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Celebrating the Eucharist throughout the Week: The Implications of the Eucharist for the Church's Mission in the World

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Introduction

In some ways, we Catholics think of the Holy Eucharist as something we go to and then return from. We leave the world, *go* to the Church, open the door, enter in, stay, pray, and then *return* to the world we came from. It is not a bad thing at all to think this way. Jesus himself went from the world to the mountain, prayed, and then returned to the world, bringing with him what he had heard from the Father. He left us a pattern of “going to the mountain,” the summit. As the Church teaches, the Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery [Northport, NY: Costello Publishing, 1996]). We go to this summit, and then we bring what we received back to the world. We go to God, then we go on mission to others. In this brief paper, I will suggest ways in which we may bring what we receive at this “summit” back out into the world in a missionary manner and spirit.

The Mission of the Church

We have to ask ourselves, “What exactly *is* the Church’s mission?” It seems sometimes that the Church has many missions: missions to heal, to alleviate poverty, to reconcile groups, to be prophetic, and many others. But the Gospels present us with one preeminent mission, understood as the great missionary mandate of Christ to his disciples: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age” (Mt 28:19-20). And Christ seems to be making his promise *to be with us* contingent upon *our going forth in mission*; this is how important mission is.

Pope Benedict XVI put this idea more succinctly in his homily for World Mission Sunday in 2009 when he said, “The goal of the Church’s mission is to illumine all peoples with the light of the Gospel”

(www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/missions/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090629_world-mission-day-

2009_en.html). Thus, we have many activities, but one overall mission: that peoples may thus see the light of the Gospel, and in seeing it, they might believe and be baptized. This “light” is not some abstract teaching, but the “Light of the world” himself.

The Holy Eucharist as a Teacher of Mission

Understanding now the essence of what we mean by “the Church’s mission,” we ask how the reality of the Holy Eucharist affects this mission. How can the Eucharist be the source for our mission? How does Christ in the Eucharist form us into missionaries? How do we teach others about becoming more missionary-like in the faith through the Eucharist?

To this end, Pope Benedict XVI helps us in his Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis: On the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church’s Life and Mission* (www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20070222_sacramentum-caritatis_en.html), the fruit of his reflections with a Synod of Bishops upon the Eucharist. The first words of the title remind us of mission, for they translate into “The Sacrament of Caritas.”

In the letter itself, the Holy Father presents us with the blueprint of how to fully participate, body, mind, and soul, in the sacred liturgy. How does one learn to do this? First of all, the Mass itself teaches us; as the Pope says in his letter, “The best catechesis on the Eucharist is the Eucharist itself, celebrated well” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 64).

The Holy Eucharist we celebrate each week carries within it elements that remind us how to be missionaries to our brothers and sisters. Let us take a missionary look at the Holy Sacrifice, a “missionary exegesis” of our liturgy, according to its major parts.

The Introductory Rites

The Holy Mass begins with the Sign of the Cross, stating that all will be done in the name of the Holy Trinity. Our Trinitarian God reminds us that we, as a Church, are born to be sent out on mission. As the Second Vatican Council wrote, “The Church on earth is by its very nature missionary since, according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit” (*Ad Gentes: On the Missionary Activity of the Church*, no. 2, in *Vatican Council II: Volume 1*). The Son was sent from the Father’s side to earth. He, in turn, with the Father, sends the Holy Spirit upon the Church and the world. Since Christ is a missionary, we Christians also must be missionaries, both individually and as a Church.

The liturgy continues with the priest expressing a desire and a prayer that God’s presence be with everyone before him as he says to the people, “The Lord be with you.” This, too, is a missionary greeting, that the Lord go out to the assembly and then to the world.

The Mass continues with contrition, as all humbly admit they have not been who they should be. A successful missionary is a humble missionary. As Pope John Paul II said, the world desires “witnesses more than teachers.” We are humble witnesses that we, the baptized, are just as much in need of what we proclaim as those who hear the

proclamation. At the first Eucharist, Christ himself performed an “act of immense humility: before dying for us on the Cross, he tied a towel around himself and washed the feet of his disciples” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 1).

In my mission work in Africa, and in my travels as superior general to many of our missionaries throughout the world, it strikes me over and over how many times the simplest and humblest of our missionary communities are those that draw people in. Other times, it is when people have been humbled by poverty or sickness that they see for the first time Christ suffering with them on the Cross and are drawn to the Church.

The Liturgy of the Word

In this part of the Mass, we remember that our faith is not some abstract belief, but rather is truth based on Divine Revelation. The Liturgy of the Word tells God’s story, the same story that we as missionaries recount to others. Throughout the Sundays of the year, and throughout the three cycles of Scripture readings, we see that there is a rich variety of how God is revealed in both the Old Testament and the New Testament. This variety helps us in our missionary efforts to “be all things to all men” as St. Paul says. As we grow in knowledge of the Scriptures, we are able to recall more often to help others.

We see, too, that this whole part of the Mass consists of *proclamation*, which is integral to all mission work. And before the priest *proclaims* the Gospel, he again says, “The Lord be with you.” As we hear in Romans 10, how can people be saved by the Gospel without someone to proclaim?

The priest’s homily is a source of instruction about *what* to share with others, and it may also give ideas to us on *how* to share these truths. If a priest preaches from the heart, he encourages the people to do the same. In the complete quote from his encyclical on mission, *Redemptoris Missio*, Pope John Paul II writes, “People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories” (no. 42, www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio_en.html). How many times I have heard my people on the missions translating what they heard in the Gospel, or what they heard in the homily, into their own dialects and expressions, in order to teach their friends better what this Catholic faith is. To tell you the truth, after Holy Mass, I sometimes hear the meaning of the Gospel for the first time as people explain it to each other in new ways. The missionary *proclamation* of the Gospel in the Mass leads to the missionary proclamation of the people to others beyond.

The Liturgy of the Eucharist

In our intercessions for the world, and then in the offering of the gifts, we recall that we are offering a world that needs to be transformed by the proclamation and by the Holy Sacrifice itself.

The priest, beginning the Preface, says again, “The Lord be with you.” And soon the Lord himself will be with the assembly in a totally unique way. Echoing the words of Trent, the *Catechism* affirms, “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*’” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 1374).

What words could I add to more adequately glorify and explain the Real and True Presence of Christ in the Mass?

There is one thing I can say. In the past couple of decades, the practices of Benediction and adoration have been revived in the Church. I have noticed, especially among recent converts, a new joy when they realize what the Eucharist is precisely, because we take “extra” time to adore Christ’s real presence outside of Mass. It is not that I have seen vast numbers drawn to adoration, but I have noticed that those who do come develop a much deeper faith. Also, because in adoration there is no distinction between the faithful and the visitors, it is a chance for Catholics to ask their non-Christian friends to fully participate. The same thing is true with communal recitation of the Rosary.

The Concluding Rites

Those of you who are already studying or using the new translation of the Mass might have discovered, as I have, that Pope Benedict has made the concluding words more *missionary*. The priest (or the deacon, if present) now has four different ways to send the people on their way after the final blessing.

1. “*Go forth, the Mass is ended.*”

2. “*Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.*”
3. “*Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.*”
4. “*Go in peace.*”

The second option, which Benedict XVI personally inserted into the text, makes us missionaries indeed: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord.” The priest is commanding the people, as the Mass ends, to go and be *missionaries*. And they answer this command by saying, “Thanks be to God,” as if they were responding with Isaiah the prophet’s words, “Here I am Lord, send me!”

Conclusion

The main point I have tried to make is that the Holy Mass is not something directed only inward. The Catholic faith is missionary by its very nature, and this nature is at the heart of the holy liturgy. For while it moves us inward to a fuller communion with Christ and with others in the Body, it also prepares us then to move *outward* to invite others into the Body.

In conclusion, because we have talked here about the liturgy, I would like to finish with a prayer. As a member of a Missionary Society dedicated to Our Lady, I will let a petition from our Holy Father encourage us onward.

Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, may the Holy Spirit kindle within us the same ardor experienced by the disciples on the way to Emmaus (cf. *Lk 24:13-35*) and renew our “eucharistic wonder” through the splendor and beauty radiating from the liturgical rite, the efficacious sign of the

infinite beauty of the holy mystery of

God. (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, no. 97).

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