

The Sunday Mass: Center and Summit of All Parish Life¹

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THE EUCHARIST, WHICH IS the principle of the Church's regeneration in every age, is also the heart of priestly vocation. It is doubly appropriate, therefore, to consider *the significance of the Eucharist* afresh: what we do as priests when we offer Mass; what we believe about it; what it means to us; what it means for "being parish." If we are to make the Mass a regenerating experience in the challenging situation ahead, we have to rediscover its vitalizing goodness for ourselves—constantly, over and over again. And as we do so day by day, Sunday by Sunday, through the course of the rich and fruitful liturgical year, the Eucharist will unfold its own plan for us as intended by Christ. For, when we celebrate the Eucharist well, we are mysteriously transformed by it—we and our parish communities—since it is here, in this perfect act of worship, that Christ "draws us into himself"² and makes us his own possession.

It is a universal fact of faith that the Mass reshapes and transforms the community it creates. It breathes life into our sense of Church. It changes the nonevent of "being merely present" into the deeply satisfying experience of sharing bodily with others in Christ—no

¹ This essay was delivered by Oliver Treanor at the time of his recent retirement from the theology faculty of the Pontifical University, Maynooth, to the Presbyterate of Down and Connor at their Diocesan Priests' Conference.

² Pope Benedict XVI, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church's Life and Mission, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007), §70.

longer just “one in a crowd,” but “members of the same family” that is Christ’s own. Feeding our need for meaningful fellowship, good liturgy makes us part of a network of relationships constantly strengthened by hearing God’s word and receiving Christ’s body,³ constantly invigorated by giving thanks to the Father in the power of his Holy Spirit. Over time, this experience becomes a vibrant part of the Catholic lifestyle of the parish, of offering ourselves and everything we do as a sacrifice of praise and gratitude to God in Christ. And as the Eucharistic nature of our life continues to take shape across the years—in our families, our schools, our hospitals, our rest homes—we will find that the actual community the Eucharist effects will protect and perfect that root instinct for belonging we so cherish and call “the parish,” even when we have to redraw pastoral areas and amalgamate with neighboring flocks of our Catholic faithful.

Thus, I am going to consider a few key ideas to help us look at this program for renewal, developing the reflection under three headings: (1) the Priest and the Eucharist; (2) the Eucharist in itself; and (3) the Eucharist, Sunday, and the Parish.

The Priest and the Eucharist.

The question is sometimes asked: “What exactly does the priest do *as a priest*?” What is his essential task, given that much of his time is taken up with services that people from other walks of life also offer? He is not a social worker, though he may do social work, or a schoolteacher, though he visits schools and even takes class. He is neither a sports manager nor a youth leader, though he sometimes sets up sports teams, accompanies pilgrimages, supports the local youth club, and so on.

Fundamentally, he is summoned *to gather God’s children into the kingdom*. Another way of putting this is to say that he is commissioned *to announce the Gospel*, since it is *through* the proclamation of the Good News that the people of God are assembled and formed into the kingdom. Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council teaches, this is the priest’s *first task*.⁴ Hence, priests are never merely “qualified professionals.” We are *called* to this work that is entrusted to us as a sharing in Jesus’s messianic mission by sharing in his priestly personhood. We are *ordained* to this service, *commissioned and sent* as apostolic delegates by the Holy Spirit. This is why we are rightly thought of (like Jesus was) as spiritual fathers, shepherds, and pastors of eternal life.

³ Ibid., §76.

⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, §5.

Although the preaching of the Gospel is our primary work, it is neither the *central* function of priestly ministry nor its *principal* task. That privilege is reserved to the celebration of the Eucharist. Vatican II states: “[The ministration of priests,] which *begins* with the announcement of the Gospel, *draws its force* and power from the sacrifice of Christ and *tends to this*, . . . which in the Eucharist is offered through the priests’ hands in the name of the whole Church” so that their entire ministry “is *directed to this* and finds its *consummation* in it.”⁵ This is because “the Eucharist is the source and summit of all preaching of the Gospel, . . . [since] the other sacraments and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate are bound up with the Eucharist and directed towards it,” given that, “in the most blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself.”⁶

It is at Mass, therefore, that the *point* of the gathering and evangelizing is made clear: to offer to God the spiritual sacrifices of the congregation in union with that of Christ, thereby completing the oblation of his body, the Church.⁷ Catholic faith believes that, at the Lamb’s Eucharistic feast, the ongoing grace of salvation runs its saving course dynamically through history, sanctifying time itself and sanctifying all who form Christ’s one body. In every Mass, indeed, the entire creation is gathered up under Christ’s headship, is placed under God’s kingly rule and power by insertion into his Son’s eternal self-giving to the Father in the heart of the Trinity. Without the ordained, *this could not happen*. For, they are coredemptive collaborators *with* and *in* the one Redeemer, acting *in nomine Ecclesiae* and *in persona Christi*. Hence, the Council confidently asserts that, “in the mystery of the Eucharistic sacrifice, priests fulfill their *principal* function,” since it is here that “the work of our redemption is continually carried out”⁸.

From this sublime and extraordinary fact, it follows that the priest himself is ordered toward the Eucharist in an extraordinary way. His very *being* is Eucharistic—his humanity and his manhood—and so is everything he does, no matter how mundane. This is because, by sacramental ordination, he is ontologically conformed to self-sacrifice after the manner of the Christ he serves. What St Paul calls

⁵ Ibid., §2 (italics mine).

⁶ Ibid., §5.

⁷ Cf. 1 Pet 2:5, 9; Col 1:24; Rom 12:1–2; 15:15b–16.

⁸ Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, §13 (italics mine). Cf. Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §§2 and 7.

on all the baptized *to do*—“offer your bodies, I urge you, as a living sacrifice, consecrated and fit for God’s acceptance” (Rom 12:1)—the ordained priest *already is*. His state of life, his priestly “I,” consecrated and offered to God, exists as a living memorial of Calvary and Easter through its co-identification with the body and blood of Christ in the sacrifice of the Mass (“This is *my* body . . . *my* blood”). For those in his parish who receive his ministration, he will be an efficacious sign of the very presence of Christ in their midst, a kind of sacrament in his own right of the Eucharistic mystery that enriches their lives.⁹ Consequently, his true identity—what he *is* as a priest, which shows itself in what he *does*—is found and intensified in his person-to-Person relationship with Christ in the action of the Mass and in the sacred species afterward¹⁰.

In such grace-filled communion with God’s Son, he discovers his inner unity, his integrity. For Vatican II’s Decree on the Life and Activity of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, it is always through a specifically Eucharistic Christology that the priest unifies his interior life with his (often perplexing and frustrating) external activities: “[Since] pastoral charity flows especially from the Eucharistic sacrifice, this sacrifice is therefore the *centre and root* of the whole life of the priest, so that he strives to make his own what is enacted on the altar of sacrifice. But this cannot be achieved unless priests themselves penetrate ever more intimately through prayer into the mystery of Christ”¹¹.

This mutually¹² self-defining union of Christ with his priests was

⁹ So, St Peter Chrysologus in one of his sermons writes: “How unique is the duty of the Christian priesthood! For there a man is himself sacrifice as well as priest; there a man does not look for something outside of himself to offer to God; there a man brings with himself and in himself and for himself a sacrifice to God; there the victim is not consumed and the priest never completes his task; there the victim is slain but lives, the sacrificing priest cannot complete the stroke” (*Sermon 108*; text in *The Divine Office II*, 562).

¹⁰ In §80 of his 2007 post-synodal exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict XVI observed: “Priestly spirituality is *intrinsically* Eucharistic” (italics mine). In that same section he continued: “The seeds of this spirituality are already found in the words spoken by the Bishop during the ordination liturgy: ‘Receive the oblation of the holy people to be offered to God. Understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord’s Cross.’”

¹¹ Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, §14.

¹² Thus, not only can we priests say with St. Paul in Colossians, “[Our] real life is Christ” (3:4); we must also say, as in Galatians, that Christ has no other life than ours: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20; cf. Matt 25:35–45 and Acts 9:4–5).

a favorite and recurring theme in Pope St. John Paul II's meditations. His 2004 traditional Holy Thursday Letter, for example, expressed his thoughts this way: "We [priests] were born from the Eucharist. If we can say the whole Church lives from the Eucharist, we can say the same thing about the ministerial priesthood: it is born, lives, works and bears fruit 'de Eucharistia.' 'There can be no Eucharist without the priesthood, just as there can be no priesthood without the Eucharist.'" ¹³ These sentiments echoed his last great encyclical on the subject—*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*—of the year before: "The Eucharist is the center and summit of the Church's life and likewise of priestly ministry; the Eucharist is the principal and central *raison d'être* of the sacrament of priesthood." ¹⁴

When a truth so great as this is allowed to settle and take shape, it deeply affects the whole of a priest's consciousness. It shows in his humble desire to model himself on the Eucharistic self-giving of Christ, on the fractioned Bread and the poured-out Cup, in which are contained all the mysteries of Jesus's *life for God and for others*. It also shows in a proactive celibate love that is freely embraced and lived out day by day as a way of embodying the Church's indissoluble union with Christ, her Bridegroom, and his with her. And so, when he says Mass, the priest is able to give a substantial and credible witness in his own person to the kingdom-already-in-our-midst as he prepares the marriage banquet for the wedding guests whom he has gathered and evangelized. Finally, it shows in his habit of prayer. From the epicenter of the Mass, his priestly worship surges up and overflows as a daily *Magnificat* of gratitude to God for Christ so that—as the "Introduction" to *The Prayer of the Church* has it—"in the fulfilment of the Divine Office the praise and thanksgiving he offers in the celebration of the Eucharist is extended to the different hours of the day."

The Eucharist Itself

When we look at the Eucharist, we are looking at the poverty and humility of Christ. Here is the antidote to the original pride and disobedience that separated us from God. In this sacrament, sin is confounded and overturned in the Second Adam, who took to himself

¹³ Pope John Paul II, Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday 2004, §2 (accessed August 4, 2017, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/2004/documents/hf_jp-ii LET_20040406_priests-holy-thursday.html), quoting his own *Gift and Mystery: On the Fiftieth Anniversary of My Priestly Ordination* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 77–78.

¹⁴ Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003), §31.

the broken history of our resistance to grace, reversed its outcome, and brought us back again to God. By his humble impoverishment, he turned everything around, he who now gives himself to us as the Bread of Life, absorbing the guilt in his own body, taking responsibility for it as head, and then offering himself to his Father in repentance and to us in forgiveness. The Eucharist is the ultimate expression of that self-offering whereby Christ reconciles all things perfectly and unites them amicably with each other once again by drawing them back into himself.

Coming to us in the form of bread and wine, he presents himself in the lowliest manner possible. It is as if he were challenging us to think of any other way he could make himself so small for the world's sake or make his saving purpose easier to grasp and tell him how. Who could dare to try once he has learned how to read the sacramental sign? For, contained in the mystery of the Eucharist are all the forms of Christ's *kenosis*, or self-emptying, by which he overturns and empties out humanity's sinful self-assertion and restores our true likeness to God through our likeness to him—his humble birth in the manger, his hidden childhood, his simple trade, his homeless vagrancy as a young rabbi, his nakedness on the Cross, and his unceremonious burial in another man's grave.

After Calvary, he had nothing left to give, and the Eucharist is the sign of this. Everything was poured out with his last breath, his Spirit of life, and the water and blood from his corpse—cleaned out and emptied, just like the empty chalice after communion and the purified paten. This is what love brought God to and what love brings man to, the divine love that is self-impoverishing, served as food and drink to unite man with God and God with man in the One who is both.

What the Eucharist therefore shows, as the abiding gift of God, is that his death that we celebrate was no tragic accident of fate, as some have suggested, but a thing carefully planned long in advance to gather us together. A deliberate initiative of the divine humility on behalf of sinners, a long-term love patiently biding its time. Its sacramental enactment the evening before at the Supper summed up and dramatically fulfilled all the Old Testament signs, symbols, and events that, over a thousand years, prefigured it. At the same time, it anticipated the new pass-over to resurrection through suffering. It also ensured that his self-sacrificing death for men should remain present and active as the thanksgiving memorial of the Church's worship. Since this memorial is no homage to the dominance of death, but

rather to the love that is life, the Mass would continually unleash the indomitable life of that Easter love without which our hope in him would have left us “of all men the most to be pitied.”¹⁵ Hence, the Eucharistic action of the Last Supper may have signaled the end of Christ’s life in the flesh, but not of his messianic mission in the Spirit to the poor and imprisoned, to the sick and the sinful. Instead, it recapitulated and condensed it so that now, entrusted intact to his apostles, his service to others and his communion with them might, through their breaking of bread, be projected outward to the ends of the earth. In this way, Jesus provided for the healing and liberation of the whole world through the Eucharistic mission of his Paschal body, the Church. And that mission always begins again with us.

In offering his body as bread broken to be consumed, Christ gave his very Person to the disciples, his actual Self: donating his blood to them as wine poured out, he handed over his entire Life¹⁶ and, donating both together, bequeathed to all generations his totality. Thus, even at the risk of misunderstanding, his sacramental action indicated the depth of intercourse he desired with his Eucharistic Church. Married people would immediately grasp what he meant from their experience of spousal intimacy, even celibates like St Paul would make the connection, and the Mystics too would understand, as would anyone familiar with the Old Testament’s predictions of the New Covenant as a marriage bond, a wedding feast.

The espousal that that first Holy Thursday proposed was consummated, in fact, by his death and sealed by his resurrection. Eucharistic communion was the result: an extension of the Incarnation to include not only the natural union between God and Jesus the man as his Son but also the union of all of us with the Father by our insertion into Christ baptismally and our participation in him Eucharistically

¹⁵ 1 Cor 15:17–19.

¹⁶ In the Hebrew mentality, “body” (*soma*) refers to the whole man, the personal identity, oneself, a meaning retained in modern culture where the first person singular denotes embodied reality such that we equate ourselves with our physical form. Similarly, for the Israelites, “blood” (*haima*) meant life itself (as the Blood Transfusion Service today reminds us in their advertising slogan). Hence, Jews, then as now, never drank the blood of animals, since blood is the principle of life and life belongs to God alone. This is precisely why Christ wished his disciples to drink his blood: so that they might share in the life of God himself and so in the divine nature. The Apostles would have been shocked by his offer, perceiving as they did the implication of the Eucharist and its astounding disregard for one of their most time-honoured taboos (Cf. John 6:60 and 66–67).

as sons in the Son by adoption. A holy wedlock between God and his people, of the divine nature with our humanity, his flesh and bone with ours, his blood with our blood. In Jesus, the affianced God kept his promise of marriage to Israel, faithfully pledging his nuptial vows and manfully carrying them out. To this end, the divine bridegroom stripped himself of all he possessed on Good Friday and opened his arms on the Cross to take a creaturely bride in matrimonial embrace. And so, the two have become one in the life-engendering union of body and spirit.

Every Eucharistic liturgy since then rejoices in his spousal fidelity and loving kindness,¹⁷ and every Rite of Communion in his indissoluble marital commitment. For those who partake worthily, the Eucharist means the survival of that marriage relationship beyond death and, consequently, their survival too. Being the sacrament of the resurrection as well as of Christ's death, it effectively removes all the barriers to unity with God in this world and the next, whether sin or mortality or time or space. Indeed the Mass is the *arrabon*, or "first course," of the heavenly wedding feast where the bride of the Lamb will sit enthroned in the perfect fellowship of the Triune God as the Communion of Saints.

In the wording of the consecration—the *ipsissima verba Christi*—the nuptial poverty and humility of the Eucharist are underscored by the expression "given up": "This is my body which will be *given up*." The expression conveys the "totality" mentioned earlier as synonymous with sacrifice. It means "*utterly* abandoned," "discarded,"

¹⁷ "Fidelity" (*emet*) and "loving-kindness" (*hesed*) were the consistent characteristics of the Old Testament God of the covenant. Their attribution to him runs like a steady current through the entire course of the history of salvation in the stream of consciousness of the inspired ancient writers. In the New Testament, John's Prologue was to incorporate the twin terms in its proclamation of the incarnation of the Logos, translating them as "truth" (*aletheia*) and "grace" (*charis*), respectively. Contrasting the newness revealed in Jesus with the archaism of the Mosaic dispensation, St. John writes: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of *grace* and *truth*. . . . Though the law was given through Moses, *grace* and *truth* have come through Jesus Christ" (1:14, 17). It is interesting to consider how the same evangelist, only a few chapters later (ch. 6), presents Jesus's teaching at length on the Bread of Life, the only one of the four to do so, and comes back to the theme again in ch. 15—the True Vine speech. This shows the typically Eucharistic perspective with which the Fourth Gospel views the whole mystery of Christ's Incarnation and Paschal event, a perspective that recognizes in the Eucharist the definitive realization of God's covenant.

“betrayed,” “handed over,” and “immolated.” This verb form used in the Last Supper narrative by Jesus is the one that John’s Gospel attributes also to the Father when he says that “God so loved the world that he *gave* [as a gift] his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”¹⁸ Romans uses it to make the same point, only stronger, stressing the sacrifice: contrasting God’s gift with the testing of Abraham (whose son ultimately was not required), Paul measures the cost of a love that “did not spare his own Son but *gave him up* [delivered up, deserted] for us all.”¹⁹ It turns up again in Galatians, when Paul recognizes in Christ’s humble obedience the Son’s acceptance of his forsakenness for the sake of the Father’s plan and his active collaboration with it: “The Son of God loved me and *gave himself up* [lit. “giving himself up”] for me.”²⁰ In the verbal consistency of all these texts, the Spirit of the living Word articulates what the Eucharist witnesses to silently: the single-minded concordance of the Trinity in showing mercy to a sinful world, a Christocentric mercy by which the Father redeems and restores and reconciles and unites in the power of the Spirit.

Even those who oppose God contribute to his plan. So, in the Passion story, the same act of “giving up” Jesus (*paradidōmi*) is attributed to sinners. Judas, for example, asks the chief priests, “What will you give me if I deliver him [*paradósō*] to you?”²¹ And the Fourth Gospel records that Pilate “then handed him over [*parédoken*] to be crucified.”²² Thus, the Gospels present Jesus’s betrayal and desertion as a confrontation between divine love and human sinfulness, with God’s Son as the point of confrontation where the conflict will be resolved. It is this that Jesus accepts, enduring the desolation of Golgotha, the shock of betrayal, the trauma of brutal arrest, and fearful exposure to the forces of hatred and jealousy, indifference, and contempt. He does so in order to end the impasse between law and trespass, between justice and condemnation, and so bring about the resolution that is forgiveness and grace. But, to achieve his purpose, he must withstand wholesale rejection by Jew and Gentile, by compatriot and foreigner, by friend and stranger, by sinners, and even—it seemed—by heaven itself²³.

¹⁸ John 3:16.

¹⁹ Rom 8:32.

²⁰ Gal 2:20.

²¹ Matt 26:15.

²² John 19:16.

²³ Mark 15:34; Matt 27:46. Thus is the unimaginable and inexpressible power of God to save the world unveiled: the more God is despised and rejected, the

When a priest takes up the Host and Chalice at the consecration, it is this he holds in his hands: the stricken, rejected Christ and the life-giving mercy that streams from his abject humiliation and destitution. Speaking Christ's words in Christ's own person as he bends over the gifts, he makes present again the sign that "contemporizes" the redemption, which is always fruitful and forever new. This is what constitutes the heart of Christian faith and makes the Church the Church, what the people of God pin their hopes on and what enables them to face life and accept death with a peace the world cannot give, and with good reason. For, they know at this moment with the certainty of faith that the Christ we worship in the Eucharist is no merely past historic figure, but rather a present continuous saving presence who, as Augustine famously observed, is closer to us than even we are to ourselves.

This is just what the Lord intended them to know. In the accounts of the Last Supper left by St. Luke²⁴ and St. Paul,²⁵ Christ particularizes his gift with the additional emphatic "for you" as he hands his disciples the fragmented bread of his body, repeating the phrase (in Luke) with the out-poured wine of his blood. In the Greek texts, the plural is used ("for ye"), but in English, singular and plural forms are (conveniently) the same. They are the same for Christ too. Once again he wishes to be "handed over," this time literally into the hands of each, and all, at the distribution of Communion.

His self-giving is in the first instance a singularly personal engagement with communicants, since, in his eyes, no one is lost in the crowd. At the same time, his gift, being for all, turns crowds into community by drawing them through the Eucharist into himself. That was always his way—in his public ministry, at the supper, on the Cross, at his glorious resurrection. No individual was ever less important than the whole, just as the whole Church is as much to him as each particular member, since it is his body and all his body's members are, with Christ as head, one Christ, which explains why the Church (for all its visible divisions in history) is only one by nature, as the Creed professes.

more he reveals his true nature as Compassion. This is what St. Paul meant in Romans when he wrote: "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (5:20b; cf. Eph 3:20).

²⁴ Luke 22:19, 20.

²⁵ 1 Cor 11:24. These two narratives are commonly referred to as the Pauline tradition, in distinction from the Petrine, as recorded by Mark, whose account is closely followed by Matthew.

By feeding us in this particularized way he wishes to *touch* us as Saul of Tarsus was touched, to *move* us as Mary Magdalene was moved, to *astonish* us like the disciples at Emmaus, and to *hearten* us as Simon Peter was heartened by the breakfast of bread and fish on the shore of the lake at Easter. This is why the Eucharist is not *solely* the abiding presence of the Lord in himself, to be gazed upon in wonder and adoration (“*Behold* the Lamb of God!”). It *is* indeed that, but it is *also* nourishment *to be received*, even as we are received by him, to bring about lasting union with him both sacramental and existential, a common union of *being* (what we *are*) and of *living* (what we *do*) within the common life and being of his one beloved Church. And so, to every baptized person he says, “This is for you!” For, unless the Sacrament is consumed, it cannot achieve the end for which it was instituted and for which Jesus died and rose again, that of completing the process begun at baptism of complete insertion into his body by full incorporation into his Church.

This “for you” therefore means that the Eucharist is intrinsically phenomenological—that is to say, not only significant in itself but also ordered toward a *felt experience* of joyful meeting and easy familiarity with Christ. Children from the parish feel this on the day of their First Communion. So do priests at their ordination Mass. And so do parishioners receiving the Last Rites who greatly desire the holy Viaticum to take on their last journey. It is no surprise then that, as the Gospel tells us, the first reason Jesus called the Twelve was that they might “be with him,”²⁶ be his companions. The word literally means “bread-sharers” (*cum-pane*), sharing intimate fellowship as closest associates, trusted disciples. Only from such companionship with Jesus does the Church’s ministry emerge and are disciples (followers) commissioned as apostles (those who are sent) and dispatched as preachers²⁷ of the Good News.

Being sacramental, this intimacy with Christ is a wholly human phenomenon involving all the senses: the visibility of the species, the sound of the breaking of the host, the taste of the cup, the smell of both, the feel of the hand, the touch on the palm, in the fingers, on the lips, and on the tongue, the eating and drinking, and the swallowing and digesting. Today, as in the time of the Apostles, the remarkably tactile, physical “event” of sacramental encounter with Christ is meant to be, as much for us as for the Twelve, absolutely life

²⁶ Mark 3:14a.

²⁷ Mark 3:14b.

changing,²⁸ really memorable and enduring. And all this because it is *highly personable* and *relational* so that we might enjoy lively human fraternity with him as good friends do who look forward to each other's company and for whom nothing is too much. As St. Cyprian of Carthage put it in the third century and St. Benedict in the sixth, it is so that we might "prefer nothing whatever to Christ as he preferred nothing to us."²⁹ Hence, Eucharistic communion is not only a matter of intellectual assent—however indispensable sacred doctrine in fact is for giving the experience its basis in truth as our solid ground for believing. It is a matter of the heart too, of the affective part of us that recognizes in Christ a completely attractive personality. Here is one we would like to know better, one whose interest in us draws out of us our better selves, one who inspires a real love for him in response to his love for us in the Eucharistic mystery—as St. Teresa of Avila discovered, and St John of the Cross and Thérèse of Lisieux and Matt Talbot and Edel Quinn, and so many like them.

As in the receiving of gifts at Christmas or birthdays, the "for *you*" resonates at the deepest levels of self-consciousness. Something inside you leaps! Stirring memories of words from a magical childhood past ("This is just for *you*"; "That parcel was left for *you*"), these are words that still define you, name you, single you out as one much loved—and consequently empowered to give love in return. All this Christ wishes to do for us superlatively in the Mass.

Then, it is *for* you, as distinct from *against* you, in the way that 'Emmanuel' is "God-*with-us*" and not "*opposed-to-us*." It is the same idea: God in Christ providing moral support, which is why he came into our history in our flesh and comes again now Eucharistically. With us in every way possible in order to be *our* God, always *for* us as God on our side, forever taking our part, defending us as our advocate, making allowances, making peace, bringing us back, bestowing collective identity, and acknowledging us as his own, his chosen ones.

This is Christ's mind and will at the Rite of Communion. Everything in the Mass leads to this consummate moment, as he intended. For this he has been preparing us from the Penitential Rite, through the readings, in the canon, so that his personal solidarity with us might be tasted at its source and be appropriated as grace: a bond that is both one-to-one *and* constitutive of God's family, of the parish.

²⁸ 1 John 1:1–4.

²⁹ See *The Divine Office*, III, 202 (*On the Lord's Prayer*, no. 15) and 107★ (*The Rule of St Benedict*, ch.72.12), respectively.

Such is the nature of the Church, with each in Christ and Christ in all, and all in all. “We, though many,” wrote St. Paul, using the same language here about the Church that he used of the Eucharist, “are one body in Christ and individually members one of another.”³⁰ None of us is absorbed or annihilated (as is Buddhism’s aim, *nirvana*³¹), but rather assumed into the warm breast of divine charity, each of us cherished for his distinctness and all of us perfected in the unity of our relatedness, like the inseparable relatedness of the three distinct Persons of the one undivided Godhead. Hence, the Eucharist makes the Church the reflected image on earth of the Holy Trinity.

So complete is Christ’s self-giving that, on the Cross, he gave away ownership of his own identity altogether. To find it again, he must find us, all of us, and all together. He discovers his completed self, therefore, only in his Church,³² and his Church is established and completed in Eucharistic communion. Since we are his body, then, without us, he would be a dismembered head. No man’s head can survive severed from his body, not even the man Christ’s. Though he be God’s Son, with his Father in glory, Jesus never relinquished his bodily humanity; hence, he can never relinquish us. Of the three forms his body has taken in time—the fleshly form born of Mary, the Eucharistic bread of life, and his ecclesial form, the Church—the last constitutes the fullest manifestation of Christ’s presence in the world. Just as we who receive the Eucharist find *our* true life in him, so he lives *his* true life in us. Henri de Lubac’s consideration of this led him to say: “The Mystical Body (the Church) is the body *par excellence*, that with the greatest degree of reality and truth; it is the definitive body, and in relation to it the individual body of Christ himself may be called a figurative body, without any detracting from its reality.”³³

This is not to take away either from the doctrine of the Incarnation or of transubstantiation. Indeed, the full reality of the mystery requires both. But it does mean that only in the Church, *because* it is his body, does Christ the head find himself in himself, and before the Father in the Spirit. He has no other life than ours, no other way of living in the world than through us. And since there can be no Church without Eucharist, nor Eucharist without Jesus of Nazareth, it follows that this one, undivided body of God’s Son shows itself as

³⁰ Rom 12:5. Cf. 1 Cor 10:17.

³¹ That is, bliss through extinction.

³² Eph 1:22–23.

³³ *The Splendor of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 133–34.

it actually is in the full communion of those who partake of the one bread and one cup, the Sunday assembly of the parish. It is here, as Vatican Council II teaches,³⁴ that the entire reality of Christ's Church is to be found in its essence, dynamically present and active in every diocesan Eucharistic congregation as the unique universal sacrament of salvation. Which is why each parish and its Sunday parish Mass is of *irreplaceable* importance in God's plan for the continued survival and redemption of the human race. This point we now need to examine more closely, given its importance for our main theme.

The Eucharist, Sunday, and the Parish.

From a steadily deepening understanding of the Eucharist—not only “*What* it is” or “*How* it is so,” but even more, the “*Why*”—comes the possibility of a better, more inclusive way of celebrating the community Mass. When we realize Christ's intention here, why he chose to give himself in this way, a fresh vision emerges for building up the parish in all its dimensions. It is the Eucharist in the first place that makes the Church, and not the other way about—that comes second. The parish is able to celebrate the Lord's Supper only because Christ first established his community in his eternal self-giving on the Cross. In that one sacrifice of his body and blood to the Father, now bestowed perpetually on us in the form of a sacred banquet,³⁵ he lets us participate in his self-offering to God so completely that we are instantly *shown to be* his one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. This is because:

³⁴ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, §§1, 9, 26; Vatican II, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, §3.

³⁵ In his reflection on the way Christ's sacrifice is displayed in the Eucharistic celebration of the Mass, Robert Sokolowski cites Léon-Dufour's point that “[Just as] the [Last] Supper symbolizes (efficaciously) the sacrifice of Christ on the cross [so] the Mass likewise symbolizes (sacramentally) the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, but it does so by way of the Supper” (X. Léon-Dufour, *Sharing the Eucharistic Bread* [New York: Paulist Press, 1987], 287). Sokolowski then takes this idea to show the possibilities for the Eucharist's reception by a postmodernist mindset that deems appearance and perception to be as significant as ontology—as indeed the theology of sacrament does. The way a thing presents itself, he observes, prescribes by its nature the appropriate response to it. He goes on: “Our celebration does re-enact the sacrifice of the cross, but it does so only through the perspective on that sacrifice that was held by Jesus at the Last Supper. . . . In the Eucharist we look back at the death of Jesus, but we look back at it as profiled through the Passover anticipation by Christ. Only because the sacrifice of the cross was embodied and preenacted at the Last Supper can it be reenacted and sacramentally embodied now” (*Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994], 28).

“In giving his sacrifice to the Church, Christ has also made his own the spiritual sacrifice of the Church, which is called to offer herself in union with the sacrifice of Christ. This is the teaching of the Second Vatican Council concerning all the faithful: ‘Taking part in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which is the source and summit of the whole Christian life, they offer the divine victim to God and offer themselves along with it.’”³⁶ In other words, just as Christ is not fully himself without his body the Church, which completes who he is, neither is his sacrifice complete until every bodily member is included in his total self-offering as head of the body to God³⁷.

This unique reality, which appears whole and entire in every Eucharistic community throughout the world, is localized and activated in the life of the parish *because* it faithfully re-presents his sacrifice, thereby making communicants sharers in his resurrection too, members even here and now of his risen body, rendered present to us in the form of the bread of life.³⁸ Since Church *is* Eucharist, the parish is the Church in its full reality. Therefore, every parish of the diocese owes its ecclesial existence to, and finds itself as the Church in, the Eucharist sanctioned by the local bishop. In 2003, Pope John Paul II expressed the principle at work here in the following way: “The Eucharist is the sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages. . . . [So] the Church, while pointing to Christ in the mystery of his passion, *also reveals her own mystery*. . . . Her foundation and well-spring is the whole of the *Triduum paschale*, but this is as it were gathered up, foreshadowed and ‘concentrated’ forever in the gift of the Eucharist”³⁹.

To describe the Church in this way—and hence the parish—as a communion in the Trinity (a oneness *with* the Father, *through* the

³⁶ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §14, citing *Lumen Gentium*, §11.

³⁷ This is why St. Paul can legitimately say: “I rejoice in my sufferings, . . . and in my flesh *I complete what is lacking* in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church” (Col 1:24).

³⁸ Contemplating this profound unity between ourselves and Christ, Pope Benedict uses three texts from St Augustine to help him express the mystery here: “The great Bishop of Hippo, speaking specifically of the Eucharistic mystery, stresses the fact that Christ assimilates us to himself: ‘If you have received [the signs of the body and blood of Christ] properly, you yourselves are what you have received’ (*Sermon* 227). Consequently, ‘not only have we become Christians, we have become Christ himself’ (*On John’s Gospel* 21.8) [since] ‘one should not believe that Christ is in the head but not in the body; rather he is complete in the head and in the body’ (*On John’s Gospel* 28.1)” (Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §36).

³⁹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §§11 and 5, respectively (*italics original*).

Son, *in* the Holy Spirit), means that parishioners have access to that joy for which human beings were created and for which they are destined eternally in the kingdom. The Mass applies to us the fruits of the kingdom that Christ won for mankind in every age by his perfect reconciling act. St. Paul succinctly defined that kingdom as “righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,”⁴⁰ and these are the benefits Christ passes on to us in the Mass, all of them gifts of superlative worth, each a pearl of great price. What greater desire after all does one have than for peace of mind, for peace of heart? What price could be put on deep joy such as children feel, the joy of innocence? What innocence is so precious as that of adult righteousness and integrity, of knowing we are “at rights” with God, mature in holiness and ready for his coming to us in all the ways he does: in other people, in the ordinary everyday conversations and situations, and at our death, whether sudden or otherwise.

In a society where depression is commonplace and suicide has reached bewildering proportions, with people stressed and unhappy, marriages under strain, relationships empty of Christ, the gifts of the kingdom that pour from the Eucharist are there to be cherished and prized. Available, accessible, offered freely and generously, they feed the hungry hope that, as one writer put it: “Even in our sinful world grace has an absolute priority over guilt, the power of the triune God’s redeeming love [is] totally victorious, the mystery of light is much greater than the mystery of darkness or iniquity. [For,] we have entered a history immersed in salvation in which ‘the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it’ (John 1:5).”⁴¹ It is a heartening and liberating truth that confidently stands against the pessimism of our time reflected in the dark culture of contemporary art, drama, literature, and music. And all of us, exposed day by day to Godless negativity through radio and television, need to be reminded of it regularly so that our faith might be strengthened and increased by the habitual experience of divine love at first-hand, at its source.

If the Eucharist and its spiritual blessings are to inundate parishioners’ daily existence—to fertilize and enrich their mentality, their outlook, and their decisions—they need to be led through the liturgy

⁴⁰ Rom 14:17.

⁴¹ Frederick M. Jelly, *Madonna: Mary in the Catholic Tradition* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1986), 116, citing Karl Rahner, “The Dogma of the Immaculate Conception,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3, *Theology of the Spiritual Life* (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1967), 140.

spiritually. That is the reason they come to Mass. Some celebrants, however, consider that the sacred rites and their significance are insufficient to hold the people's attention or interest. They resort oftentimes to so-called "creative liturgy" to compensate for what they imagine is lacking in the rubrics.⁴² This is a grave mistake, as many Mass-goers will tell you.⁴³ The faithful who practice regularly are not there to be entertained, but rather nourished. They want to meet Christ.⁴⁴ Those others who come only because they have to—for reasons of solidarity at times of bereavement for example or for weddings—will not find the occasion entertaining anyway. There are better ways to be entertained outside the Church.

A growing number of Catholics (and not just the elderly who remember how differently things used to be done) say they do not experience at Mass now any sense of the sacred, or the sacrifice of Calvary, or the presence of God, or the challenge of the Gospel, or any encouragement to follow it. In reply, they might be told that the Eucharist is a banquet too, a meal where the People of God come like a family does, to eat together and express love for one another as brothers and sisters do. As at any familial meal, everyone must be

⁴² I know of a case in which clowns and acrobats from a visiting circus are invited to perform during the Sunday Masses every year during the circus season. One celebrant had a goat brought in during Lent to reinforce the Trocaire campaign appeal that year (the sacristan resigned immediately). Less dramatic forms of creative activity, but no less wildly distracting, are: the passing of a microphone through the congregation "to let them have their say" during the homily; the distribution of Christmas stockings and Easter eggs to "every child in the audience"; the inclusion of "Dad's pipe and tobacco" in the funeral offertory procession; and the solo rendering by the celebrant of a certain football anthem on the morning of the Big Match after Communion (justified as a sung Intercessory Prayer).

⁴³ "It is to be lamented," wrote Pope John Paul II, "that, especially in the years following the post-conciliar liturgical reform, as a result of a misguided sense of creativity and adaptation there have been a number of *abuses* which have been a source of suffering for many. A certain reaction against 'formalism' has led some . . . to consider the 'forms' chosen by the Church's great liturgical tradition and her Magisterium as non-binding and to introduce unauthorized innovations which are often completely inappropriate" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §52; cf. §10). Pope Benedict reiterated the point in *Sacramentum Caritatis* §3: "The changes which the Council called for need to be understood within the overall unity of the historical development of the rite itself, without the introduction of artificial discontinuities." Later that year in his Letter to Bishops (July 7th), he returned to the point about ritual tradition and warned again that "creativity frequently led to deformations of the liturgy."

⁴⁴ John 12:20–21—the great desire of the human heart in every age.

involved and show their talents so they will feel appreciated and *want* to come again (maybe) next Sunday—or whenever.

It is certainly true that liturgical changes over the last half century have brought a different emphasis and change of ethos in the way Mass is celebrated, a change from the predominantly transcendental to the anthropocentric. Many positive effects have resulted from the personalist-inclusivist character of the celebration and the introduction of specific ministries of readers and extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion and, increasingly, the permanent diaconate. But the last five decades have also seen a different element enter in that is distractingly secularist in its approach and alien to the New Testament concept of *koinonia*.⁴⁵ It is this that accounts for those anomalies, misguided “creative” innovations, adaptations, or departures from legitimate liturgical tradition and its unity of historical development that Pope John Paul (as noted earlier) termed “abuses which have been a source of suffering for many.”

Among the laity, for instance, the idea is now prevalent that the Mass so “belongs to them” that they have the right to introduce their own personal touches to the celebration at will. (“this is *my* wedding” or “*our* family funeral”). Following what they see in televised state funerals or weddings and encouraged by the profiteering of funeral directors and wedding organizers, they can demand additions or alterations to the Mass that are not in the Catholic tradition

⁴⁵ This term, of extraordinary depth and richness among the inspired writers, is used most frequently by Paul and found also in Luke’s Acts and the First Letter of John. It is translated by the RSV as “sharing” or “participation” and in other translations as “fellowship” or “brotherhood.” The two variants actually throw light on each other and elucidate the reality here. There is fellowship or brotherhood because of what Christians share and participate in. It is the common union or communion of the baptized *in Christ and with Christ and each other* that brings about such a transformation in their very nature as human beings that Paul described it as an altogether new creation (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15). The change was marked by their new filial relationship with God through Christ’s reconciling act and was effected by their full initiation into the New Testament churches. It manifested itself in a common life together, in united mind and heart through fidelity to the teaching of the Apostles, in charitable sharing of their material goods, and especially in their different way of worshipping God—namely, by the common celebration of the one bread and one cup of the Lord as the proclamation of his death in expectation of his second coming. Such liturgical worship and way of joyful living was the fruit of the one Spirit that was poured out on them and that generated their unity, or *koinonia*, as the one body of Christ, the Church (cf. Acts 2:42–47, 1 Cor 12:12–13, and 1 John 1:3).

and reflect a fatal individualism in society today that is contrary to the Eucharist's universal ecclesial significance. Because this happens when emotions are highly charged as a result of bereavement or marriage fever, the local priest (even if he *has* reservations about their plans for the liturgy) can be so intimidated as to feel powerless to voice an objection and even less able to prevent what might happen on the day. This attitude of private ownership is the symptom of an extremely reductive understanding of the Eucharistic mystery. Stripped of its sacrificial meaning, desacralized as the banquet of the covenant in Christ's blood, the Mass is seen as no more than a meal among friends, a social ritual whose importance derives from the nonreligious, passing significance attributed to it by the occasion, a rite of passage in a common fellowship no different from that in the pub or the sit-down meal later at the hotel.

"Liturgy is never anyone's private property," affirmed Pope John Paul decisively, "be it of the celebrant or of the community in which the mysteries are celebrated."⁴⁶ And, in a tone more scathing than was usual with him, he explained the reason: "The Sacred Liturgy expresses and celebrates the one faith professed by all and, being the heritage of the whole Church, cannot be determined by local Churches in isolation from the universal Church." He spoke equally firmly of "the great responsibility which belongs to priests in particular for the celebration," given that "no one is permitted to undervalue the mystery entrusted to our hands: it is too great for anyone to feel free to treat it lightly and with disregard for its sacredness and its universality".⁴⁷

On the question of the nature of the Eucharist as sacrifice and banquet and the relationship between the two aspects, John Paul began and ended his pontificate with two major statements that stressed the unity of the mystery and the inherent harmony of its twofold integrity. For him, this was no matter of transitory importance, but rather one of vital, permanent significance, as it must be for all who love the parishes they serve as priests and who spend themselves making them vibrant faith communities, true manifestations of the Church that Christ instituted. Together the statements are, as it were, like arms embracing all his teachings on the Eucharist and the life of the Church in the years between.

⁴⁶ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §52.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, §§51, 52.

First, in his 1980 letter *Dominicae Cenae*,⁴⁸ he observed:

[This] drawing together and this union, the prototype of which is the union of the Apostles at the Last Supper, express the Church and bring her into being. But the Church is not brought into being only through the union of people, through the experience of brotherhood which the Eucharistic banquet gives rise to. The Church is brought into being when, in that fraternal union and communion, we celebrate the sacrifice of the Cross, when we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (I Cor. 11:26), and later when, being deeply compenetrated with the mystery of salvation, we approach as a community the table of the Lord in order to be nourished there, in a sacramental manner, by the fruits of the holy sacrifice of propitiation. Therefore in Eucharistic Communion we receive Christ himself; and (by) our union with him, which is a gift and a grace for each individual, . . . we are also associated in the unity of his Body which is the Church.

Only in this way, through faith and that disposition of mind, is there brought about that building up of the Church, which in the Eucharist, truly finds its "source and summit."

And in his last encyclical on the Eucharist twenty-three years later, he makes the same point again:

The gift of Christ and his Spirit which we receive in Eucharistic Communion superabundantly fulfils the yearning for fraternal unity deeply rooted in the human heart; at the same time it elevates the experience of fraternity already present in our common sharing at the same Eucharistic table to a degree which far surpasses that of the simple human experience of sharing a meal. Through her communion with the body of Christ, the Church comes to be ever more profoundly "in Christ in the nature of a sacrament, that is, a sign and instrument of intimate unity with God and of the unity of the whole human race" (*Lumen Gentium* §1).⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Pope John Paul II, *Dominicae Cenae* (1980), §4.

⁴⁹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §24.

It is clear from this that the Eucharist is able to bind in unity not because it is *either* banquet *or* sacrifice, but because it is both. To lose sight of either dimension is to devalue the nature of the communion it effects. It is also to miss the point of what a parish is. The Eucharist expresses and renews the Church whose nature is unity and peace. The parish is the Church. Therefore, the Eucharist expresses and renews the unity and peace of the parish. It is only Christ's body and blood that creates and sustains a parish, that heals it and reconciles it, refreshes its youth and vigour; and it does so as the sacrament of his Supper, which in turn is the sacrament of his redeeming sacrifice.

The practical implications that follow are important. From a balanced perception of the twofold reality of the mystery, a priest, keeping in mind what Christ is doing in the Eucharist and believing in the power of the Eucharist to change people's lives, will want his congregation to have greater awareness of the mystery too and to come to see for themselves the impact that liturgy should be having on their daily life. As Vatican II's *Sacrosanctum Concilium* put it, the faithful are to be encouraged to take part in the Mass not "as strangers or silent spectators," but as participants "in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing."⁵⁰

Exactly what active participation might mean has not always been understood in the way the Council intended. Some have interpreted it as involving as many as possible in as many external activities as possible. The more people do, the more they participate. But, in 2005, the eleventh General Synod of Bishops corrected this notion when it placed first on its checklist of real participation at Mass the spirit of constant conversion. In agreement, Pope Benedict XVI observed somewhat wryly that "active participation in the Eucharistic liturgy can hardly be expected if one approaches it superficially."⁵¹ What he meant was that only "a heart reconciled to God [can] make genuine participation possible."⁵² Making distinction between "genuine" and "superficial" participation is helpful because it draws attention to what is actually important here—namely *the quality* of the congregation's engagement with the Mass. This is not something determined by outward appearance only. Merely to be active is not necessarily to be involved. What determines quality *involvement* is the spiritual

⁵⁰ Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §48 (cited in Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §52).

⁵¹ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §55.

⁵² *Ibid.*

preparedness for the grace that flows in corresponding measure to one's *interior active disposition before the Eucharistic reality*.

Among the personal dispositions required for fruitful engagement with the action of the Mass, Pope Benedict, drawing from the *Propositions* of the eleventh General Assembly, specified an examination of conscience with sacramental confession when necessary, recollection and silence before Mass begins, and the Eucharistic fast. In other words, a meaningful act of divine worship presupposes the same preparation by the faithful as is expected of the celebrant. To encounter Christ in Word and Sacrament, conscious that we are entering into the mystery of salvation; to be moved by the banquet of sacrifice; to be alert to its implications for our whole manner of living—none of this comes about without prior deliberation. Genuine active participation in the Eucharist therefore begins every time we make a decision to let the mystery unfold itself to our minds and hearts and take steps to prepare for the privilege of worshiping God as he desires, “in spirit and in truth.”⁵³ This process will inevitably be accompanied by the effort “to participate actively in the life of the Church as a whole, [which includes making] a missionary commitment to bring Christ’s love into the life of society.”⁵⁴

Again, speaking on the practical level here, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*’s four constitutive components of public worship, in the hands of a competent pastor, still comprise the key opportunities for a true and fruitful, active participation by the flock. First of all, the faithful should be “instructed by God’s word,” whose voice is the preacher. This means *God’s* word as revealed in the Church’s Sacred Scriptures, doctrines, and teachings, and as expounded by the homily—Not nonbiblical texts or hymns-in-place-of-the-psalm, and not the life story or opinions of the homilist or a homily substitute on forthcoming events or parish building projects or financial business or the like. Second, they should be nourished at the table of the Lord’s body. Third, they should give thanks to God—for the incomparable gift of his Beloved Son and their sanctifying Spirit in the ongoing plan of creation and salvation. And last, they should be encouraged to do that which makes the Mass different from any other act of worship—namely, offer “the immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, [and at the same time] learn to make an offering of themselves [so that] they might

⁵³ John 4:23–24.

⁵⁴ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §55.

be drawn day by day into ever more perfect union with God and each other.”⁵⁵

The vocabulary here is very precise. The faithful “should be instructed,” “should be nourished,” “should be encouraged,” and “should learn.” This shows how the Council envisaged lay participation at Mass and, at the same time, highlights and specifies the priest’s role in facilitating a grace-filled sharing in the liturgy every Sunday. Such participation does not come about automatically. A shepherd *leads* his sheep to green pastures. By means of the divine word, he *shows* them where to find still waters. Using the crook of admonition and staff of encouragement, he *guides* them along the right path. He *prepares* the Eucharistic banquet of the Good Shepherd who laid down his life for the flock and, with the oil of the Spirit, *affirms* their hope in the promise of the life of lasting peace in the Lord’s own dwelling place. And, in this way, parish community and parish identity is continually molded and re-formed in Christ, healed and reconciled in his Spirit, united and pacified with the Father, built up and strengthened in the Trinity, and regenerated and sanctified by God’s grace.

This is not, therefore, by human resources, and yet it is not without human collaboration. For this is Christ’s work among us and within us, Christ conducting his eternal worship of his Father through us whom he has made priestly members of his priestly body. He it is who, by means of sacred rites and sacred words carried out faithfully by sacred ministers, himself shepherds, enfolds, and churches his sheep. And this is because, as St. Augustine taught, “all good shepherds [are] in the one shepherd, are all one reality”; therefore:

Let them feed the sheep—it is Christ who feeds them. The friends of the bridegroom do not speak with their own voice, but greatly rejoice because of the bridegroom’s voice. He is feeding the sheep when they feed them; and he says “I feed,” since in them is his voice, his love. . . . He, the one shepherd, feeds his sheep in these shepherds, and they in the one. So let them all be in the one shepherd, and speak with the one shepherd’s voice, for the sheep to hear, and to follow their shepherd, not any at random, but the one. All should in him speak with the one voice, and not with different voices⁵⁶.

⁵⁵ Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §48.

⁵⁶ St. Augustine, Sermon 46.29–30 *On the Shepherds* (text in *The Divine Office* III, 581).

At the heart of good liturgy, with its genuinely inclusive participation and sanctifying proactive celebration, is the simple truth that Mass should never just be *said* or *heard* or merely *attended*, but rather *prayed*. It is, after all, the Christians' act of worship, the highest and most noble homage that can be rendered to the Holy Trinity by man, the great outpouring of gratitude that alone is acceptable to him on behalf of the whole creation, given its fallen state. The Eucharist, prayed, is precisely all this because Christ redeemed us with it, instituted it for us as the perfect form of prayer so that it is always in union with his high priestly prayer of thanksgiving that we offer our thanksgiving to the Father through him. This being the case, the Sunday Mass is seen to encompass the Mind and Spirit of God himself, which is why it alone satisfies in full the honor that is his due.

To pray the Mass with God's Mind and Spirit—in Christ and the Holy Spirit—is to become absorbed in the words as they are uttered and in the sacramental actions that accompany them and give the words their life. Ultimately, it is to become absorbed in *the* Word that is the Gospel of the day, with its ancillary readings from the Old Testament and Epistles. To the spiritually attentive, the prayers of the Missal⁵⁷ will crystallize the good news of that Gospel, refracting its many hues of nuanced meaning and its joy-filled relevance. They will also inspire us with fresh ways of following it, the better to receive the Word made flesh now made bread for us that we might become what we consume and be wholly consumed by what we have received.

Just as good shepherding draws the faithful by example, so the focused concentration of the celebrant will draw his parish with him into the heart of the Eucharistic mystery Sunday by Sunday contemplatively. As he does so, the dignity of the celebration will be enhanced by his economy of movement in the sanctuary. Only actions that directly center the congregation's attention are appropriate, not the superfluous twitching of fingers or waving of outstretched arms or shuffling of feet, nor fidgeting during the reading by lectors nor

⁵⁷ And this requires greater concentration now than before the retranslation of the prayers of the Missal. If we accept the challenge this poses, it will require, in advance, several readings of the Collect, Offertory, and Concluding Prayers, plus the Entrance and Communion Antiphons, and from time to time a reflective rereading of the Eucharistic Prayers especially for their rhythm and punctuation pauses, as well as the many Prefaces that almost certainly will trip the reader if read for the first time only during Mass.

studious scrutiny of the congregation, nor head signals to altar servers, and so on. Priests are rarely conscious of these nervous idiosyncrasies that their congregations are certainly aware of and that enthrall the fascinated gaze of the faithful, distracting their attention hypnotically from the action of the Mass. Unnecessary page turning back and forth, frenetic searching for the proper Preface, and indecision about which Eucharistic Prayer, are also clear signs that this Mass has not been properly prepared for in advance. They communicate a lax attitude that can come across only as indifference and can run through a crowd like a virus.

What further instills the sense of gracious nobility to the occasion is the use of authentic materials at the altar and its environs: wax candles, for example, and not oil-filled imitations; an oil lamp before the tabernacle and not an electric bulb; fresh flowers or natural greenery, not artificial bouquets; pure linen corporals and purificators and towels; crystal water bowls and cruets; gold and silver for chalices and patens, not pottery or wood. The worship of God is worthy of the best, and the best comes down to the most basic things used to honor him. Because good quality artifacts bespeak the solemnity of the event,⁵⁸ they affect the celebrant's state of mind for the good. They also come under people's notice for the good during Mass—as such things do when they are out to dine or on holiday—and give an awareness that what they are doing this Sunday is special, just as, too, a bright environment and pleasant smell on entering a church immediately create the impression of serenity and well-being here, of good order and evident care for the house of God and the parish's place of worship. All such details help build up the ethos that we rightly call Catholic, that concerns itself with everything in life from the ground up that serves the dignity and privilege of our living with God. But also of import, the attention given to these things makes *parishioners* feel cared for and worthy of care. What is done for the sanctuary and for the liturgy is done for them—and they know it—to enrich their common life in the body of Christ and enable them to return love for Love in the Holy Spirit, whose temple they are.

“Whose temple they are”: ultimately this is what the Sunday Mass is about throughout the year: Constructing the *Corpus Christi*—the local Church—from the one *Corpus Christi*—the Eucharist; making

⁵⁸ As is shown at Christmas and Easter for instance when a special effort is usually made, or at a wedding or ordination, or the priest's own jubilee Mass. Sunday celebrations through the rest of the year deserve no less.

the parish as a Catholic community a place fit for God to dwell in, in our midst, a place where newcomers will instantly feel at home, feel that here again is their Church from Church, whether they be visitors passing through, families moving in to stay, or neighboring parishes clustering together to pool spiritual resources; making it a parish area where God and man move easily in and out of each other's lives, at one with every other Catholic parish in the diocese and throughout the world and yet still distinct in character, with its own particular history and tradition, a place its sons and daughters are proud to come from. Sunday Mass makes a parish a community that draws its strength and identity from Christ, baptized into him in the Church where their parents were married, and from which they will be buried. This community, unafraid to be Christ's associates and companions, bear witness to him in the modern world as their predecessors from here have done for generations past.

So, finally, it must be asked: *how* does this first, central, and principal self-identifying act of Catholic life and faith, the weekly celebration of the Eucharist, make the parish what it is in all its distinctness and in its universality? We ask this because, *from the outside*, one parish looks much the same as any other, really. Everywhere you find the same mix of people doing similar things in similar ways, with similar backgrounds, the same type of family stories and memories, personal desires and fears, pains and joys. So what impact, what difference, does the Sunday Mass make on any parish or cluster of parishes *on the inside* to make it what it should be *in God's eyes*?

To outline an answer, we must go back to our original reflection on what a priest's task is in whichever parish he serves. He is called and sent to *gather God's people into the kingdom* by *announcing the Gospel* that culminates in *celebrating the Eucharist*, since this completes the insertion into Christ's body that began at our baptism. The aim of his mission then, the outcome toward which all priestly ministry is directed, can be summed up in three concept terms that translate worship and faith into the secular life of a community that identifies itself as Catholic and organizes itself as Christ's Church in "this" or any parish:⁵⁹ "sacramental style"; "Eucharistic attitude"; and finally "Eucharistic consistency."

"Sacramental style" is a way of looking at the world and ourselves that recognizes sanctity in everything that exists. All created things

⁵⁹ That is, how the *Lex orandi* and *Lex credendi* express themselves as *Lex vivendi* from one Sunday to the next.

speak of Christ, who speaks to us of God: the incarnate Son who impressed his wisdom on all he created and then took material form to enter into that creation as man! After the Incarnation, all things put us in touch with Christ. To eyes able to see the inherently sacramental potential in any thing, the sacramental life of the Church makes eminent sense: seven outward signs of invisible grace working visibly for the good, bringing to God's created children the highest form of being. Now we too have the potential to put other people in touch with God—all of us sacraments of a kind, efficacious channels of the divine life and divine love to others, sacraments like the seven instituted in Christ and by Christ to make his risen presence felt in the world we inhabit, all of us fruitful occasions of grace for the encounter between Christ and other men and women and children because we ourselves live an ecclesial sacramental existence. And, so, we have the ability to leave other people better off for having met us, for having had dealings with us.

More than this is needed however. The Eucharist is not simply one sacrament among seven, but the source of the other six, the center from which they spring and their apex, their summit or culmination to which they return. This is because, whereas the other six bestow the fruits of the redemption Christ won for us, the Eucharist is Christ himself, and its celebration is the re-presentation of his saving sacrifice and his Easter triumph. Therefore, sacramental style in living requires Eucharistic awareness, a "Eucharistic attitude," if it is to be properly sourced, centered, and made complete.

What this entails for building up the spiritual life of the parish is extending the act of worship on a Sunday morning (or the evening vigil) out into the sacramental existence of the rest of the week. As Pope Benedict put it:

Christianity's new worship includes and transfigures every aspect of life: "Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (1 Cor 10:31). Christians, in all their actions, are called to offer true worship to God. Here the intrinsically Eucharistic nature of Christian life begins to take shape. The Eucharist, since it embraces the concrete, everyday existence of the believer, makes possible, day by day, the progressive transfiguration of all those called by grace to reflect the image of the Son of God (cf. Rom 8:29ff.). There is nothing authentically human—our thoughts and affections,

our words and deeds—that does not find in the sacrament of the Eucharist the form it needs to be lived to the full.⁶⁰

The “Eucharistic form of life”—that which conforms daily living to the Eucharist itself, and to the thanksgiving worship of God that it celebrates—is necessarily self-sacrificing. When we realize this and take it to heart, then we adopt the “Eucharistic attitude.” It is a spirituality based on that text in Romans in which St. Paul urges the early Christians: “Offer your very selves [lit. ‘your bodies’] to him as a living sacrifice of praise, the worship offered by mind and heart. No longer conformed to this present age, let your minds be re-made and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God and know what is good, acceptable and perfect.”⁶¹

From this, two things become clear. One is that it is through worshipping God and through habitual prayer that the proper disposition emerges for responsible and mature Christian life. Therefore, the Sunday act of worship, with full, authentic participation, is absolutely crucial to the holiness of parishioners. Occasional attendance will not do, nor mere presence in the pew. Pastors really have to spell out for their congregation the nature of what they are doing at the Eucharist and the goal they should be working towards of forming a Eucharistic mindset as part of a whole new sacramental way of relating to reality—in particular, the self-sacrificing nature of loving others for the sake of Christ in the Mass, in the family, at work, in the social-secular milieu in which they move during the course of the week.

And point number two is that, deeply embedded in a genuine Eucharistic attitude and Eucharistic form of living, there is “Eucharistic consistency,” the third of the three concept terms. Human spiritual maturity does not exist without moral responsibility. Therefore, it is presumed that a communicant is in the state of grace *consistent with the significance of Communion* before receiving the Eucharist, otherwise the act is vacated of its meaning. Since the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood expresses a unity already there with the baptized person, not to be in unity with Christ and his Church because of grave sin and yet approach the sign of communion would be more than an untruth; it would be a sacrilege and, therefore, could never achieve its purpose.⁶²

⁶⁰ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §71.

⁶¹ Rom 12:1–2.

⁶² Cf. 1 Cor 11:28–29. See also John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, §36.

It is a fact that there are Catholics now who receive at Mass even though their lives are not in harmony with the Gospel, but rather at variance with Catholic teaching. The commonest cases at the present time are of cohabitation, divorce and remarriage, abortion, artificial contraception or fertility treatment (*in vitro* fertilization, which involve multiple abortions, as well as defiling the sacramental act of marriage), homosexual unions, and the scandal that arises from the public nature of most of these. “Eucharistic consistency” needs to be restored in such situations before Catholics are legitimately eligible again to receive Holy Communion. And this is effected through sacramental confession and absolution. The nature of the Eucharist as sacrament of redemption requires this, as does its signification of the Church’s unity as the fullest manifestation in our midst of Christ’s victorious presence and power over sin and its damnable consequences.

It is in this area, perhaps more than most, that the parish faithful need the shepherding referred to earlier. It would seem that many do not even know what the Church’s teaching is on these matters and little less understand the reasoning behind that teaching. As St. Paul observed in his letter to the Romans: “How will they believe unless they have heard, and how will they hear unless they have a preacher (of the good news). So faith comes from what is preached, and what is preached comes from the word of Christ.”⁶³ The fact that, so often, serious moral decisions are made without even consulting what the Church has to say is itself an indication that lay people today take more guidance from current political debate and soap operas on television than they do from the sources of revelation. To justify this, the argument is made that faith is a private matter and everyone must follow his own conscience, to which a truly ecclesial parish would reply that such a position is not Catholic, but rather belongs to the Protestant tradition. Furthermore that conscience, being the faculty of understanding, requires sound education, since—as are all areas of human understanding—it is subject to error, misinformation, confusion, self-deception, and blunting through neglect. Furthermore still, that Catholic conscience, being at the service of Truth, takes its direction from God himself and his holy word, which is beyond fault, that word that he has entrusted in its entirety to his spouse the Church, whose sacred tradition and teaching authority—as Vatican

⁶³ Rom 10:14–17.

II's dogmatic constitution *Dei Verbum* affirms—are two of the three sources of divine revelation. As regards faith's private and public nature, the Bishops' Synod on the Eucharist and the papal post-synodal exhortation had the following additional point to make:

Worship pleasing to God can never be a purely private matter, without consequences for our relationships with others: it demands a public witness to our faith. Evidently, this is true for all the baptized, yet it is especially incumbent upon those who, by virtue of their social or political position, must make decisions regarding fundamental values, such as respect for human life, in its defense from conception to natural death, the family built upon marriage between a man and a woman, the freedom to educate one's children and the promotion of the common good in all its forms.⁶⁴ These values are not negotiable. Consequently Catholic politicians and legislators, conscious of their grave responsibility before society, must feel particularly bound, on the basis of a properly formed conscience, to introduce and support laws inspired by values grounded in human nature. There is an objective connection here with the Eucharist (cf. 1 Cor 11:27–29).⁶⁵

What makes the parish a parish, as distinct from a town commune or an urban social entity or any other type of organized human communality, is its total fidelity to the Eucharist as a way of life. It is this that makes of it an ecclesial communion. Whether we are thinking of present existing parishes, or future clusters over a wider geographical region, it is the Sunday by Sunday faithfulness of the faithful to the Mass that sustains the Church through the changes of history, builds it up like a temple (construction in progress), and renews it in holiness through the generation of life and regeneration of spirit as our ancestors did since the time of St. Patrick. In our own diocese that history of fidelity, which eventually shot through the rest of Ireland like the flames of an Easter fire, carefully enkindled its very first sparks. It was among us that Patrick began his incendiary of faith, and it was here that he chose to come back to die. Although in his *Confessions* he does not mention the Eucharist specifically, it was

⁶⁴ Here a footnote reference is made to Pope John Paul II's 1995 encyclical letter *Evangelium Vitae*.

⁶⁵ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, §83.

he who ordained those who handed it on, and we have been doing so ever since in that strong tradition that to date has never died. Today it is to us that that Eucharistic flame has been entrusted for handing over and handing on. 