

The Liturgy Leads Us into the Passion

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Mother of God Prayer Meeting
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"Return to the sources!" This is the theme of our prayer meeting for spring 2004. On one level, "Return to the sources" means that God desires us to recall our own conversion and baptism in the Spirit, to draw life from those original graces when he first touched our life. But it also has an objective meaning. When this phrase arose in 20th-century theology, it meant that the Church needs to return to Scripture and the Liturgy as the two primary fonts from which the Body of Christ receives the living water of the Holy Spirit in an ongoing way. This talk will be about how we can draw life from the Liturgy.

When you attend the Liturgy, what does it mean to you? Where are your heart and your mind?

The Liturgy is meant to lead us into the passion. Those of us who have watched the movie *The Passion of the Christ* are like those Paul speaks to in Gal 3:1: "You, who before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified." We know that this man so brutally scourged and crucified was the Son of God, laying down his life for us in infinite love and compassion, and that his sacrifice has unlimited power in our lives... but how do we access that power? How does it touch our life?

Jesus left us this memorial, the Eucharistic Liturgy, as the primary way the Church would have ongoing access to the paschal mystery, so that this mystery of God's love for us would become our food, our strength, our life. I would like to talk about two aspects of the Eucharist to help us enter more deeply into it.

I. The Eucharist is the Renewal of the Covenant

The first reading at Mass today was about God's covenant with Abraham.

God said to Abram, 'Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon.' And he brought him all these, cut them in two, and laid each half over against the other; but he did not cut the birds in two. And when birds of prey came down upon the carcasses, Abram drove them away. As the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell on Abram.... When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, 'To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river' (Gen 5:9-18).

Abram had just asked for a confirming sign of God's promise that he would have a multitude of descendants. This is God's answer, in the form of an oath and covenant ritual. It is an ancient Semitic rite: animals were cut in half, and the halves were laid out opposite each other. The covenant partners passed between the parts and said, in effect, "So may it happen to me if I don't keep the covenant." In other words, they invoke a hypothetical self-curse, analogous to the slaughter of animals (Jer 34:18). It is a way of making the covenant a solemn, absolutely firm bond.

But this covenant is unique in that it is a unilateral act – only God observes the rite and commits himself by passing between the pieces, in the form of a flaming torch. Fire is a symbol of the mysterious presence of the holy God (see Ex 3:2; 13:21). Meanwhile Abram is passive; in fact, he is asleep. God invokes the hypothetical curse upon himself – an inconceivable testimony to his desire for a covenant. It is a totally gratuitous action of God,

not dependent on man's response. God's promised blessing of land becomes the property of Abram's descendants at the moment when God does the rite.

This is all a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ, who "became a curse for us" so that we might receive the blessing of Abraham (Gal 3:13f). The amazing thing is that we, not God, broke the covenant, yet God took upon himself the consequences of our covenant-breaking. Jesus experienced in his own body the full consequences of sin, so that a new and unbreakable, eternal covenant might be formed with us.

At the Last Supper he had said, "Do this in memory of me." Biblically, memory means not just calling to mind but "making present" in a way that changes you. For example, in the Jewish Passover Haggadah it says, "In every generation it is the duty of each person to think of himself as though he himself had just come out of Egypt." So whenever we "do this in memory of him," the Liturgy makes present again Christ's passion, in which he gave us his body (his whole human existence) and his blood (his life).

The sacrifice on Calvary itself made present in history the eternal self-giving of the Son to the Father in response to the Father's love. The Eucharist makes Calvary present to us – or better, us to Calvary. Time and space are transcended. Earth and heaven touch. 33 AD and 2004 meet – as well as 1200 BC (the Exodus) and the date no one knows when there will be a new heaven and earth. Time is taken up into eternity. As Pope John Paul II has said,

This sacrifice [on the cross] is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there. Each member of the faithful can thus take part in it and inexhaustibly gain its fruits.... What more could Jesus have done for us? Truly, in the Eucharist, he shows us a love which goes 'to the end' (cf. Jn 13:1), a love which knows no measure" (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 11).

The result of experiencing this should be joy! Our celebration of the Eucharist should be characterized by deep and uncontainable joy, by thanksgiving to the Lord for the gift of deliverance from the slavery of sin. The liturgy itself strongly underlines this aspect. The celebrant invites us: "Let us give thanks to the Lord our God"; we respond, "It is right to give him thanks and praise." "Father, all-powerful and ever-living God, we do well always and everywhere to give you thanks and praise..."

Also, consider why the Lord chose wine as the efficacious sign of his blood. It was not just because of the color. Wine symbolizes the "more" in life, more than the bare necessities – it evokes joy, celebration, poetry, a banquet. Who would give a wedding feast and serve only bread and water?

II. The Eucharist is the Nuptial Sacrament

According to John Paul II, "The Eucharist is the Sacrament of the Bridegroom and the Bride." Why is this so?

All scripture is a love story—a story of God's passionate, spousal love for his people. What are the first human words in Scripture? "This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh!"—Adam's exclamation of wonder upon seeing Eve, his bride. What are the very last words quoted in Scripture? "The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come!'"—the yearning of the Bride for her Bridegroom. In the middle is the Song of Songs, the great mystical expression of the romance between God and his people. From Adam and Eve to the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb, God speaks of his love for his people as the love of a husband for his bride. God's relationship with his people is "nuptial." This means that his love for us is so

passionate that he voluntarily binds himself to us, his Bride, in covenant with a solemn oath of faithfulness.

This is why the Pope calls marriage the "primordial" sacrament: it is "the most ancient revelation of the plan in the created world." Primordial does not mean "greatest" but "first in order."

The deepest yearning in our hearts is for nuptial union. This longing will be totally fulfilled in heaven, where there is no marriage, because we are espoused to God himself, body and soul, in a union that infinitely surpasses the union of husband and wife on earth.

In human marriage, the covenant by which a man and woman give themselves to one another as a total gift of self, is enacted, consummated and renewed in their physical union – the one-flesh union of husband and wife.

Christ's covenant with his Church is also consummated in a physical union, the Eucharist by which we become one flesh with Christ. The Eucharist is therefore nuptial – it is the enactment and renewal of the wedding vows which were first made on the cross.

"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25-26). It is Christ's one-flesh union with his Church in a total, mutual and fruitful gift of self. The Eucharist is our heaven on earth.

But does the Church look like a bride or a widow? Are we as radiant in our Lord's love as a new bride is at her wedding? If we were, the whole world would know that he is alive!

On a human level, the union of man and woman in their sexual differentiation is what brings life to the world, literally. Each has an indispensable role: the man gives the seed, the woman conceives life. So it is in the union of Christ with his Church. In the Liturgy, the priest is an icon of Christ – this is why only a man can be a priest. Priests efficaciously symbolize Christ's giving up of his body for his Bride so she can conceive life in the Holy Spirit.

This is why the Church so insists on its teaching on the Eucharist and on sexual morality – if we don't get these right, everything else goes wrong. As belief in and devotion to the Real Presence declines, sexual activity outside of marriage skyrockets. This is no coincidence – the two stand or fall together. If we don't experience the Eucharist as nuptial union, we will look for it elsewhere.

So instead of teaching kids how to use contraceptives, we should be teaching them the Eucharistic life. In other words, we need a Eucharistic revolution! This is the true antidote to the sexual revolution. This is what will reverse the "maximum pleasure/ minimum effort" trend of the last generation and return us to a Love that suffers, that lays down its life for another.

That doesn't mean we should all join a cloister and spend the rest of our life in perpetual Adoration. It does mean that the union we experience in the Eucharist becomes the reality out of which we live every moment of the day. It means that our thoughts, words, and actions prolong Christ's Real Presence in our family, workplace, and neighborhood.

As the theologian Henri de Lubac said, "The Eucharist builds the Church, and the Church makes the Eucharist." The Eucharist makes the Church by empowering us to become a Eucharist.

III. How can we celebrate the Liturgy more worthily?

Given all the above, we begin to understand why it is so incredibly important how we celebrate Mass.

People's whole Christian life is formed by the liturgy. Therefore there is no renewal of the Church without a renewal of the liturgy. Liturgy is not a matter of creating a meaningful experience (a horizontal, man-centered approach), but enabling us to enter into the divine Mystery in a fully human way (the vertical, God-centered approach). The music, gestures, images, vestments, movements, all have important role.

In 900 AD, when delegates sent by the Russian Prince Vladimir returned from the Cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople, they could hardly describe the beauty of the liturgy. "They were in amazement and wondered greatly and praised the service. Overwhelmed by what they had experienced, they reported to Prince Vladimir: "We knew not whether we were in heaven or on earth. For on earth there is no such splendor or such beauty, and we are at a loss to describe it."

Imagine unbelievers coming into our liturgies and having such an experience! Here are three practical ways we can celebrate the Liturgy more worthily.

1. Be present – in every sense of the word, both bodily and in heart and mind. When you walk in, recognize that you are in the holy presence of the Lord and be attentive to him first and foremost. Fight distractions, be interiorly receptive to the immensity of the gift he is giving us.

2. Worship the Lord with your whole being. We are body persons, and the liturgy recognizes that well. Sing out (Ps 95:1), raise your hands to God (1 Tim 2:8), kneel with reverence (Ps 95:6). Heb 12:28 says: "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe."

Even incense plays a role. Isaiah describes his great vision of the Lord, "And one called to another and said: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory." And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke" (Is 6:3-4; see Ex 30:7; Rev 8:3-4).

3. Love one another. Paul had this strong rebuke for the Corinthians: "When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.... For when you assemble as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you.... When you meet together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat" (1 Cor 11:18-22).

Jesus also tells us, "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you [not, if you have something against your brother!], leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5:23f).

Welcome children especially, and don't be annoyed by them (Mt 19:14). On the other hand, if a child is disruptive during times when hearing is important (the readings and homily), in charity toward those listening, take the child out briefly where he won't distract them. Fraternal love is why the kiss of peace has been so important in the liturgy from the earliest days of the Church. St. Augustine said,

'The Body of Christ,' you are told, and you answer 'Amen.' Be members then of the Body of Christ that your Amen may be true. Why is this mystery accomplished with bread?... Understand and rejoice!... Consider that the bread is not made of one grain alone, but of many. During the time of exorcism, you were, so to say, in the mill. At baptism you were wetted with water. Then the Holy Spirit came into you like the fire which bakes the dough. Be then what you see and receive what you are. Now for the Chalice, my brethren, remember how wine is made. Many grapes hang on the bunch, but the liquid which runs out

of them mingles together in unity. So has the Lord willed that we should belong to him and he has consecrated on his altar the mystery of our peace and our unity.

Questions for Prayer and Small Group Discussion

1. Prayerfully read Gen 15:9-18. In your own words, how does this event reveal the depth of God's love?
2. Read Eph 5:21-33. Do you recognize Christ's pouring out of his life on the cross as a spousal gift of himself to *you*? How can you be more deeply receptive to this gift whenever it is renewed in the liturgy?
3. Read the following passages and prayerfully imagine yourself in the place of each of the people mentioned: Ex 20:18-21; Job 42:5-6; Is 6:1-7; Mt 17:1-6; Rev 1:12-18. In each case, what is the human response to being confronted with God's holiness, and what is God's response?
4. What are some possible dangers when the Church or an individual Christian loses sight of the holiness of God?
5. When you attend the liturgy, where do you typically find your thoughts? How can you be more present to Christ and attentive to what is going on?