

Immediately after the Lavabo, the priest prays: "Receive, Holy Trinity, this offering that we make in memory of the passion, resurrection and ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ." And, at the end of the Mass, there is another prayer of homage to the Trinity of God: "*Placeat tibi, Sancta Trinitas, obsequium servitutis meae...* May the tribute of my service be pleasing to you, o Holy Trinity; and grant the sacrifice that I, who am unworthy, have offered to your majesty, may be acceptable to you; and that through your mercy it may bring forgiveness to me and to all those for whom I have offered it." The Mass is, I insist, an action of God, of the Trinity. It is not a merely human event. The priest who celebrates fulfils the desire of our Lord, lending his body and his voice to the divine action. He acts, not in his own name, but *in persona et in nomine Christi*: in the Person of Christ and in his name.

Because of the Blessed Trinity's love for man, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist brings all graces to the Church and to mankind. This is the sacrifice announced by the prophet Malachy: "From the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and a fragrant sacrifice and a pure offering is made to me in all places." It is the sacrifice of Christ, offered to the Father with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit — an offering of infinite value, which perpetuates the work of the redemption in us and surpasses the sacrifices of the old law.

Holy Mass in the Christian's life

The holy Mass brings us face to face with one of the central mysteries of our faith, because it is the gift of the Blessed Trinity to the Church. It is because of this that we can consider the Mass as the centre and the source of a Christian's spiritual life.

It is the aim of all the sacraments. The life of grace, into which we are brought by baptism, and which is increased and strengthened by confirmation, grows to its fullness in the Mass. "When we participate in the Eucharist," writes St Cyril of Jerusalem, "we are made spiritual by the divinizing action of the Holy Spirit, who not only makes us share in Christ's life, as in baptism, but makes us entirely Christ-like, incorporating us into the fullness of Christ Jesus."

This pouring out of the Holy Spirit unites us to Christ and makes us acknowledge that we are children of God. The Paraclete, who is Love, teaches us to saturate our life with the virtue of charity. Thus *consummati in unum*: "made one with Christ," we can be among men what the Eucharist is for us, in the words of St Augustine: "a sign of unity, a bond of love."

I will not surprise anyone if I say that some Christians have a very poor concept of the holy Mass. For them it is a purely external rite, if not a mere social convention. This is because our poor hearts are capable of treating the greatest gift of God to man as routine. In the Mass, in this Mass that we are now celebrating, the most Holy Trinity intervenes, I repeat, in a very special way. To correspond to such great love, we must give ourselves completely, in body and in soul. We hear God, we talk to him, we see him, we taste him. And when words are not enough, we sing, urging our tongue — *Pange, lingua!* — to proclaim to all mankind the greatness of the Lord.

To "live" the holy Mass means to pray continually, and to be convinced that, for each one of us, this is a personal meeting with God. We adore him, we praise him, we give thanks to him, we atone for our sins, we are

purified, we experience a unity with Christ and with all Christians.

We may have asked ourselves, at one time or another, how we can correspond to the greatness of God's love. We may have wanted to see a program for christian living clearly explained. The answer is easy, and it is within reach of all the faithful: to participate lovingly in the holy Mass, to learn to deepen our personal relationship with God in the sacrifice that summarises all that Christ asks of us.

Let me remind you of what you have seen on so many occasions: the succession of prayers and actions as they unfold before our eyes at Mass. As we follow them, step by step, our Lord may show us aspects of our lives in which each one of us must improve, vices we must conquer, and the kind of brotherly attitude that we

should develop with regard to all men.

The priest draws near to the altar of God, "of God who gives joy to our youth." The holy Mass begins with a song of joy, because God is here. It is the joy that is shown, together with love and gratitude, as the priest kisses the altar, symbol of Christ and reminder of the saints — a small surface, sanctified because this is where the sacrament of infinite worth is made present to us.

The Confiteor makes us aware of our unworthiness; not an abstract reminder of guilt, but the actual presence of our sins and weaknesses. This is why we repeat: *Kyrie, eleison, Christe, eleison*: Lord, have mercy, Christ, have mercy. If the forgiveness we need had to be won by our own merits, we would only be capable of a bitter sadness. But, because of God's goodness, forgiveness comes

from his mercy, and we praise him — Gloria!: "for you alone are the holy one, you alone are Lord, you alone, O Jesus Christ, are the most high, with the Holy Spirit in the glory of God the Father." We now listen to the word of Scripture, the epistle and the gospel — light from the Holy Spirit, who speaks through human voices so as to make our intellect come to know and contemplate, to strengthen our will and make our desire for action effective. And because we are one people, "gathered together in the unity of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," we recite the Creed, affirming the unity of our faith.

Then, the offering: the bread and wine of men. It is very little, but it is accompanied by prayer: "Lord God, we ask you to receive us and be pleased with the sacrifice we offer you with humble and contrite hearts: and that the sacrifice which today we

offer you, o God, our Lord, may be brought to your presence and be made acceptable." Again, a reminder of our smallness and of the desire to cleanse and purify all that is offered to God: "I will wash my hands... I have loved the beauty of your house..."

A moment ago, just before the Lavabo, we invoked the Holy Spirit, asking him to bless the sacrifice offered to his holy name. After washing his hands, the priest, in the name of all those present, prays to the Holy Trinity — *Suscipe, Sancta Trinitas* — to accept our offering in memory of the life of Christ and of his passion, resurrection and ascension; and in honour of Mary, ever Virgin, and of all the saints.

May this offering be effective for the salvation of all men — *Orate, fratres*, the priest invites the people to pray — because this sacrifice is yours and

mine, it is the sacrifice of the whole Church. Pray, brethren, although there may not be many present, although materially there may be only one person there, although the celebrant may find himself alone; because every Mass is a universal sacrifice, the redemption of every tribe and tongue and people and nation.

Through the communion of the saints, all Christians receive grace from every Mass that is celebrated, regardless of whether there is an attendance of thousands of persons, or whether it is only a boy with his mind on other things who is there to serve. In either case, heaven and earth join with the angels of the Lord to sing: *Sanctus, Sanctus, Sanctus...*

I adore and praise with the angels — it is not difficult, because I know that, as I celebrate the holy Mass, they surround me, adoring the Blessed

Trinity. And I know that in some way the Blessed Virgin is there, because of her intimate relationship with the most Blessed Trinity and because she is the Mother of Christ, of his flesh and blood — the Mother of Jesus Christ, perfect God and perfect man. Jesus was conceived in the womb of Mary most holy, not through the intervention of man, but by the power of the Holy Spirit alone. In his veins runs the blood of his Mother, the blood that is offered in the sacrifice of the redemption, on Calvary and in the Mass.

Thus we begin the canon, with the confidence of children of God, calling him our most loving Father: *clementissime*. We pray for the Church and for all those who are a part of the Church — the pope, our families, our friends and companions. And a Catholic, with his heart open to all men, will pray for all men, because no one can be

excluded from his love. We ask God to hear our prayers. We call on the memory of the glorious ever-Virgin Mary and of a handful of men who were among the first to follow Christ and to die for Him, and we recall our union with them.

Quam oblationem... the moment of the consecration draws near. Now, in the Mass, it is Christ who acts again, through the priest: "This is my body"... "This is the cup of my blood." Jesus is with us! The transubstantiation is a renewal of the miracle of God's infinite love. When that moment takes place again today, let us tell our Lord, without any need for words, that nothing will be able to separate us from him; that, as he puts himself into our hands, defenceless, under the fragile appearances of bread and wine, he has made us his willing slaves.

"Praesta meae menti de te vivere, et te illi semper dulce sapere: Make me live

always through you, and taste the sweetness of your love."

More prayers, because we human beings almost always feel the need to ask for things — prayers for our deceased brothers, for ourselves. We have brought all our weaknesses, our lack of faithfulness. The weight is heavy, but he wants to bear it for us and with us. The canon ends with another invocation to the Blessed Trinity: *Per Ipsum, et cum Ipso, et in Ipso...*: Through Christ, and with Christ, and in Christ, who is all our love, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honour and glory is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever.

Jesus is the way, the mediator. In him are all things; outside of him is nothing. In Christ, taught by him, we dare to call God our Father — he is the Almighty who created heaven and earth, and he is a loving Father who waits for us to come back to him

again and again, as the story of the prodigal son repeats itself in our lives.

Ecce, Agnus Dei... Domine, non sum dignus... We are going to receive our Lord. On this earth, when we receive an important person, we bring out the best — lights, music, formal dress. How should we prepare to receive Christ into our soul? Have we ever thought about how we would behave if we could only receive him once in a lifetime?

When I was a child, frequent communion was still not a widespread practice. I remember how people used to prepare to go to communion. Everything had to be just right, body and soul: the best clothes, hair well-combed — even physical cleanliness was important — maybe even a few drops of cologne... These were manifestations of love, full of finesse and

refinement, on the part of manly souls who knew how to repay Love with love.

With Christ in our soul, we end the holy Mass. The blessing of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit accompanies us all day long, as we go about our simple, normal task of making holy all honest human activity.

As you attend Mass, you will learn to deepen your friendship with each one of the three divine Persons: the Father who begets the Son; the Son, begotten by the Father; the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son. When we approach any one of the divine Persons, we approach the one God. And when we come close to all three Persons — Father, Son and Holy Spirit — again we come into the presence of the one true God. Love the Mass, my children, love the Mass. And be

hungry to receive our Lord in communion, although you may be cold inside, although your emotions may not correspond to your desires. Receive communion with faith, with hope, with burning charity.

Contact with Jesus

A man who fails to love the Mass fails to love Christ. We must make an effort to "live" the Mass with calm and serenity, with devotion and affection. Those who love acquire a finesse, a sensitivity of soul that makes them notice details that are sometimes very small, but that are important because they express the love of a passionate heart. This is how we should attend the holy Mass. And this is why I have always suspected that those who want the Mass to be over quickly show, with this insensitive attitude, that they have not yet realized what the sacrifice of the altar means.

If we love Christ, who offers himself for us, we will feel compelled to find a few minutes after Mass for an intimate personal thanksgiving, which will prolong in the silence of our hearts that other thanksgiving which is the Eucharist. How are we to approach him, what are we to say, how should we behave?

Christian life is not made up of rigid norms, because the Holy Spirit does not guide souls collectively, but inspires each one with resolutions, inspirations and affections that will help it to recognize and fulfil the will of the Father. Still, I feel that, on many occasions, the central theme of our conversation with Christ, in our thanksgiving after holy Mass, can be the consideration that our Lord is our king, physician, teacher and friend. He is our king. He desires ardently to rule our hearts, because we are children of God. But we should not try to imagine a human

sort of rule — Christ does not dominate or seek to impose himself, because he "has not come to be served but to serve."

His kingdom is one of peace, of joy, of justice. Christ our king does not expect us to spend our time in abstract reasoning; he expects deeds, because "not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord!, shall enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of my Father in heaven shall enter the kingdom of heaven."

He is our physician, and he heals our selfishness, if we let his grace penetrate to the depths of our soul. Jesus has taught us that the worst sickness is hypocrisy, the pride that leads us to hide our own sins. We have to be totally sincere with him. We have to tell the whole truth, and then we have to say: "*Domine, si vis, potes me mundare*: Lord, if you will" — and you are always willing — "you

can make me clean." You know my weaknesses; I feel these symptoms; I suffer from these failings. We show him the wound, with simplicity, and if the wound is festering, we show the pus too. Lord, you have cured so many souls; help me to recognize you as the divine physician, when I have you in my heart or when I contemplate your presence in the tabernacle.

He is a teacher, with a knowledge that only he possesses — the knowledge of unlimited love for God, and, in God, for all men. In Christ's teaching we learn that our existence does not belong to us. He gave up his life for all men and, if we follow him, we must understand that we cannot take possession of our own lives in a selfish way, without sharing the sorrows of others. Our life belongs to God. We are here to spend it in his service, concerning ourselves generously with souls, showing,

through our words and our example, the extent of the christian dedication that is expected of us.

Jesus expects us to nourish the desire to acquire this knowledge, so that he can repeat to us: "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink." And we answer: teach us to forget ourselves, so that we may concern ourselves with you and with all souls. In this way, our Lord will lead us forward with his grace, just as when we were learning to write. Do you remember that childish scrawl, guided by the teacher's hand? And we will begin to taste the joy of showing our faith, which is yet another gift from God, and showing it with clear strokes of christian conduct, in which all will be able to read the wonders of God.

He is our friend, *the* Friend: "*Vos autem dixi amicos*: I have called you friends," he says. He calls us his friends; and he is the one who took

the first step, because he loved us first. Still, he does not impose his love — he offers it. He shows it with the clearest possible sign: "Greater love than this no one has, that one lay down his life for his friends." He was Lazarus' friend. He wept for him when he saw him dead, and he raised him from the dead. If he sees us cold, unwilling, rigid perhaps with the stiffness of a dying interior life, his tears will be our life — "I say to you, my friend, arise and walk," leave that narrow life which is no life at all. Our Holy Thursday meditation draws to a close. If our Lord has helped us — and he is always ready to do so, as long as we open our hearts to him — we will feel the need to correspond in what is most important, and that is love. And we will know how to spread that love among other men, with a life of service. "I have given you an example," he tells his disciples after washing their feet, on the night of the

last supper. Let us reject from our hearts any pride, any ambition, any desire to dominate; and peace and joy will reign around us and within us, as a consequence of our personal sacrifice.

Finally, a loving thought directed to Mary, Mother of God and our Mother. Forgive me if I go back to another childhood memory — a picture that became very common in my own country when St Pius X was encouraging the practice of frequent communion. It represented Mary adoring the sacred host. Today, as in those days and as always, our Lady teaches us to come to Jesus, to recognize him and to find him in all the different situations of our day. And nowhere is she more a teacher than in the supreme moment of the holy sacrifice of the Mass, where time blends with eternity. Jesus, with the gesture of a high priest, attracts all things to himself and places them

divino afflante spiritu, with the breath of the Holy Spirit, in the presence of God the Father.

Saint Josemaría Escrivá

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