

***The Year of the Eucharist
An Invitation to "live the life of the Trinity"***

In his message the morning after the Papal election, the new Pope, Benedict XVI, reflecting on the fact that his election occurred during the Year of the Eucharist issued an invitation to us that over the next months we might intensify our love and devotion to the Eucharistic Jesus. This invitation followed on straight after his strong affirmation of "determination to continue the commitment to implement the Second Vatican Council."

In noting how this year will see the 40th anniversary of the conclusion of the conciliar sessions (Dec. 8, 1965), the new German Pope commented that "the conciliar documents have not lost their current importance; on the contrary, their teachings reveal themselves particularly pertinent in relation to the new needs of the Church and of the present globalized society".

In this short article I would like to offer a meditation that weaves together a few threads linking Vatican II, the Eucharist and the Pope's invitation. My central thesis is today the Eucharist can be viewed as an invitation to "live the Trinity." and as such it teaches us how to realise Vatican II's vision of the Church. This vision is summed up in the opening paragraphs of the Council document on the Church where it describes the Church as a "people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" and therefore a "sign and instrument of communion with God and among all of humanity" (LG, 4 and 1).

Rediscovering the Trinity

In a talk the then Cardinal Ratzinger delivered during the Jubilee Year, he recalled how as an advisor at the Council he had understood that the great concern, certainly among the German bishops, was that the Council be primarily about God. The issue of systematic atheism - theoretical and practical - was at a point where it was realised the Church needed to proclaim God anew. And this meant rediscovering the true face of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

Elsewhere, he had already previously noted that the analysis on contemporary unbelief provided in the Vatican document on the Church in our times, *Gaudium et Spes*, especially, ns. 19-22, is " "

Catholic writers such as Karl Rahner, Walter Kasper and Hans Urs von Balthasar as well as Bruno Forte, David Schindler and David Tracy have all focussed on the contemporary rediscovery of the centrality of the Trinity in our faith. Protestant theologians such as Jürgen Moltmann, Eberhard Jüngel and Colin Gunton have also reflected on its social, cultural and ecclesial implications. And from the Orthodox world, it is enough to emphasise Buldakov and Zizioulas' anthropological reflections in the light of the Trinity.

Rediscovery of the triune face of God is coming about in the context of clearer realisation that often the God that has been rejected in contemporary culture - either in theory or in practice - is not the Christian God but rather a world-opposing theistic God of philosophers or a distant, self-enclosed deistic notion of God.

Michael Paul Gallagher summed this up some years ago: 'Which God do atheists usually reject? Often a solitary and unrelating potentate -a "Christian Zeus", as the Benedictine theologian Sebastian Moore once put it. Seldom the God whose three persons relate to each other in love. Seldom a Trinitarian participation in the Cross... Seldom the Three-in-One who invite us to join them and to enjoy their creating and healing of life'.¹ And this is very much

Perhaps it is to help us rediscover the true "Trinitarian" face of God that past centuries have witnessed a deepening crisis of faith in the God as often proclaimed or taught. In this year of the Eucharist, therefore, as a new Pope sets out to implement Vatican II which he believes was focussed particularly on representing the true triune face of God to the world, we can approach the Eucharist also as an invitation to discover what how it "shows" and helps us to "live" the Trinity.

¹ "Show Atheists the Trinity" *The Tablet* (24 January 1998), p. 104.

The Eucharist brings us into the Living Space of the Trinity

Let's consider firstly what is it that we receive "objectively" in the Eucharist. This was perhaps one of the strongest elements of Pope John Paul II's final apostolic letter for the Year of the Eucharist, *Mane Nobiscum*, focussed on the Real presence. In the Eucharist we really encounter Jesus Crucified and Risen.

Through the sacrifice of the mass, Christ himself, in the power of the Holy Spirit, objectively offers us himself to us to bring us into a new living space. As Vatican II put it: "In this mystery the faithful...have access to God the Father through the Son,...in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit....they enter into communion with the most Holy Trinity".² Jesus Christ leads us through his presence in the Word, in the community, in the minister and in the real presence *par excellence* of the Eucharist.³

Thomas Aquinas, in his usual synthetic genius, puts the effect of what happens in the Eucharist as follows: "the proper effect of the Eucharist is the transformation of humanity into God"⁴ Of course, this is so by participation and gift. The Eastern Tradition of the Church speaks of our "divinisation" through the Eucharist. Of course, Jesus told us he would do this: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you" (Jn 15:9). He wants us to have nothing less than his very life in us so that we can share in his life in God the Father, Abbà.

Let's review briefly three features of the new "living space" into which the Eucharist brings us.

We are transformed into another Jesus Christ

Firstly, in the Eucharist we are transformed into "other Christs". The early Church writers comment on the greatness of what happens in the Eucharist. Augustine, for instance, comments: "I am the food of full-grown men. Grow and you shall feed on me. But you shall not change me into your own

² *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 15.

³ See *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n.7.

⁴ *In Sent.* IV, dist. 12, q 2, a 1.

substance, as you do with the food of your body, instead you shall be changed into me".⁵

Albert the Great explained it in this way. Normally when two things unite the one that is more powerful transforms the weaker into itself. So, for instance, if I eat an apple, it is transformed into my body. However in the case of the Eucharist, since this food has a strength that is more powerful than those who eat it, this food transforms those who eat it into itself".⁶

Several centuries earlier than Albert the Great, St. Cyril of Jerusalem preached in the holy city that: "by partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, you become of one body and blood with him".⁷ And this is echoed in *Lumen Gentium* 26 where it says, quoting St. Leo, that "sharing in the body and blood of Christ has no other effect than to accomplish our transformation into that which we receive".

In eating the bread from heaven, we receive a food that gives life, strengthens and fortifies us to the point that we can echo St. Paul and say: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). And this itself is a source of wonder. It would be one thing to have seen Jesus, as we would have, had we lived in Palestine two thousand years ago. But it quite another to repeat Jesus with our lives, to be another Jesus here on earth - and that is the gift offered to us through the Eucharist.

Cardinal Van Thuan who died two years ago recounted his experience of his fourteen years in prison in Vietnam, most of it in solitary confinement. He managed somehow to celebrate the Eucharist each day. His comment was that: "I felt the very heart of Jesus himself beating in my heart. I felt that my life was his life and his life was mine."⁸ And, indeed, his life touched many, including his guards, deeply.

⁵ *Confessions*, VII 10 (PL 32, 742) ed & trs. R.S. Pine-Coffin, Penguin 1971, p. 147.

⁶ Albert the Great, *De Euch.*, D.3 tr 1, c.5, Borgnet edition, Vol 38, p. 257.

⁷ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Cat. Myst.* 4,3 (PG 33, 1100)

⁸ *Testimonies of hope. Spiritual exercises held in the presence of S. John Paul II*, Rome 2000, p.169

We find ourselves in the heart of the Father

"Where are you staying?" is what the two disciples asked Jesus. And he replied "Come and see" (Jn 1:38-9). The whole of John's Gospel brings us to realise just where it is Jesus Christ wants us to stay - in the heart of the God the Father, Abbà. God is not distant, static, removed, far away, and inaccessible to us. He is not the highpoint of a triangle or the conclusion of a syllogism, or some impersonal, moral code, complete in himself with no meaning for us. No God is love, the God of human beings, the God of history, the God who says in every Eucharistic celebration: "I am here for you".

It is important to recognise the Father each time we celebrate the Eucharist because the discovery of God-Love is vital to how we understand the Church. St. Cyprian said that no one could have God as a Father unless he has the Church as a mother. Today the reverse is also true: No one can have the Church as a mother (ie., sense the maternal, feminine beat of the Church) unless he discovers God Abbà, God Love, God Father.

To build up the Church as communion requires we know how much God loves us immensely. And that's the gift on offer in the Eucharist. We need to feel looked upon and loved by God, knowing that every one of our concerns and our prayers, every word and whisper of our heart, every move we make, every event, be it sad, joyful or indifferent, every sickness, everything, from the things we consider important to our smallest actions, thoughts, and sentiments, are looked upon and loved by God. To know this comforts us, makes us feel that we are in company, even when we are alone. The new Pope seemed to indicate this awareness as he repeated in his inaugural homily: "I am not alone".

Sometimes in thinking of God in the abstract, we tend to fragment his love. Yes, we repeat the phrase "God loves us" but we think his love is divided up into many parts as there are many people in the world. His love is infinite but we unconsciously divide it up as if it were parcelled out in fragments among all who receive it. But in reality God's love is infinite for each one of us. None of us can say: "God loves me a little less than the others". God loves each of us with an infinite, complete love. And this is what we hear, see, feel in

the Eucharist. In each fragment of the Eucharist we receive the whole Christ, not just part of Christ; and he brings us the undivided, immense and unique love of God the Father-Abbà.

We need to return again and again to this heart of the Father that we meet in the Eucharist because it's so easy to get our idea of our own self-worth or indeed of God's notion of us merely from people around us. Without ever intending to, others can underestimate us through lack of love, and we pick up the idea, even unconsciously, that their attitude reflects God's love, but that is not true. God's love is different. Though his love certainly also comes to us through others, at the same time his love way surpasses any love we know in this world. He loves each of us, even when the world thinks little of us. God the Father's love is always at work within me, helping me, transforming me. And that's what I meet in the Eucharist because I am meeting Jesus whom the "Father sent into the world, not to condemn the world...but to save it" (Jn 3:17).

In her autobiography we read of Teresa of Lisieux's struggle in coming to know this great love of God. Some of the older sisters would criticise her, deriding her youth. But she came to know God's love rose above any individual harsh comment or disregard.

We are immersed in the atmosphere of the Holy Spirit

The third feature of the new "living space" into which the Eucharist introduces us is a relationship with the Holy Spirit. In John's Gospel we hear Jesus say: "It is the Spirit that gives life". There is a growing recognition in the Catholic Church of the role of the Holy Spirit, the giver of life. It is increasingly realised that the Spirit is the principal actor in every coming of Christ among us.⁹ And this is particularly true in the Eucharist although, being Love, the Holy Spirit seems to take a back role in the action of the Eucharist in order to highlight Jesus Christ and the Father.

Yet, the Holy Spirit is very active and we need to be very attentive to the voice of the Spirit who accompanies Jesus in the Eucharist. St. Cyril of Jerusalem once wrote: "Next, after sanctifying ourselves by spiritual songs, we implore the

⁹ Cf. F. Durrwell, *L'Eucharistie, presence du Christ*, Paris 1971, pp. 44-6.

merciful God to send forth his Holy Spirit upon the offering to make the bread the Body of Christ and the wine the Blood of Christ. For whatever the Holy Spirit touches is hallowed and changed".¹⁰

When we think of some of the great figures we know that it was during the Eucharistic celebration that they felt a call to live out the radicality of the Gospel message. Think, for example, of Abbot Anthony who, on one Sunday, heard the Gospel that spoke of renouncing goods and, on another Sunday, heard of the Gospel imperative to put all family ties and concerns second in relation to the Kingdom of God. Anthony took this call seriously and went out into the desert, establishing the Monastic Movement that continues to this day.

The Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras was often fond of quoting a comment on the Holy Spirit that ran as follows: "Without the Spirit, God is far away, Christ remains in the past, the Gospel is a dead letter, the Church is a simple organisation, authority a domination, mission a propaganda, worship mere evocation, and Christian action a slave morality. But in the Spirit... the Risen Christ is present, the Gospel is the power of life, the Church signifies Trinitarian communion, authority is a liberating service, mission is a Pentecost, the liturgy is memorial and anticipation, human activity is deified".¹¹

We are made into one heart and soul(Acts 4:32)

The Eucharist is "a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity" as Vatican II puts it.¹² It creates new bonds of fraternity among us. As the Acts of the Apostles indicates the early community experienced how they were made into "one heart and soul" (Acts 4:32) "because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17).

The aspect of Eucharist fraternity with its existential and social aspects was at times overlooked in the past. But today we realise that when we go back to the Upper Room where the

¹⁰ *Cat. Myst.* 5,7 (PG 33, 1113) in *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 64, "The Works of St. Cyril of Jerusalem", trs. L. P. McCauley and A.A. Stephenson. Washington: CUA, 1970, pp. 196.

¹¹ Olivier Clément, *Dialogues avec le Patriarche Athénagoras* (Paris: Fayard, 1969), p. 496.

¹² Sacrosanctum Concilium, n. 47.

Eucharist was instituted we discover the Church was born as "God's family". The Eucharistic Jesus Christ continues as the living hidden protagonist all over the world gathering people together who were otherwise divided by caste, by class, by party, by race, by language. Through the Eucharist, Christ Jesus furthers his vision of universal fraternity, overcoming all divisions.¹³

As we take part in the Eucharistic banquet the Eucharist we are shaped into a family. John Damascene wrote: "through it we have communion with Christ, we have communion and are united with one another through it...we all become...members of one another, being of one body with Christ".¹⁴

To "live the Trinity"

We have indicated some of the features of what happens "objectively" to us in the Eucharist. It is really Jesus Christ we meet. He brings us into the heart of the Father. Through the Eucharist we are immersed in the atmosphere of the Spirit. And in this we are forged into one heart and one soul with one another.

But all of this needs to be received, made our own and translated into life by us. What is given to us "objectively" in the sacrament of unity must be lived out by us "subjectively" in a living commitment to building up unity and communion around us day by day. In other words, we have to correspond and let the objectively given gifts have effect in our lives.

If the Eucharist brings us into a new living space of the Trinity, then it is logical that we are invited in every Eucharist to "to live the life of the Trinity." This is a phrase that comes from *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 29.

It is significant that in providing a summary definition of the Church as an instrument of unity with God and among humanity, Vatican II quoted a sentence from St. Cyprian. The full citation, however, is worth reading because it brings out the need for our existential correspondence to what we receive

¹³ See Igino Giordani, "Social Value of the Eucharist" in A. Piolanti (ed.), *L'Eucaristia* (Rome, 1957), p.1211.

¹⁴ De Fide Orthodoxa IV, 13 (PG 94, 1154) in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, Vol. IX., trs. S.D.F. Salmon, Oxford 1899, p. 84.

in the Eucharist: "God does not accept the sacrifice offered by someone who nurtures enmity. He wants such a person to leave the altar and go first to reconcile himself with his brother/sister, because God cannot be appeased by anyone who prays with his heart filled with hatred. The highest sacrifice in the eyes of God is our peace and brotherly concord, and his people gathered together in the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit".¹⁵

Throughout the centuries the Church has always emphasised that the efficacy of the Eucharist is linked to various conditions such as: that we believe in Christ's doctrine; are baptized; have faith in what the Eucharist is; live according to Christ's teaching; repent and confess our sins so as to approach the Eucharist with a pure heart; be reconciled with those brothers and sisters with whom we are not at peace; be united to the Church, to the bishop; and desire that union with Christ and with our brothers and sisters that the Eucharist achieves.

The aspect of communion with one another in the whole network of relationships within the Church and in our relationships with those around us is one of the aspects being underlined today. It is enough to consider how strongly the need to promote a new style of Church based primarily on "a spirituality of communion" has been proposed to us.¹⁶ Think too of the huge developments in the Church's social teaching as a Gospel of justice, peace and freedom.

The way we interact with one another will have much to do with how today we show the effect of the Eucharist to people who want within history to discover meaning in a community that they see and experience as a place and instrument of human realisation.

This requires of us that we live the plan that the Eucharist teaches us, a plan "to live the life of the Trinity" that is summarised in Jesus' own commandment given the night of the institution of the Eucharist: "love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13).

¹⁵ St. Cyprian, *De Orat. Dom.* 23: PL 4, 553 referred to in *Lumen Gentium*, 4.

¹⁶ *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), n.43.

Once, while attending a Sunday liturgy in a Roman parish, Pope Paul VI commented: "Are the faithful united here in love, in the charity of Christ? Then certainly this is a living parish. The true Church is here since the divine-human phenomenon that perpetuates the presence of Christ among us is blossoming here. Are the faithful gathered together merely because they are registered on local area register or the baptismal register? Are they gathered together simply because they're here on Sunday to hear mass without knowing each other even though they stand shoulder to shoulder? If that's how it is, the Church is not connected together; the cement that is to form everyone into a real, organic unity is not yet working... Remember Christ's words. They will know you are my disciples if you love one another; if there's this warmth of affection and sentiments; if there's this love vibrating (in the parish)....with that greatness of heart and the capacity of generating Christ among us....¹⁷

The sacrament of the Eucharist wants to bring about its effect of uniting, reconciling, nourishing and strengthening humanity. But it needs our correspondence.

Conclusion

Pope Benedict has encouraged us to intensify our relationship with the Risen Christ whom we meet in the Eucharist because from "full communion with him flows every other element of the life of the Church, in the first place communion among all the faithful, commitment to proclamation and testimony of the Gospel, the ardour of love toward all, especially toward the poor and the little ones". In living the life of the Trinity through mutual love, the signs of the Eucharist will speak to us and others, but above all we ourselves will be the best signs.

¹⁷ *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, II (Vatican City, 1964), pp. 1072-1073. [*Translation mine*]