

Eucharist and life

Our last word is an insistent appeal to all responsible animators of Christian communities: let them not be afraid of insisting, in time and out of time, on the faithfulness of the baptized to celebrate joyfully the Sunday Eucharist. How could they ever neglect this encounter, this banquet that Christ prepares for us in his love? ... It is the crucified and glorified Christ who passes among his disciples, to drag them together with him to the renewal of his resurrection.

Paul VI

Final prayer

We thank you, holy Father,
for your holy name that you have made to dwell in our heart,
for the wisdom, faith, immortality that you have revealed us
through Jesus Christ, your servant.
Glory be to you for ever and ever. Amen.
You, almighty Lord, have created all things
to the glory of your name,
and have given the children of men food and drink so that
they may praise you;
but to us you have granted the grace of a spiritual food and
drink, and of eternal life through Jesus, your servant.
First of all we thank you because you are almighty.
To you be glory, for ever and ever. Amen.
Lord, remember your Church, deliver her from all evil,
make her perfect in your love, sanctify and reunite her from
all corner into your kingdom that you have prepared for her.
Because yours is the power and the glory
for ever and ever. Amen.
Let grace come and the world pass away!
Hosanna to the God of David!
Let him who is holy come close, let him who is not holy be
converted. Maranathà. Amen.

(From Didaché)

cards of formation

DOMINICAN YOUTH
MOVEMENT



*“they remained faithful...
to the breaking of bread”*

Acts 2,42

Towards the re-discovery
of the mystery of the Eucharist

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To begin...



“All the believers ... remained faithful ... to the breaking of bread”. Luke is accurate in his language: he doesn't speak about a community of “friends”, neither about a community of “brothers”, but of “believers”. The deepest foundation is adherence to the Word of Christ that creates and favours the growth of the Christian community. The breaking of bread becomes the distinctive of the Christians: as the disciples of Emmaus recognised Jesus at that sign, similarly the world now recognises the community of the Risen Lord that gathers around the Banquet of the Lord.

Jesus reminds us that he himself is the life-giving bread, that he has broken himself to be in all, with all, for all: it is a great gesture of communion and of sharing.

Today, we are like the first Christians, namely the believers in Christ who break the bread and share his presence all together, who nourish themselves with his Word, are united in charity.

The Eucharist that we celebrate must be a powerful stimulus and must translate into our daily life the self-oblation once lived by Jesus. Man needs symbolic gestures, fit to express efficaciously and incisively the values that give sense to life.

To reflect

*From the Encyclical Ecclesia de Eucharistia,
by John Paul II.*

The Eucharist, which is in an outstanding way the sacrament of the paschal mystery, *stands at the centre of the Church's life*. This is already clear from the earliest images of the Church found in the Acts of the Apostles: “They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (2:42). The “breaking of the bread” refers to the eucharist. Two thousand years later, we continue to relive that primordial image of the Church. At every celebration of the Eucharist, we are spiritually brought back to the paschal Triduum: to the events of the evening of Holy Thursday, to the Last Supper and to what followed it. The institution of the Eucharist sacramentally anticipated the events which were about to take place, beginning with the agony in Gethsemane. Once again we see Jesus as he leaves the Upper Room, descends with his disciples to the Kidron valley and goes to the Garden of Olives. Even today that Garden shelters some very ancient olive trees. Perhaps they witnessed what happened beneath their shade that evening, when Christ in prayer was filled with anguish “and his sweat became like drops of blood falling down upon the ground” (cf. *Lk* 22:44). The blood which shortly before he had given to the Church as the drink of salvation in the sacrament of the Eucharist, *began to be shed*; its outpouring would then be completed on Golgotha to become the means of our redemption: “Christ... as high priest of the good things to come..., entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption” (*Heb* 9:11- 12)

REFLECTION

What is the remedy that will heal our body from the poison of sin? It is the glorious body of Christ. He has revealed himself stronger than death and is for us a source of life. As a little of leaven permeates the whole dough, similarly the immortal body of God, once it has entered ours, changes and transforms it into his divine substance.

(Saint Gregory of Nissa)

The Apostle, therefore, asks the believers, gathered in the assembly, to give importance, above all, to the eucharistic celebration. He himself had most probably taught them to celebrate the supper of the Lord independently from the normal meal, though undoubtedly in relation with it. Speaking, in fact, about the institution of the Eucharist, He doesn't even mention the banquet of Jesus with his disciples: the tradition he refers to is only that of the eucharistic rite. Those who wanted to have a full meal in common, might have wanted to refer to the teaching of some other apostle or they meant to be more faithful to the example of the Lord, who had actually instituted the Eucharist during an evening supper. Paul does not condemn this custom in itself, but because of its sad consequences in the community: the unity of the body of Christ has been offended; the Corinthians have proved not to have taken into account the community value of the Eucharist, symbol and maker of the union of all in charity. From these considerations we deduce that the first Christian community had an exact knowledge of the nature of the Eucharist and of its relation with fraternal love. It is just in the breaking of bread that the community of believers acknowledges itself as church. The Eucharistic celebration meant concretely this sacrifice. This was the source of charity which characterised the first Christian community: fraternal charity was the bond of its members. The Eucharist, in fact, made them one with Christ who had given his life for them all and united them reciprocally, binding them with a spirit of fraternal dedication and solidarity. It was charity that turned all the members into brothers and sisters in total solidarity of material needs.

The relation between the eucharistic celebration and the church has been underlined by Vatican II. "The Church of Christ - the constitution *Lumen gentium* affirms (No.26)- is truly present in the legitimate local communities of faithful. They are, in their own see, the new people called by God. In them the faithful are gathered with the preaching of the Gospel of Christ and with the celebration of the Lord's supper, so that the flesh and the blood of the Lord may tightly unite all the brothers of the community. The symbol of the charity and unity of the mystical body, without which there is no salvation, is offered in every community that shares the altar under the presidency of the bishop".

Finally we must not forget the link of the Eucharist with the hierarchical organisation of the church. It is, in fact, founded on the principle that the celebration of supper is presided by the apostle, later by a bishop or by the presbyter of the local church (acts 20,11). The Eucharistic celebration is always communitarian, but the eucharistic prayer, like the "blessing" of the banquet in the Hebrew rite, and like the thanksgiving action pronounced by Jesus, is pronounced by the one who presides the assembly", as we can see from the writings of the New testament and from the sub-apostolic tradition.

Listening to the Word of God

From the Acts of the Apostles: 2,24-48

The disciples remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. And everyone was filled with awe; the apostles worked many signs and miracles. And all who shared the faith owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and distributed the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed.

Each day, with one heart, they regularly went to the Temple, but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked up to by everyone. Day by day the Lord added to their community those destined to be saved.

REFLECTION

In the last Supper, after celebrating the Pasover with his disciples, while passing from this world on to the Father, Christ instituted this sacrament in perpetual memory of his passion ... the greatest of all miracles; he left this sacrament, as a peerless solace, to all those who would be filled with sorrow because of his absence.

(Saint Thomas Aquinas).



Self Formation

Breaking of bread and fraternal charity

Instituted by Jesus, the Eucharist was celebrated regularly in the primitive Christian community. We must refer to the Eucharistic celebration what the Acts of the Apostles call “the fraction of bread”, “the breaking of bread”.

The expression, in itself, does not designate necessarily the Eucharist: all the Hebrew meals opened with a blessing and with the “breaking of bread”; but the Christian used this expression to designate the Eucharistic Banquet. The thing seems to be sure “if we observe that all the narrations of the institution ... have paid importance to the gesture of “breaking the bread” made by Jesus on that occasion. Moreover, every doubt is chased away if we think that this expression recurs in the text where St. Paul explicitly comments the Eucharistic ritual: ... *the loaf of bread which we break* is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? (*1 Cor. 10,16*). The fact that the believers did not feel the need of forging a new word, probably shows that they did not celebrate the Eucharist in one special act of cult, but in the course of ordinary meals taken in common (Acts 2).

Acts 2, 42.47: These remained faithful to the teaching of the Apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. ... All who shared the faith owned everything in common; they sold their goods and possessions and distributed the proceeds among themselves according to what each one needed. Each day, with one heart, they regularly went to the temple, but met in their houses for the breaking of bread; they shared their food gladly and generously; they praised God and were looked after by everyone...

In this text, that describes the life of the primitive community, we observe that the believers are bound by a particular bond called communion (*koinònia*), and that this is translated into a material and spiritual solidarity. The breaking of bread which they celebrate in private homes, is the characteristic sign of the community union and at the same time constitutes it.

In another passage of the Acts, which describes the meeting of Paul with the Christians of Troas, we can see all the elements that form the picture of a Eucharistic celebration: the community gathers on “the first day of the week”, that is on Sunday, around the apostle who presides the liturgical gathering; after a long speech, Paul breaks the bread (*Acts 20*). In this case, there is no sure indication of a common meal; the breaking of bread takes place after midnight and seems to be an enough short rite. We can, therefore, think that the Eucharistic celebration did not always take place at the end of a common meal or, anyhow, in connection with it.

Acts 20, 7-8.11: On the first day of the week, we met for the breaking of bread. Paul was due to leave the next day, and he preached a sermon that went on till the middle of the night. A number of lamps were lit in the upstairs, where we were assembled ... (Paul) he broke the bread and ate and carried on talking till he left at daybreak.

The custom of a common meal, united in the Eucharist, was surely in vigour in Corinth, with abuses that induced Paul to intervene. The Apostle reprimands the Corinthians because the community meals that precedes the Eucharistic celebration manifests egoism instead of the charity among the members of the body of Christ. There are, in fact, some who eat before the arrival of the others; others consume the food greedily even to the point of getting drunkard; the poor who take nothing with them in the hope of sharing the common meal, remain with an empty stomach. Moreover during the meetings divisions and dissension are shown. Paul wants that those who feel hungry are supposed to eat in their own homes, before attending the liturgical assembly: the common meal is not there to feed the hungry; its role, as meal, must be reduced as much as possible (*1 Cor. 11*). Faith must learn to see in the bread the body of Christ (vv. 23 and following) and the charity of the commensals must prevail over individualism and over divisions.

1 Cor. 11, 17.22.33-34: “Now that I am on the subject of instructions, I cannot congratulate you on the meetings you hold; they do more harm than good. In the first place I hear that when you all come together in your assembly, there are separate factions among you and to some extent I believe it. It is not a bad thing, either, that there should be different groups among you, so that those who are to be trusted among you can be clearly recognised. So, when you meet together, it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat; for when the eating begins, each one of you has his own supper first, and there is one going hungry, while another is getting drunk. Surely you have homes for doing your eating and drinking in? Or have you such disregard for God’s assembly that you can put to shame those who have nothing? What am I to say to you? Congratulate you? On this I cannot congratulate you. So then, my Brothers, when you meet for the Meal, wait for each other; anyone who is hungry should eat at home. Then your meeting will not bring you condemnation.

The Eucharist in the first centuries of Christianity

With regard to the Eucharist, this is how you render thanks: first for the chalice: We give you thanks, our Father, for the holy vine of David, your servant. Then for the broken bread: We give you thanks, our Father, for life and for the knowledge you have revealed to us through Jesus, your servant. To you glory for ever and ever. Let your Church be gathered in your kingdom from the extreme boundary of earth just as this broken bread which was spread here and there on the hills, was picked up to become one and the same thing; because yours is the glory and the power, through Jesus, for ever and ever. Let, however, no one eat or drink the Eucharist unless he is baptised in the name of the Lord, since the Lord has said, “Don’t give what is holy to the dogs”.

Didaché, 9