

Tract 6:

Eucharistic Life in a Weary World: Insights from St. Albert the Great

The Eucharistic theology of St. Albert the Great speaks to our current times. We live in an age of weariness. This lethargy can result from fear—fear of sickness, failure, or rejection. Paradoxically, it may be the result of being over-busy. Goals accomplished often do not bring complete satisfaction. No adult life is without the experience of having been betrayed, disappointed, or hurt in some way by a beloved friend. The Catholic faith does not promise a life without sad weariness; the classic prayer, the *Salve Regina*, describes our time on this earth as a “valley of tears.”

Yet, neither does the faith leave us without a source of strength and joy. This source may not overcome all of the weariness of this life, but will enable us to endure it and even often to rejoice in the midst of it. The source of this energy is, of course, the eternal bliss of God, source of all goodness. In his sacramental theology, Albert the Great looks towards this being of God as a help in the challenges of life. Albert is the farthest thing from a process theologian. He looks to the unchanging goodness of God with hope and trust, rejoicing in the fullness of the unchanging Godhead. He is also realistic about the difficulties of human life. When describing what it means for Christ to have become man, Albert discusses the metaphysics of the hypostatic union. Then he adds that this means that Christ also took up “all the weariness of human life.”¹

When Albert teaches us about how to open our own hearts to the

¹ Albert the Great, *On the Body of the Lord*, trans. Sr. Albert Marie Surmanski, O.P., Fathers of the Church Medieval Continuation 17 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 149.

sweetness, beauty, and joy of the eternal life of the Trinity, he speaks about the Eucharist. Of course, union with the Trinity is established through the sanctifying grace given in baptism. It is the Eucharist that deepens this union by offering us repeated moments of connection. Albert calls the eternal overflowing of being and unity from the Father to the Son to the Spirit the “golden chain.” Here he reflects on Jesus’s own statement in John 17:21: “As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us” (NRSV). Christ’s Incarnation and Passion offer us a chance to connect our lives to the chain. The link that connects us is the Eucharist. Albert warns us, “and all who fall from this chain perish.”² For Albert, being united to the Trinity is not simply about avoiding perishing. It connects our life to a “sweetness” which touches our human experience. This “sweetness” might be a consoling moment in which one recognizes the divine presence; it also seems to include the faith-based recognition that our life is dynamically moving towards a heavenly goal; it also includes the energy or strength which flows from the hopeful and loving desire to attain this goal.

A metaphor that Albert offers is that of the mixing of water into the wine at Mass. He understands this as imaging the way in which the sometimes “insipid” or “tasteless” character of our daily life is mixed into the more “flavorful” wine of the divine life.³ The divine life is so great that its wine swallows up the small drops of our life without being diluted by it. How does the Eucharist make human life more “flavorful” or joyful? This question is best addressed through Albert’s discussion of the Eucharist as spiritual food. It is not meaningless that Christ gave us the Eucharist under the appearances of bread and wine. Albert invites us to consider the sacramental appearances. Bread and wine are not merely “placeholders” that point to where Christ is. Instead, they speak eloquently about the way in which Christ comes to us in this sacrament—as spiritual food.

When Albert talks about our need for spiritual food, he compares it to our need for physical food. If we fast for a long period of time, we become hungry, weak, and tired and begin to waste away. Physical hunger brings about physical weariness. So, Albert recognizes that life in this world results in a similar loss of spiritual life or energy.⁴ He says that abstaining from spiritual food means that “the substance of the spirit and the strength and the substance of the natural good are lost.”⁵ This loss of spiritual energy

² Albert, *On the Body of the Lord*, 171–72.

³ Albert, *On the Body of the Lord*, 38.

⁴ Albert, *In IV sent.*, d. 1, a. 2, in *Opera Omnia*, vol. 30, ed. Auguste Borgnet (Paris: Vives, 1894).

⁵ Albert, *On the Body of the Lord*, 124.

is not sin itself, but is a result of sin—of our various small unfaithfulnesses, imperfections, and moments in which we fail to respond to the Lord. Albert says that “man is corrupted by the evil of his work.”⁶ Small and large sins dissipate our attention and can weaken our love of God. Perhaps a certain weariness or tendency to discouragement also originates in our encounter with the brokenness of the world around us, the sins, sickness, and the failures of others which hurt us.

Albert does not chastise his readers for suffering and weakening in this way. By comparing a spiritual tendency to grow weak to the human need for food, he shows that it is not completely avoidable in this life. Just as we do not become angry and frustrated when we discover that we are hungry and weak at the end of the day when we have not eaten, so we should not be upset at ourselves when we discover a growing spiritual weariness. Albert invites his readers who experience such lassitude to turn to the Eucharist for strength.

How does the Eucharist offer strength? For Albert, the “spiritual refreshment” of the Eucharist is first of all a deepened union with the Lord in love.⁷ The immediate grace of the Eucharist impacts the soul at a level below that of experience, uniting the person to God through indwelling grace. Thus the strength given in the Eucharist can nourish us in a quiet and hidden way, giving us interior energy without our immediate conscious awareness of it. One could consider this spiritual nourishment as working in a way parallel to the increased physical strength which seeps into our muscles after we assimilate the vitamins and calories in a good meal. The spiritual life, however, also involves conscious attitudes and habits of mind and heart. As adult Christians, we do not receive God’s grace as entirely passive: we need to cooperate so as to grow in faith and love, to use in our actions the strength we have received. The interior strength offered in the Eucharist needs to work its way into our experience so as to color our daily life.

This is one of the reasons why the sacraments are given as visible signs and embedded in the wider liturgy. St. Albert emphasizes that the material elements in the sacraments were chosen by God to speak to us, giving us an opportunity to step forward to receive the Christ who comes to us. From another perspective, Albert reminds us that Christ taught with wisdom as well as healed with power. Thus the sacraments offer wisdom by teaching us

⁶ Albert, *On the Body of the Lord*, 124.

⁷ Albert, *In IV sent.*, d. 8, a. 12.

about the grace which they give.⁸ This means that the experience of receiving the Eucharist should include a cognitive and affective encounter with Christ. As is taught by Psalm 104, Christ comes to us under the appearance of bread to promise us strength. He comes to us under the appearance of wine to promise us joy (see Ps 104:15).

To eat the bread of the Eucharist we need to open our mouths, receive it, and chew. Albert notes that literal chewing is necessary so that we do not choke on the host.⁹ This chewing, however, is an image of the way in which we should spiritually process our encounter with Christ so that it will nourish us. Chewing is an image of meditative pondering, “since meditation is nothing but a repetitive movement of the mind upon the same thing by thought and devotion and affection.”¹⁰ Part of the effectiveness of the sacrament of the Eucharist comes from consciously reflecting on the One who is present in the Eucharist. This conscious act of faith and love allows the grace given in the Eucharist immediately to inform our outlook and attitude. Albert goes on to note that the teeth represent the mind and the will which are white because of a clean conscience. A soul free from serious sin is a requirement for a fruitful reception of communion.

Albert advises the one receiving communion to reflect on Christ’s humble suffering to open herself to a re-ordering of her loves.¹¹ He advises the communicant to reflect on “the joy in which he boldly endured the cross for us” so that fear may be cast out from her heart.¹² Such reflection allows the inner encounter with the Lord to be translated into acts of faith, hope, and love which then impact Christian experience.

Sacramental reception is a moment to exercise faith, hope, and charity.¹³ It is when these acts are made that the inner strength offered by the Eucharist blossoms into our experience. When Albert talks about the Eucharist as elevating us in hope, he quotes from Matthew 28: 20: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” Christ fulfills this promise by his presence in the Eucharist. Reminding ourselves of it while we receive the Eucharist allows the “lightness of this hope” to lift our weariness—our own act of hope supported by the grace of Christ.¹⁴ In his 2007 encyclical *Spe Salvi*,

⁸ Albert, *De Sacramentis*, tr. 1, a. 2, ad. 3, in *Opera Omnia Sancti Doctoris Alberti Magni*, Cologne ed., vol. 26, ed. Albertus Ohlmeyer, O.S.B. (Munster: Aschendorff, 1958).

⁹ Albert, *On the Body of the Lord*, 124.

¹⁰ Albert, *On the Body of the Lord*, 155.

¹¹ Albert, *On the Body of the Lord*, 123.

¹² Albert, *On the Body of the Lord*, 123.

¹³ Albert, *In IV sent.*, d. 8, a. 1.

¹⁴ Albert, *In IV sent.*, d. 8, a. 1.

Pope Benedict XVI writes: “Our daily efforts in pursuing our own lives and in working for the world’s future either tire us or turn into fanaticism, unless we are enlightened by the radiance of the great hope that cannot be destroyed even by small-scale failures or by a breakdown in matters of historic importance” (§35; Vatican website). The moment of encounter with Christ in the Eucharist is a privileged place to allow ourselves to be reminded of this truth.

With this model in mind, Albert offers a dramatic image of the “exchange” which we should seek in the Eucharist. Drawing on the idea of the “marvelous exchange” between God and humanity, Albert pictures Christ’s mediation in the Mass as a shipping channel. Albert lists the things that we bring to the exchange—“poverty of spirit, mourning for sins, tears, fasting, afflictions and chastisements of the body”—which are “plentiful among us . . . but lacking in heaven.”¹⁵ Albert does two things here: he recognizes the sorrows of this life and offers us a place to which to bring them. Many of the “goods” Albert pictures us shipping are conscious acts of penance, but “tears” and “afflictions” could include any of the many wearying sufferings of human life borne well.

In return, Albert promises, “this river carries to us that in which we are deficient, and which abounds in heaven, that is, joy of heart, and consolation of the Holy Spirit, and the sweetness of the taste of the divine, and a certain fruit of the virtues, that we may desire them more strongly, [and] more easily scorn those things in which we are [surrounded].”¹⁶ The “sweetness” of the presence of God may include a mystical awareness of the presence of Christ, or it may be the chosen “sweetness” which recognizes that, even here on earth, we are united to God who is the ultimate good.

Here, Albert’s theology serves remarkably well to interpret the teaching of the Second Vatican Council when *Lumen Gentium* teaches about the role of the laity at Mass:

The supreme and eternal Priest, Christ Jesus, since he wills to continue his witness and service also through the laity, vivifies them in this Spirit and increasingly urges them on to every good and perfect work. For besides intimately linking them to His life and His mission, He also gives them a sharing in His priestly function of offering spiritual worship for the glory of God and the salvation of men. For this reason the laity, dedicated to Christ and anointed

¹⁵ Albert, *On the Body of the Lord*, 265.

¹⁶ Albert, *On the Body of the Lord*, 266.

by the Holy Spirit, are marvelously called and wonderfully prepared so that ever more abundant fruits of the Spirit may be produced in them. For all their works, prayers and apostolic endeavors, their ordinary married and family life, their daily occupations, their physical and mental relaxation, if carried out in the Spirit, and even the hardships of life, if patiently borne—all these become “spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (Pt. 2:5). Together with the offering of the Lord’s body, they are most fittingly offered in the celebration of the Eucharist. Thus, as those everywhere who adore in holy activity, the laity consecrate the world itself to God. (§34; Vatican website)

Albert’s image of ships taking the lives and sacrifices of communicants to heaven and bringing back a sense of purpose and spiritual strength encapsulates the same description of the “spiritual sacrifices” offered by the laity which “consecrate the world to Christ.” Albert adds the assurance that, along with his blessing, Christ returns to those who receive communion worthily and mindfully the joy and purpose that they need.

To end this consideration, let us move from the image of the shipping channel to a more intimate reflection. When asked about why we sometimes experience a felt closeness to Christ when we receive the sacrament and sometimes do not, even when we are in state of union with Christ, Albert reminds us that the Eucharist is *panis voluntarius* or “bread with a will.”¹⁷ Christ comes to us in the Eucharist offering the precise experience which will strengthen, enlighten, arm, and move us forward in our relationship with him. Awareness of this invites us to respond to Christ in the Eucharist as a true Person—a good and wise Teacher who will give us what we need. Albert invites us to reflect on the Passion of Christ, the Gospel readings, and other teachings presented at Mass. He invites us to expect and to allow our hearts to be consoled by Christ’s goodness in coming to us in the Eucharist. He expects us to make an act of hope—reminding ourselves of the heavenly goods to which we aspire and to which we are united. When the Eucharist is received in this way, faithfully, our precise Eucharistic experience will vary, but the light and strength which we need will be infused into our intellects and wills. N:V

¹⁷ Albert, *In IV sent.*, d. 13, a. 16.