

Eucharist, a noun and verb

Bishop Timothy L. Doherty

June 29, 2020

Without question, the Church has continued to be a source of grace during this pandemic. The sick, the lonely, the elderly, and the hungry continue to be served. Prayer and study groups take advantage of warmer weather to meet outside, while some use videoconferencing. Priests attend to the actively dying if someone tells them there is a need. Praying punctuates daily schedules in homes and monasteries, sometimes more so.

Here at my office, the nature of incoming mail has changed. A goodly number of letters describe a personal love for the Eucharist, and the heartfelt hunger to pray in the parish church. More than a few writers mention that the ‘source and summit’ of Catholic life is the Eucharist, and many of these actually focus on receiving Holy Communion. These letters are a grace for me, and also a prod to review some of our theology.

Let’s first look to the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), the green-covered 1997 edition. The same text is online at USCCB.org. This edition added a glossary at the back, which is a wonderful resource for us teachers. At the term “Eucharist” it begins: “The ritual, sacramental action of thanksgiving to God which constitutes the principal Christian liturgical celebration of and communion in the paschal mystery of Christ. The liturgical action called the Eucharist is also traditionally known as the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.”

When we turn to CCC par. 1324 where it tells us that the Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life, it is referring to the unifying action of the whole Mass. There is a footnote here that directs us to paragraph 11 of Vatican Council II’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church which says of the assembly of priest and laity: “Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, the source and summit of the Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God and themselves along with it. And so it is that...each in his own way...has his own part to play in the liturgical action.” The Mass celebrant calls this to our attention when he says, “Pray, brothers and sisters, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the almighty Father.” The assembly responds, “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands....”

The reality of the Eucharist commands a larger understanding than we sometimes give it. As one of our seminarians reminded me recently, “Eucharist” is both a noun and a verb. It is a memorial, it is the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ in substantial presence, and it is an action. The liturgical action includes the Liturgy of the Word. Even when we are unable to participate at a Mass, the Sacred Scriptures can be with us in our homes and cars. God’s word has been available to us all along. Yes, receiving Holy Communion is a communion with Christ and the Church *par excellence*. But there is a communion among the People of God also whenever we pray, and especially in devoted attention to the Scriptures. Saint Ambrose (d. 397) refers to the Psalms as “the gymnasium for the soul.”

When I was a child, there was a rumor that we satisfied our Sunday duty if we ‘heard’ only the Mass’s Offertory, Elevation, and priest’s communion. People arrived after everyone else had acknowledged their sinfulness, and left before the final blessing and commissioning. Not only was this a non-participatory idea of the Mass, but it devalued the effective importance of the Liturgy of the Word. This

misinformed idea has not totally disappeared. The connection between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist is deep and thoroughgoing. Yet not one letter that I received mentioned that the writer missed hearing the Word proclaimed or preached in their parish assembly.

As welcome and useful as video streaming Masses might be, we must not forget that our being gathered in the “assembly” (CCC 1329) is also a mode of Christ’s presence. There are many resources beside the Catechism or Council documents that expand our appreciation of Mass. One of these is *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery* (May 25, 1967), at section 10, “The Connection between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.” Don’t let the age of some documents tempt you to think their teaching automatically lacks currency. The New Testament, for example, has not aged out.

So my letter writers have done me the favor of “sending me back to the books.” No one can contain the mystery of the Eucharist in words, but that mystery can help us grow in holiness with a bit of review. How long has it been since you studied our Catechism which, by the way, is thoroughly marbled with Scripture citations?

I have not written all this in order to lessen your hunger for Holy Communion, but to deepen it. And I pray that those who delve into our teachings about Divine Worship will realize, as we return to well-populated worship, how much more there was to miss about our Mass.