

# DIOCESE OF PETERBOROUGH

## “SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND”

### A Day of Renewal on the Blessed Eucharist

Saturday, November 20, 2004

## 1 The Eucharist, Source And Summit of All Christian Life

### 1.1 Introduction

1.1.1 The Holy Father has declared this the “Year of the Eucharist.” We may wonder why, when we celebrate the Eucharist Sunday after Sunday, or even daily, we need to have a special year dedicated to this theme.

1.1.2 Clearly the Pope feels that it is especially vital for us now, in our current cultural context, to come to a *renewed* understanding and appreciation for the mystery of the Eucharist.

(1) He says we live in a “secularized culture, characterized [. . .] by a forgetfulness of God and a vain pursuit of human self-sufficiency” (MND 26).

1.1.3 I don’t think I need to remind you of the sad fact that for a large majority of our Catholic neighbours in North America and throughout the Western world (in some places over eighty percent!), the Eucharist is far from being the “source and summit” of their lives. . . . They have lost the sense of the importance or even the relevance of Sunday worship.

1.1.4 Without going into all the sociological and cultural factors for this situation, I think it’s safe to say that those Catholics who have abandoned the practice of the faith have not been able to perceive the *magnitude* of what the Lord has to offer them.

1.1.5 And I’m not saying it’s all their fault! Maybe in their lives there has never been an opportunity for the truth of the Eucharist to get through to them in all its power and purity.

1.1.6 But whatever the reason for their departure, I’m convinced that what is going to bring these brothers and sisters of ours home is not more guilt trips about the “Sunday obligation.” Nor are they going to be brought back by more exciting music, or more relevant homilies (although I’m sure that wouldn’t hurt!).

- 1.1.7 What they need, above all, is the simple, joyful witness of men, women, and children who *love* the Eucharist and treat it as the greatest treasure of their lives.
- 1.1.8 So we can see this Year of the Eucharist as a challenge for us to deepen our own faith, our reverence, our sense of wonder at the marvellous treasure the Lord has bestowed upon his Church.
- 1.1.9 In this talk I would like to explore with you *why* we Catholics take the Eucharist so seriously, and why the Second Vatican Council called the eucharistic sacrifice the “*source and summit* of the whole Christian life” (LG 11).
- 1.1.10 I must say I found it quite challenging to prepare this talk. Not that it’s difficult to find things to say about the Eucharist. It’s an inexhaustible mystery! What is challenging is having ONLY forty-five minutes in which to try to summarize the essentials of the Church’s teaching on this topic.
- 1.1.11 What I’ve chosen to focus on with you is the *foundations* of the Church’s faith in the Eucharist, which are in the Scriptures, the written word of God.
- 1.1.12 But I’m glad there will be an extended time for Q&A later on this morning, when we can unpack things a little more, and deal with some more particular questions you may have.
- 1.1.13 Just a comment on the word “mystery.” (At the memorial acclamation the priest says, “Let us proclaim the mystery of faith!”) When we speak about a mystery of the Christian faith, we’re not talking about something nebulous, something fuzzy like a cotton ball that we can mould into whatever shape we want.
- 1.1.14 A better image would be the *diamond*: There is an infinite variety of ways that I can turn the diamond to see how the light strikes its different facets, but it has a definite shape. I can’t mould it into something else to suit my fancy—at least not without breaking it.
- 1.1.15 It’s like that with the mystery of the Eucharist. It’s true that we can never fully comprehend it. But that doesn’t mean we should be satisfied with nebulous, fuzzy ways of describing it (e.g. speaking of it only “the community meal,” “a banquet of love,” etc.).
- 1.1.15.1 As the Holy Father says in his recent encyclical, “The Eucharist is too great a gift to tolerate ambiguity and depreciation” (EE 10).
- 1.1.16 The mystery has a definite shape, and it has particular connections with other truths of our faith. That’s what we’ll be looking at this morning.

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## 1.2 The Last Supper

- 1.2.1 It's a rather curious fact, when you think about it, that the central act of our life as a Church is a solemn ritual with bread and wine.
- 1.2.2 But all of us here who go to Mass regularly should have no trouble answering, at least in basic terms, the question of why we celebrate the Eucharist and what it is.
- 1.2.3 And the reason I say this is because every time we come to Mass, we *hear* the answers to those questions.
- 1.2.4 In every eucharistic celebration, at the heart of the eucharistic prayer, the presider recites the *story of the Last Supper* that Jesus took with his closest disciples, the night he was betrayed.
- 1.2.5 From the very beginning, from New Testament times onwards, this story has served as the *justification* for *why* the Church celebrates the Eucharist, and the primary *explanation* of *what it is*.
- 1.2.6 Now we're all probably aware, as readers of the New Testament, that the narrative of the Last Supper has come down to us in *four versions*: in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, and in the First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians, chapter 11. (What we hear in our eucharistic prayers is basically a combination of all four versions.)
- 1.2.7 The *differences* among the four accounts are interesting, and they are definitely worth studying, but we don't have the time to get into that this morning.
- 1.2.8 I'm just going to read Luke's version, so it's fresh in our minds.

And he said to them, "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." And he took bread, and when he had given thanks he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." And likewise the cup after supper, saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk 22:15-20).

- 1.2.9 The Last Supper narrative is like a close-up on Jesus. It doesn't satisfy our curiosity. It tells us next to nothing about what other people were doing or thinking, about secondary details; it focusses entirely on *his* words and actions.
- 1.2.10 What stands out about this story is not the fact that Jesus is having a meal! The gospels often portray Jesus sharing meals with people, both righteous people and sinners. Nor is it unusual for Jesus to be praying. That happens a lot too. What leaps off the page at us is *what Jesus says about the bread and the wine*.
- 1.2.11 That's definitely not part of the Jewish Passover ritual! It's also unlike anything else in the ministry of Jesus.
- 1.2.12 In all four accounts of what Jesus said about the bread, he identifies two realities: the *bread* he is holding, and his own *body*. "This IS my body."
- 1.2.13 And in all four accounts of Jesus' words over the cup, he identifies *three realities*: the *cup of wine* he is holding, his own *blood* to be shed on the Cross, and something else called the *covenant*.
- 1.2.14 According to Matthew and Mark, he says: "This is my blood of the covenant" (Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24).
- 1.2.15 We find an even stronger identification in the tradition reported by Luke and Paul: "This cup [. . .] is the new covenant in my blood" (Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25).
- 1.2.16 So it appears from this that if we want to understand what Jesus was doing at the Last Supper, we have to understand (1) what Jesus was going to do the following day, by offering his body and shedding his blood (on the Cross), and (2) we have to understand what Jesus means by "the covenant" or "the new covenant."

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### 1.3 The Fruit of the Paschal Mystery

- 1.3.1 So first of all, let's look at the relationship between the Last Supper and the Cross.
- 1.3.2 The Last Supper narrative gives us a window into Christ's soul. It gives us *his own interpretation* of the Cross, that is, of his death: He is saying that his body is given, is broken FOR US . . . that his blood is shed FOR US.

- 1.3.3 He is consciously and freely *transforming* what would otherwise be nothing but a tragic and brutal execution into an offering, a *sacrifice*, both for his Father and for humanity.
  - 1.3.4 And the only possible explanation for such an offering is LOVE, an *extreme* kind of love.
  - 1.3.4.1 John 13:1—“Just before the Passover feast, Jesus knew that his time had come to depart from this world to the Father. Having *loved* his own who were in the world, he now loved them to the very end.” And these words “to the very end,” here, can also mean “completely” or “to the uttermost” (see John 19:30).
  
  - 1.3.5 The Cross is the culmination of the entire life and mission of Jesus on earth . . . and the Eucharist is the fruit of the Cross. It’s what enables us to look on that tree of death as a Tree of Life. It’s what enables us to partake fully of the benefits of redemption.
  - 1.3.6 By offering the Eucharistic gifts at Mass, we are uniting ourselves to the sacrifice of Christ, offered once for all on the Cross, and by doing so we are in a sense *making that sacrifice present* here and now.
  - 1.3.7 Since that sacrifice is the one source of salvation for the whole human race, it is clear why Vatican II calls the eucharistic sacrifice the SUMMIT of the whole Christian life.
  
  - 1.3.8 The Eucharist makes no sense apart from the Cross. But likewise, it makes no sense apart from the Resurrection.
  - 1.3.9 We are not receiving the body of one who is dead! He is risen!
  - 1.3.10 St Paul says, “We know that since Christ has been raised from the dead, he is never going to die again; death no longer has mastery over him” (Rom 6:9).
  - 1.3.11 That makes for a very different kind of “eating.” It is not so much Christ who is assimilated into us, as we who are assimilated into him.
  
  - 1.3.12 The awareness of the link between the Eucharist and the Resurrection is the reason why very early on, Christians began to choose *Sunday*, the first day of the week, as the proper day to celebrate the Eucharist.
  - 1.3.12.1 We find traces of that already in the New Testament (Ac 20:7; 1 Cor 16:2).
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## 1.4 The Reality of the New Covenant

- 1.4.1 In Biblical language the word “covenant” is a way of describing the special bond that unites the Lord and his chosen people.
- 1.4.2 The first covenant, with the people of Israel, was sealed with a sacrifice at the foot of Mount Sinai. The book of Exodus tells us, “Moses took the blood and threw it upon the people, and said, ‘Behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words’” (Ex 24:8).
- 1.4.3 The preaching of Jesus was all about the definitive restoration of the bond between God and his people. His central message was that God was bringing about a new relationship between God and all humanity (including us Gentiles), something Jesus called the *Reign or Kingdom of God*.
- 1.4.4 In proclaiming this new reality, Jesus knew that inaugurating it would cost him his very life.
- 1.4.5 But that destiny is something Jesus fully and freely accepted: “The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life, a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45).
- 1.4.6 The establishment of the kingdom of God, through the death and resurrection of Christ, means that from now on, the heavens are opened for us! (You’ll recall the promise of Jesus to Nathanael at the beginning of John’s gospel: “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man.”)
- 1.4.7 There is no more separation between us and God, because Jesus, our High Priest, has overcome all obstacles. He has done away with sin. Nothing can restrict our access to the Father now. We can have full enjoyment of all heavenly blessings.
- 1.4.8 “Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms in Christ”! (Eph 1:3).
- 1.4.9 In fact the union between Christ and the Church is so close that it can be compared to a *marriage* (Eph 5:32).
- 1.4.10 In this sense, the eucharistic banquet can be compared to a *wedding feast*, celebrating the union between heaven and earth,
- 1.4.11 The bread that feeds us will always be abundant (as Jesus showed us at the multiplication of the loaves), and the wine of our rejoicing will never run out (as he showed us at the wedding feast of Cana)! We are in an everlasting covenant, never to be revoked.

- (1) Interestingly, that word “everlasting” is the only word the Roman liturgy adds to the words of Christ: “This is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new *and everlasting* covenant . . .”.

- 1.4.12 According to what Jesus said at the Last Supper, the eucharistic meal *contains the reality* of the new covenant. “This is my blood of the covenant,” or “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.”
- 1.4.13 When believers share the one bread and the one cup, they are sharing in the fullness of what God is offering the world in Christ Jesus.
- 1.4.14 That is why Vatican II says that “in the Blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself” (PO 5).
- 1.4.15 How can we turn down the invitation to such a banquet?
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## 1.5 The Lord’s Supper

- 1.5.1 In St Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, the apostle refers to a practice of the Church called the “Lord’s Supper” (11:20). Paul has some very definite ideas about what should (and should not!) be happening at the Lord’s Supper.
- 1.5.2 What is the link between the Last Supper of Jesus and the Lord’s Supper celebrated by the early Christian communities?
- 1.5.3 How do we know that the Last Supper was not intended by Jesus to be a unique and unrepeatable event?
- 1.5.4 Once again, it is the story of the Last Supper itself, as reported by Luke and Paul, that provides the answer.
- 1.5.5 Jesus says to his apostles, “Do this in remembrance of me.”
- 1.5.6 The word “remembrance” can also be translated “memorial.” A memorial is more than a simple memory of something in the past. It’s a way of making of bringing a past reality into the present in such a way that we can share in its effects.
- 1.5.7 The classic example of a memorial is the annual Passover meal celebrated by the Jewish people.
- 1.5.8 The Eucharistic liturgy that the Church has celebrated in varied forms, down through the ages, is the memorial of the death and resurrection of Christ.

- 1.5.9 It is performed in *fidelity* to the Lord's command at the Last Supper, and in conscious *imitation* of his actions: He took, blessed, [broke,] and gave.
- (1) Preparation of the Gifts
  - (2) Eucharistic Prayer
  - (3) Fraction Rite
  - (4) Communion Rite
- 1.5.10 By the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the power of the words of Christ recited by the priest, the Church's memorial actually makes present the reality of the Body and Blood of our Saviour.
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## 1.6 Jesus, Our Bread of Life

- 1.6.1 Let's be clear on the fact that there is absolutely *no precedent* or parallel in ancient Mediterranean religions for the idea of eating a man's body or drinking his blood. That would have been just as shocking a suggestion for first-century people as it is for us today. Just like Jesus on the Cross, the Eucharist was a source of *scandal*, a sign of contradiction.
- 1.6.2 We find an echo of this reaction in John 6, when Jesus says: "The bread that I will give for the life of the world is my *flesh*" (6:51). "My flesh"—an even more concrete and graphic term than the word "body" in the Last Supper narratives.
- 1.6.3 Right away, the gospel tells us, "the Jews began to argue with one another, 'How can this man give us his flesh to eat?' Jesus said to them, 'I tell you the solemn truth, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in yourselves.'" So this isn't some optional component of Jesus's teaching! He goes on to say to them, "My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink."
- 1.6.4 Notice the association between *eating flesh* and *drinking blood*: That's the clue that links the teaching of Jesus in this chapter to the Eucharist of the Church.
- 1.6.5 Up until this point in the chapter, Jesus has been making a comparison between himself and the *manna*, saying that he is the true/living bread from heaven.
- 1.6.6 Now we might not immediately connect this teaching with the Eucharist, because the comparison between the word of God and bread was already well established (cf. "No one lives on bread alone . . ."). So eating Jesus might be understood in a metaphorical sense, as being simply a vivid way of describing what it means to believe in him as the Word of God.

- 1.6.7 But there is nothing in the story of the manna that refers to *drinking* anything. And especially not to drinking *blood*, because that was absolutely forbidden in the Law of Moses!
- 1.6.8 So the simplest and most obvious explanation for Jesus' statement that his flesh is true food, and his blood is true drink, is that he is referring to what he did at the Last Supper: "Take, eat, this is my body. . . . Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant."
- 1.6.9 Just how *offensive* this teaching was to the hearers of Jesus can be seen in what happens at the end of his sermon: "Then many of his disciples, when they heard these things, said, 'This is a difficult saying! Who can understand it?' [. . .] After this many of his disciples quit following him and did not accompany him any longer" (Jn 6:60.66). But the Twelve stick with him. Peter says, "Lord, to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life" (6:68).
- 1.6.10 Notice that Jesus makes no attempt to soften or water down his teaching, to prevent his disciples' leaving. He doesn't say, "Oh that was just a metaphor."
- 1.6.11 The reason it *has* to be more than a metaphor is that Jesus says that eating his body and drinking his blood *gives eternal life*—something that affects not just our minds but our bodies also: "The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."  
(1) This is echoed in the private prayer of the priest before receiving communion, "May the Body/Blood of Christ bring me to everlasting life."
- 1.6.12 The Scriptures are full of metaphors and other figures of speech (e.g. when Jesus is called the Lamb of God), but figures of speech can't give eternal life! Only the *true reality* of Christ's body and blood can give us eternal life.
- 1.6.13 This is why the Catholic Church teaches that Christ is "truly, really, and substantially" present in the eucharistic elements of bread and wine (Council of Trent, *Decree on the Most Holy Eucharist* [11 Oct. 1551]).
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## 1.7 The Eucharist and the Church

- 1.7.1 The very first textual evidence we have of the Eucharist is in Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians, written twenty-five years or so after the death and resurrection of Jesus:

- 1.7.1.1 “Is not the cup of blessing that we bless a sharing (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? Is not the bread that we break a sharing in the body of Christ?” (1 Cor 10:16).
- 1.7.2 The ultimate foundation of our faith in the Eucharist is the *trustworthiness of the words of Christ*, reported to us by the apostles: “This is my body . . . This is my blood. . . . Do this in memory of me.”
- 1.7.3 But we must also place our faith in the *Church*, which teaches us that what we do at Mass qualifies as a faithful fulfilment of the command of Christ. The Church is the authority that establishes the form in which we “bless the cup of blessing,” and we “break the bread.”
- 1.7.4 The celebration of the Eucharist seriously engages the credibility of the Church and her ministers.
- 1.7.5 For me as a believer, participating in the eucharistic action requires that I give my assent both to Christ and to his Church. And we do this formally *twice*: by saying Amen to the great eucharistic prayer and by saying Amen when receiving holy communion. “Amen, it is so, I agree, I believe.”
- (1) It makes no sense whatsoever for me to say that I don’t believe in the Church, but I believe in the Eucharist!
- 1.7.6 The Eucharist is also the source of the Church’s *unity*, as St Paul explains: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all share the one bread” (1 Cor 10:17).
- 1.7.7 The *Eucharist* is the body of Christ; the *Church* is also the body of Christ. The relationship between the two can be expressed like this: “The Church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the Church.”
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## 1.8 Conclusion

- 1.8.1 In his recent letter the Pope reminds us that “while the Eucharist makes present what occurred in the past, it also *impels us towards the future, when Christ will come again* at the end of history” (MND 15).
- 1.8.2 “Blessed are those who are invited to the banquet at the wedding celebration of the Lamb!” (Rev 19:9).
- 1.8.3 As powerful as the eucharistic sacrifice is, as great a treasure as we have in the Real Presence of the Lord, these are only a downpayment in comparison with the future glory that has been prepared for us. *Maranatha!* Come, Lord Jesus!

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**For Further Reading:**

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 1322-1419.

John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mane nobiscum Domine* (7 Oct. 2004)

John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (17 Apr. 2003)

Johannes H. Emminghaus, and Theodor Maas-Ewerd. *The Eucharist: Essence, Form, Celebration*, 2d ed. (Liturgical Press, 1997).

Michael L. Gaudoin-Parker, ed., *The Real Presence through the Ages: Jesus Adored in the Sacrament of the Altar* (Alba House, 1993).

Benedict J. Groeschel and James Monti, *In the Presence of Our Lord: The History, Theology, and Psychology of Eucharistic Devotion* (Our Sunday Visitor, 1997).

## 2 The Eucharist, Greatest Treasure of Our Personal Lives

### 2.1 Introduction: Developing a Eucharistic Spirituality

- 2.1.1 In his Letter introducing the Year of the Eucharist, the Holy Father sets before us the example of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, who invited Jesus to stay with them and then recognized him in the breaking of the bread.
- 2.1.2 That story shows us the way to develop an authentic eucharistic spirituality.
- 2.1.3 My talk is structured around five priorities: overcoming hardness of heart, preparing ourselves to meet the Lord, participating actively in the Mass, sincere eucharistic devotion, and becoming what we have received.

### 2.2 Priority no. 1: Overcoming Hardness of Heart

#### 2.2.1 OUR HEARTS HAVE GROWN COLD!

- 2.2.1.1 The biggest problem regarding the Eucharist today is *indifference*, what the Scriptures call “hardness of heart.”
- 2.2.1.2 Besides the massive abandonment of the practice of the faith in the so-called developed world, there’s also the problem of *routine* and *casualness* among those who do come to church.
  - (1) lack of fervour, lack of enthusiasm
- 2.2.1.3 Common complaint among Catholics: “I don’t get anything out of Mass.”
- 2.2.1.4 The disciples were going to Emmaus because they couldn’t see any reason to stay in Jerusalem. Their hopes had been high, but they were shattered by the brutal death of their master. “We had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel.” Now they were packing it in for good.

#### 2.2.2 DIAGNOSIS: POSSIBLE CAUSES OF INDIFFERENCE

- 2.2.2.1 Ignorance: I haven’t come to know Christ in person, or I don’t understand how I can meet him in the Eucharist.
  - (1) If Jesus is a totally remote figure for me, just a person who lived 2,000 years ago but doesn’t have anything to do with my life today, then the Mass isn’t going to make much sense to me.
  - (2) Or maybe I do know Jesus, but there are things about church that distract me from seeing what this has to do

with Jesus. Like I can't get past the style of the music, the style of the liturgy, the personality of the priest.

- (3) Or maybe I'm one of these Christians who sees the Mass as "just empty ritual." "What matters is action, loving your neighbour, trying to be a better person."

#### 2.2.2.2 Lack of Faith: I've heard the message, but I don't *believe* in the *reality* of Christ's gift to his Church.

- (1) In the Bible, when people hear God's word, but can't say yes to it, the result is *sadness*.
- (2) For example, the sadness of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, when Jesus asks them what they've been talking about. They actually heard the women announcing the good news that Jesus was alive, but so far they haven't been able to *believe* it. As a result, their hearts are full of grief and despair.
- (3) Or the sadness of the rich young man (Mt 19:22): He couldn't *believe* he could be happy if he left his possessions and followed Jesus.

#### 2.2.2.3 Lack of Desire: I'm a believer, but I'm not hungry/thirsty enough for the Lord's presence.

- (1) I think this is probably the category that most of us are in.
- (2) God's invitation to us is clear: "Listen! I am standing at the door and knocking! If anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come into his home and share a meal with him, and he with me."
- (3) Do we deserve this? NO! We can never deserve it, no matter how holy we are. That's why, right before communion, we say, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof. . . ."
- (4) But that's OK, because the Lord has chosen to give himself to us for free!
  - "All who are thirsty, come to the water! You who have no money, come! Buy and eat! Come! Buy wine and milk without money and without cost! Why pay money for something that will not nourish you? Why spend your hard-earned money on something that will not satisfy? Listen carefully to me and eat what is nourishing! Enjoy

fine food! Pay attention and come to me! Listen, so you can live!” (Is 55:1-3).

- (5) But it’s pretty hard for the Lord to feed us unless we’re hungry and thirsty!
- (6) In the Beatitudes, he says: “Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied” (Lk 6:21); but “Woe to you who are well satisfied with food now, for you will be hungry” (6:25).
- (7) And remember Mary’s song of praise: “[God] has filled the hungry with good things, and has sent the rich away empty” (Lk 1:53).

### 2.2.3 REMEDIES

#### 2.2.3.1 Letting Christ Walk with Us on the Way

- (1) Disciples on the road to Emmaus: Jesus explained the Scriptures to them. “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things written about himself in all the scriptures” (Lk 24:27).
- (2) It is no accident that within the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word precedes the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Before we can recognize him in the form of *bread* broken for us, we have to have the *seed* of his word planted in our hearts.
- (3) St Paul says that “faith comes from what is *heard*, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ” (Rom 10:17).
- (4) Of course, it’s possible for us to hear without hearing, to let the birds come and devour the seed that falls on the path (Mk 4:4).
- (5) A lot of words come at us at Mass. But are we paying attention? Are we allowing those words to truly penetrate our souls and challenge us? And are we helping others around us to understand that Christ is alive today?
- (6) The sign that the word of God has really broken through our defences is that our *hearts are set on fire*; all of a sudden my life seems full of hope and meaning. I was ready to pack it in, to go back home to Emmaus, but suddenly I feel like going back to Jerusalem and reconnecting with the Church.
- (7) On their way back to Jerusalem, the disciples become aware of this experience: They say to each other, “Didn’t

our hearts burn within us while he was speaking with us on the road, while he was explaining the scriptures to us?" (Lk 24:32).

#### 2.2.3.2 Inviting Christ to Stay with Us

- (1) For the disciples on the road to Emmaus, faith took the form of *hospitality*: inviting Jesus to stay with them for the evening meal. That was their way of embracing the word they had received on the road.
- (2) Faith is a response of our *total person* to the word of God. It's not just about ideas and words. It's about what goes on in my heart, it's about how I live my life. It's sustained by concrete practices.
- (3) In many ways, faith is like a muscle. If you don't exercise it, it gets atrophied!
- (4) At Mass, we're engaging in a communal activity. We're expected to join in what the assembly is doing, to say certain prescribed formulas, to sing along with the choir.
- (5) Now that can nourish my faith, provided that I reflect on what I'm doing or saying, and avoid daydreaming.
- (6) But besides participating in the liturgy, I need to make an *interior* response to the Eucharist. In fact, the liturgy itself encourages this by incorporating times of *sacred silence*.
- (7) That's when I need to be exercising my faith, offering myself and everything I have to the Father with Christ, making acts of faith in the presence of the Lord in the bread and wine, worshipping him as my God, thanking him for coming to dwell in my heart.
- (8) It doesn't have to be some fancy prayer, in sophisticated language. The simplest is often the best.
- (9) Then there are all the concrete *gestures* that we do at Mass: the sign of the cross, bowing to the altar, genuflecting towards the tabernacle, the way we receive holy communion. The care and *mindfulness* we put into these simple gestures is an important way of sustaining our faith, as well as witnessing to others around us.

#### 2.2.3.3 Nurturing Our Desire

- (1) There's a *negative* aspect to desire: recognizing that I'm missing or lacking something.

- (2) So the first step is nurturing my desire for an encounter with Christ in the breaking of the bread is coming to know my own *emptiness*, getting in touch with the parts of me that are still *cold* and *dead*.
    - I'm not talking about total spiritual death, brought about by serious sin—that's something we deal with in the sacraments of baptism and reconciliation.
  - (3) Then there's the *positive* aspect of desire: reflecting on how powerfully *alive* the Lord is, how even touching the hem of his cloak (with faith) was enough to heal the woman who'd been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years (Mt 9:20-21; cf. 14:36).
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## 2.3 Priority no. 2: Preparing Ourselves to Meet the Lord

2.3.1 If we have successfully overcome or avoided indifference, we will spontaneously desire to *prepare* ourselves to meet the Lord in the Eucharist.

2.3.2 Preparing to form the Church.

- (1) I'm not preparing to attend a football game or go shopping. I'm preparing to form the Church, the Body of Christ, composed of brothers and sisters united in one faith, one bond of love. As St Luke reports in the Acts of the Apostles, "The group of those who believed were of *one heart and mind*" (Ac 4:32).
- (2) So we need to be *reconciled* before approaching the altar of the Lord: "Leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5:24).
- (3) We need to set aside our divisions (among "camps" and cliques, between rich and poor, racial/ethnic groups, etc.).
- (4) But the communion we celebrate in the Eucharist is not only with the members of this particular community; it's with the *whole Church*: the Church in other places, the hierarchy (notice the mention of the pope and the diocesan bishop in the eucharistic prayer), the Church of past ages, the Church in heaven.
- (5) Receiving communion from this priest means I'm in communion with him, and with his bishop, and with the

bishop of Rome, and with all their predecessors since the time of the apostles.

2.3.3 Preparing to hear God's word.

- (1) The Second Vatican Council says that "it is Christ himself who speaks when the Holy Scriptures are read in the Church" (SC 7).
- (2) I am not preparing to read the newspaper, where I can sit back comfortably in my chair and assume a critical distance between me and what I read.
- (3) To prepare myself to hear Christ speaking in his word means assuming the stance of a *disciple*, one who is ready to *obey* whatever is revealed as God's will.
- (4) I stand *under* the word of God; I am judged by it. I'm not here to have a philosophical discussion with Christ or to argue with him.

2.3.4 Preparing to offer spiritual sacrifice.

- (1) "Therefore I exhort you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God" (Rom 12:1).
- (2) In giving us his body and blood, Christ is showing us the *very same love* that led him to give his life for us on the Cross--an *extreme* love. That love calls forth in us a *response* that is total.
- (3) Just as the Lord offered himself on the Cross, we need to offer ourselves with him to the Father.

2.3.5 Preparing to approach the Lord's table.

- (1) "O taste and see that the Lord is good!" (Ps 34:8).
- (2) Joy, expectant faith, gratitude, wonder—these are all appropriate attitudes to nurture within our hearts as we come forward to receive holy communion.
- (3) But those attitudes can only be truthful if we are in the proper state to receive communion. St Paul warns us in very forceful terms: "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself first, and in this way let him eat the bread and drink of the cup. For the one who eats and drinks without careful regard for the body eats and drinks judgment against himself" (1 Cor 11:27-29).

- (4) These words are meant to inspire a holy and healthy fear, but not an excessive scrupulosity.
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## 2.4 Priority no. 3: Participating Actively in the Mass

### 2.4.1 Praying the Liturgy vs. Praying during the Liturgy

2.4.1.1 One of the priorities of the liturgical reforms initiated by Vatican II was that the faithful should not be passive spectators at an event “performed” by the clergy. Rather, they should see themselves as actively involved in the liturgy, which is an action of the whole Church (of all the baptized, together with the ordained).

2.4.1.2 I’m sure we’ve all heard the famous slogan, “full, conscious, and active participation.”

2.4.1.3 Participation doesn’t mean grabbing a guitar and singing something. It doesn’t mean exercising a visible function distinct from the assembly. If we still think that to participate in the liturgy we have to be up there in front of everyone, we are still operating out of a clericalist mindset.

2.4.1.4 Participation in the liturgy simply means praying the liturgy, entering into it fully, being present to what is going on. Other traditional forms of prayer (e.g. the rosary), while spiritually beneficial and recommended by the highest authorities of the Church, cannot compare with the power and value of the sacred liturgy, in which the whole Church is praying with one voice to the Father.

### 2.4.2 “Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.”

2.4.2.1 The high point of the eucharistic liturgy is the eucharistic prayer, which has been from the beginning a solemn prayer of blessing and thanksgiving addressed to the Father.

2.4.2.2 Clearly, the central reason for giving thanks is the paschal mystery of Christ: his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Spirit. This is the source of our salvation and our hope for eternal life. But we also give thanks for all God’s gifts to us, beginning with creation.

### 2.4.3 Thanksgiving after communion

2.4.3.1 The Holy Father offers us a model of eucharistic spirituality in Our Lady, the Mother of the Eucharist.

2.4.3.2 If we truly believe in the presence of the substance of Christ’s body and blood in the Eucharist, then in those few minutes following communion, we are

*living tabernacles*. We are experiencing what Mary did for the nine months in which she bore Christ within her own womb.

(1) The difference, of course, is that she was fashioning his body and blood from her own.

2.4.3.3 Just imagine how Mary treated Jesus while she bore him in her womb. (I imagine her singing softly to him.)

2.4.3.4 Does this sound like sentimentalist piety? Well what's too bad!

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## 2.5 Priority no. 4: Sincere Eucharistic Devotion

2.5.1 In the Holy Father's Letter on the coming of the new millennium, he urged the whole Church to embrace a pastoral program based on *contemplating the face of Christ*.

2.5.2 We can do this in private prayer and reading of the Scriptures.

2.5.3 But devotion to the Eucharist outside Mass is a privileged opportunity to gaze with love on the face of Christ, and to extend the benefits of our encounter with him in holy communion.

2.5.4 The Pope writes, "The presence of Jesus in the tabernacle must be a kind of *magnetic pole* attracting an ever greater number of souls enamoured of him, ready to wait patiently to hear his voice and, as it were, to sense the beating of his heart" (MND 18).

2.5.5 Yes, the presence of Christ in the eucharistic elements is a hidden presence. But the paradox is that it is that very hiddenness that makes intimacy possible—because it creates a *space* for my loving response. If Christ were revealed to us right now in all his glory, we are so weak and feeble that we would be overwhelmed.

2.5.6 The poverty of the eucharistic presence, even the fragile quality of the host, is exactly what our frail humanity needs. It's on our level.

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## 2.6 Priority no. 5: Becoming what We Have Received

2.6.1 St Paul places every celebration of the Lord's Supper under the supreme standard of the Cross: "For every time you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's *death* until he comes" (1 Cor 11:26).

2.6.2 If our conduct during the service (or outside of it, for that matter!) contradicts the meaning of the Eucharist, then he says we are "guilty of the body and blood of the Lord" (11:27).

- 2.6.3 The Lord died so that we might become one holy people, “to gather together into one the children of God who are scattered” (Jn 11:52). If we reject and exclude other children of God, if we cause divisions, if we refuse to reach out to the poor, we are making ourselves enemies of the Cross.
- 2.6.4 Sharing in the Eucharist necessarily commits us to working for justice, peace, and reconciliation among people.
- 2.6.5 We must become what we have received: the body broken, the blood poured out for the life of the world.
- 2.6.6 “Everyone will know by this that you are my disciples—if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:35).
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