

Cultivating a Eucharistic Spirituality – Rev. J. Elderfield – 8/10/16

As a Catholic Christian, called to be a husband, a father, Deacon, chaplain, I have often wondered and reflected on how I am doing – that is to say, how am I living as a Disciple of Jesus Christ.

There are two responses that come to mind. Firstly, I am very grateful for all the gifts and blessings I have received from the Lord in my life so far. Those blessings include my faith, my current health, my past, the ups and downs, my wife, my children, employment, parish community, current context etc. I am blest and must respond with thanksgiving.

Secondly, I am conscious that I am a sinner in need of salvation – for my past, in my present and doubtless in the future. I am aware and more so as I get older, that I need the Lord – to know, love and serve him. My desire however derives from His desire for me in the first place and his mercy. Through the gift of Baptism at the beginning of my life, I was ‘claimed for Christ’ and placed on a daily journey of salvation. Jesus gives me a share of his divine life for now. That means I am to live with him, in him and through him. Baptism meant I died with him and hope to rise with him. The pattern of Jesus’ death and resurrection now marks my life.

This is what we call the paschal mystery. Richard Caillardetz, Ph.D. in his pamphlet *Broken and Poured Out* writes: ‘that at the core of the spirituality of any Eucharistic minister must be a deep appreciation of this paschal mystery’ (p.31).

What is the paschal mystery?¹

The Paschal Mystery is basically the process of dying and rising, death and new life. We see this all around us and in our own lives.

In essence it is Jesus gift of himself by his passion, death, resurrection and ascension. We as disciples are called to receive this gift of himself especially in the Eucharist to be sent out to be gift of self to others.

Jesus Christ's passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension are the ultimate event of dying and rising, of death and new life.

We learn from Jesus that new life can come from death, that we can find meaning in tough times, that there really is light in the darkness. We learn that all life has this rhythm of dying and rising and that God is with us in good times and in bad.

Christ's experience of suffering, death, and new life has forever changed us and given us a different way of living. Death no longer has the last word. Plus, when we encounter tough

¹ The content following was adapted from *The Paschal Mystery in Everyday Life*, Loyola Press. See <http://www.loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/family/catholic-teens/catholic-teachings-for-teens/the-paschal-mystery-in-everyday-life>

times, we have the comfort of knowing that God has “been there, done that” and the power of hope that new life will come from death.

Becoming conscious of our own dyings and risings helps us have a greater sense of compassion for others and a greater willingness to reach out.

I invite you to Pause for thought and consider the following questions:²

Think about your own life. What is a dying or rising that you have experienced today, this week, this year? Reflect on that experience in light of the event of Jesus Christ's passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension.

St John Paul II in his Encyclical letter on the Eucharist in the Church, *Ecclesia Eucharistia* wrote: ‘In this gift Jesus Christ entrusted to his Church the perennial making present of the paschal mystery. With it he brought about a mysterious “oneness in time” between that *Triduum* and the passage of the centuries. The thought of this leads us to profound amazement and gratitude. In the paschal event and the Eucharist which makes it present throughout the centuries, there is a truly enormous “capacity” which embraces all of history as the recipient of the grace of the redemption. This amazement should always fill the Church assembled for the celebration of the Eucharist. But in a special way it should fill the minister of the Eucharist.’ (Para. 5)

How amazed or grateful are we? When was the last time we expressed amazement or gratitude for so great a gift?

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states in paragraph 1380 that: ‘It is highly fitting that Christ should have wanted to remain present to his Church in this unique way. Since Christ was about to take his departure from his own in his visible form, he wanted to give us his sacramental presence; since he was about to offer himself on the cross to save us, he wanted us to have the memorial of the love with which he loved us “to the end,” even to the giving of his life. In his Eucharistic presence he remains mysteriously in our midst as the one who loved us and gave himself up for us, and he remains under signs that express and communicate this love.’

In the words of Pope Francis: ‘the Eucharist is not private prayer or a beautiful spiritual experience. It is not a simple commemoration of what Jesus did at the Last Supper. In order to understand well, we say that the Eucharist is a “memorial,” i.e. an act that makes present the event of the Death and Resurrection of Jesus: the bread is really his Body given for us, the wine is really his Blood poured out for us.’

² Any boxed items that follow invite the reader to *Pause for Thought* and consider the questions enclosed.

Pope Francis goes on to say: The Eucharist *is* Jesus who gives himself entirely to us. Nourishing ourselves on Him and abiding in Him through Eucharistic communion, if we do so in faith, transforms our lives into a gift to God and to our brothers and sisters. Nourishing ourselves on the “Bread of life” means entering into harmony with the heart of Christ, assimilating his choices, his thoughts, his behavior. It means entering a dynamism of love and becoming people of peace, people of forgiveness, reconciliation, and supportive sharing ... the same things that Jesus did.’³

How far do we allow Jesus to receive us and assume us? Are we being Christ in our lives and to those around as a fruit of our holy communion with Him?

Again Pope Francis taught that: ‘Living in communion with Christ, therefore, is anything but remaining passive and aloof from everyday life. On the contrary, it increasingly puts us in relationship with the men and women of our time, to offer them the concrete sign of the mercy and attention of Christ. While it nourishes us with Christ, the Eucharist which we celebrate transforms us little by little into the body of Christ and spiritual food for our brothers and sisters. Jesus wants to reach everyone, to bring the love of God to all. And for this, he makes each believer a servant of mercy.’

As Jesus in the feeding of the crowd took....blessed....broke and gave the gifts, so we receive from him the perennial gift of himself in the Eucharist in order to be Eucharist for others.

It reminds me of St Theresa of Avila’s prayer: ‘Christ has no body but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours, Yours are the eyes with which he looks Compassion on this world, Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good, Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, Yours are the eyes, you are his body. Christ has no body now but yours, No hands, no feet on earth but yours, Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassion on this world. Christ has no body now on earth but yours.’⁴

How are we being Eucharist for others? Are we generous and thankful or fearful and limited?

I have been reading about the *Jewish Roots of the Eucharist* as written by Dr Brant Pitre. In the book, using biblical texts and ancient Jewish traditional texts, he makes the connection between Jesus’ teaching about himself as the bread of Life (Cf. John 6) and the meaning of his Last Supper, with how the first century Jewish Christian believers would have understood its significance in the light of their Jewish faith history, beliefs, expectations and symbolism. He makes 4 key points amongst others:

³ Taken from Sunday Angelus August 2015. See internet source: <http://aleteia.org/2015/08/17/pope-francis-to-all-catholics-the-eucharist-is-jesus-christ/>

⁴ Taken from Sunday Angelus 2016. See internet source: <http://aleteia.org/2016/08/17/pope-francis-the-eucharist-transforms-us-into-spiritual-food-for-our-brothers-and-sisters/>

Firstly, the author shows how the Jewish people in Jesus's day were awaiting the new exodus of the Messiah (a new Moses, a new covenant, a new temple, new Promised Land). Jesus signalled the fulfilment of these expectations (through miracles, fulfilling prophecy, the Transfiguration and the New 'Exodus' of Jesus).

Secondly, as they awaited a new exodus, it meant establishing a new Passover. This Jesus did at the Last Supper in which he identified himself as the true Passover Lamb. His blood would be poured out in sacrifice AND his flesh would be consumed in the Eucharistic species.

Thirdly, Jesus contemporaries were longing for the return of the miraculous new manna (bread from heaven, also termed the bread of angels – seen as a heavenly substance that would come down in the days of the Messiah). Jesus fulfilled this longing in John 6 (Bread of life discourse) which he promises to give this new manna to them in the form of his own body.

Fourthly, and the point I want to reflect on more deeply, is the significance of 'the Bread of the Presence'.

The reason the author develops an argument about this 'Bread' is that he poses the question of how would God be worshipped and be present to His people with establishment of the New Passover and New Covenant.

He begins by examining what God in the Old Covenant, through Moses, instructed his people to construct in order to worship Him and be present to them. They were to build a Tabernacle (a Tent of Meeting), in which Moses built three key pieces of furniture: The Ark of the Covenant (God's throne – Mercy seat – contained Tablets, Manna and Aarons staff), The Golden Lampstand (7 tongues of fire), known as the Menorah, AND the golden table on which was placed the Bread of the Presence (in short, a visible sign of the invisible face of God)

This holy bread symbolised the presence of God and was offered to God with sacrificial wine. It was also a sign of God's everlasting covenant with Israel.

The priest-king Melchizedek (a reference in the New Testament for the everlasting priesthood of Jesus and his perpetual sacrifice) of Jerusalem is the first mentioned in the Old Testament to offer a sacrifice of bread and wine for Abram's victory, a more ancient form of sacrifice than the later blood sacrifices of the temple. The priestly line of Melchizedek is priestly order that Jesus is associated with especially in the letter to the Hebrews chapter seven.

According to Jewish tradition, the Bread of presence in the temple at the time of Jesus was offered in a particular way. It was considered Holy once it was offered in sacrifice to God (notice an unbloody one). It was thought to be supernatural in some way. Most significantly, during the major feasts such as the Passover when pilgrims would go to Jerusalem (just as Jesus did from childhood and with his disciples), there was a custom where the priests in the

temple would bring out the Golden Table with the Bread of the Presence for the pilgrims to see and say the following words: *Behold, God's love for you!*

It signified God's love because it was a visible sign of the everlasting covenant between God, the divine bridegroom and Israel, the earthly bride, like a marriage bond.

When the temple worship came to an end by its destruction in 70 AD, how was the presence to continue, indeed be fulfilled?

Jesus referred to himself as the new temple which if destroyed in three days would rise again. He established that His presence would be perpetually continued and made present through a new priesthood that he instituted through his apostles. In the Last supper taking the sacrificial signs of bread and wine, he makes them holy to be a continuation of his divine presence, he who is the face of God, for to see him is to see the Father.

Pitre argues: 'In short, when Jesus wanted to signify the everlasting covenant that he would establish between God and his people, he did not choose the flesh of the Passover Lamb to do it. Rather, he drew attention to the bread and wine of the Last Supper, which he identified as himself as his own body and blood. Through these perpetual signs he, like the priest in the temple before him, was saying to his disciples then, and to us now: Behold, God loves you!'⁵

As Catholics, the real presence of the Lord is a firm part of our tradition and clear teaching: 'The mode of Christ's presence under the Eucharistic species is unique. It raises the Eucharist above all the sacraments as "the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend." In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist "the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, *the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.*" This presence is called 'real' - by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presence as if they could not be 'real' too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a *substantial* presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.'⁶

How might we reflect on this truth of God's love and presence for us revealed so beautifully in the Blessed Sacrament? Does this truth have an impact on our understanding and reception of the Lord? How might this inform our perception of the elevation of the Eucharistic species in Mass? Does it have an impact on how we minister the Lord to others, especially the sick and housebound?

In Pope Benedict XVI's post synodal exhortation on the Eucharist, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, he explains that the Eucharist is a pledge of immortality, of eternal life that is to grow and develop within us. To make us grow up into Christ. What should be happening is that as we

⁵ Ibid., p.144

⁶ *Catechism*, 1374

feed on the Lord, we should be becoming transformed more and more like Him. Quoting St Augustine, we should be changed into him. Jesus does this by uniting himself to us – *He draws us into himself!*

This transformative relationship is the motivation behind St Paul's exhortation to the Romans (12:1) and to us: to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice which is our spiritual worship. We are to offer our whole selves as he has offered his whole self to us.

The sacrifice of Jesus in the Eucharist is also our sacrifice as members of His Body, the Church. To sacrifice is to make sacred. Therefore everything and every moment can be a sacrifice, made holy. All reality can be taken up into Christ and be transfigured!⁷

As Pope Benedict writes: '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. Here we can see the full human import of the radical newness brought by Christ in the Eucharist: the worship of God in our lives cannot be relegated to something private and individual, but tends by its nature to permeate every aspect of our existence. Worship pleasing to God thus becomes a new way of living our whole life, each particular moment of which is lifted up, since it is lived as part of a relationship with Christ and as an offering to God. The glory of God is the living man (cf. *1 Cor 10:31*). And the life of man is the vision of God.'⁸

Eucharistic spirituality embraces the whole of life...we cannot live therefore with God on the margins nor absent in our daily living...we are challenged to examine again our way of living and thinking.

Continuing the quote to the Romans (12:2), our minds need renewing which is why a morning like this is important for us to retreat, reflect and be renewed. We need to be made strong again in our faith, understanding and awareness of the Lord's profound love for us especially through the amazing gift of the Eucharist.

As Pope Benedict puts it: 'The Eucharist, as a mystery to be "lived", meets each of us as we are, and makes our concrete existence the place where we experience daily the radical newness of the Christian life. The Eucharistic sacrifice nourishes and increases within us all that we have already received at Baptism, with its call to holiness, and this must be clearly evident from the way individual Christians live their lives. Day by day we become "a worship pleasing to God" by living our lives as a vocation. Beginning with the liturgical assembly, the sacrament of the Eucharist itself commits us, in our daily lives, to doing everything for God's glory.'⁹

⁷ *Ibid.* para. 70

⁸ *Ibid.* para. 71

⁹ *Ibid.* para. 79

In essence called as a royal priesthood to give worship to God, we are loved so deeply that we are to overflow with that love to others as a sign of true worship and as witnesses to our life of faith: '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.'¹⁰

How does our belief and experience of the Eucharist affect our daily living, attitudes and actions? What barriers might there be? What ways can we deepen our Eucharistic witness?

In the Eucharist we have everything we need to go forward into the peripheries and evangelise with the Joy of the Gospel as Pope Francis has often said.

St John Paul II knew that Eucharistic devotion and cultivating a Eucharistic spirituality was the key. He wrote in his encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* about the need for a renewed enthusiasm in Christian living required for this century: 'a renewed impetus in Christian living passes through the Eucharist. Every commitment to holiness, every activity aimed at carrying out the Church's mission, every work of pastoral planning, must draw the strength it needs from the Eucharistic mystery and in turn be directed to that mystery as its culmination. In the Eucharist we have Jesus, we have his redemptive sacrifice, we have his resurrection, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit, we have adoration, obedience and love of the Father. Were we to disregard the Eucharist, how could we overcome our own deficiency?'¹¹

I began by acknowledging my blessings and that I am a sinner. My life consists of ups and downs. What keeps me going is the Lord especially in the Eucharist.

Let us be honest about our need. Let us pray for an increase in our desire for His Love and Mercy in this Year of Mercy, and let us pray to live the mystery of our loving God in the reality of our lives so that he may be glorified in and through us.

Glory be to the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be world without. Amen.

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¹⁰ Ibid. para. 83

¹¹ *Ecclesia Eucharistia*, para. 60

Scripture Readings with Questions for Reflection and Discussion in small Groups:

(All Scripture Quotes are taken from the New Revised Standard Version, Anglicised Edition)

GROUP A: *John 15:4-5*

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

1. Think about your own life. What is a dying or rising that you have experienced today, this week, this year? Reflect on that experience in light of the event of Jesus Christ's passion, death, Resurrection, and Ascension.
 2. How amazed or grateful are you at the gift of the Eucharist? When was the last time you expressed amazement or gratitude for so great a gift?
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GROUP B: *John 17:21-24*

'May they all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. Father, I desire that those also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory, which you have given me because you loved me before the foundation of the world.'

1. How far do you allow Jesus to receive you and 'assume' you in the Eucharist? Are you being Christ in your life, and to those around, as a fruit of your holy communion with Him?
 2. How are you being Eucharist for others? Are you generous and thankful or fearful and limited?
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Scripture Readings with Questions for Reflection and Discussion in small Groups:

GROUP C: *Luke 24:28-35*

'As they came near the village to which they were going, he walked ahead as if he were going on. But they urged him strongly, saying, 'Stay with us, because it is almost evening and the day is now nearly over.' So he went in to stay with them. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him; and he vanished from their sight. They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?' That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, 'The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!' Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

1. How might you reflect on the truth of God's love and presence for you revealed in the Blessed Sacrament? Does this truth have an impact on your understanding and reception of the Lord?
 2. How might the ancient Jewish belief in 'The Bread of the Presence' inform your perception of the elevation of the Eucharistic species in Mass?
 3. Does the 'real presence' of the Lord in the Eucharist effect how you minister the Lord to others, especially the sick and housebound?
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GROUP D: *Romans 12:1-2*

'I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.'

1. How does your belief and experience of the Eucharist affect your daily living, attitudes and actions?
 2. What barriers might there be? What ways can you deepen your Eucharistic witness?
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