

# acts

of the General Council  
of the Salesian Society  
of St John Bosco

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OFFICIAL ORGAN OF ANIMATION AND COMMUNICATION FOR THE SALESIAN CONGREGATION

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1. LETTER OF THE RECTOR MAJOR	1.1 Fr Pascual CHÁVEZ VILLANUEVA <i>«This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me»</i> (1Cor 11,24) <b>MAKING THE EUCHARIST IN ORDER TO BECOME EUCHARIST</b>	3
2. GUIDELINES AND POLICIES	(none in this issue)	
3. RULINGS AND DIRECTIVES	(none in this issue)	
4. ACTIVITIES OF THE GENERAL COUNCIL	4.1 Chronicle of the Rector Major 4.2 Chronicle of the General Councillors	45 52
5. DOCUMENTS	5.1 «PASSION FOR GOD – PASSION FOR THE WORLD» Message of the Rector Major to the Secular Institute, the Volunteers of Don Bosco, on the 90 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of their Foundation 5.2 "Report of the Superiors General" presented by the Rector Major at the Assembly of the V Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean at Aparecida (Brazil) 5.3 Precapitular Commission and Juridical Commission for the CG26 5.4 Salesian Bishops 5.5 Our dead confreres	74  77  81 83 86

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**«This is my body, which is given for you.  
Do this in remembrance of me»**

**(1Cor 11,24)**

## **MAKING THE EUCHARIST IN ORDER TO BECOME EUCHARIST**

1. 'MAKING THE EUCHARIST' TODAY. 1.1 The Eucharist in the recent life of the Church. 1.2 The Eucharist in the present state of the Congregation. 1.3 The Eucharist in the life of the confreres. 2. RECALLING THE EXPERIENCE OF THE DISCIPLES. 2.1 The first defection of the disciples (*Jn 6,66-71*). 2.2 The abandonment by the Twelve (*Mk 14,17-31*). - 2.2.1 Following Jesus does not ensure that we don't betray him. - 2.2.2 Promising Jesus a great deal does not prevent us from denying him. - 2.2.3 The covenant broken almost as soon as it was made needs to be remembered. 2.3 The gesture in Jesus' hour: loving even to the end (*Jn 13,1-20*). 3. 'BECOMING EUCHARIST' TODAY. 3.1 Consecrated life, "eucharistic life". - 3.1.1 Consecrated life, "memorial" through obedience. - 3.1.2 Consecrated life, "sacrifice" through chastity. - 3.1.3 Consecrated life, "shared meal" through poverty. 3.2 The Salesian, man of the Eucharist. - 3.2.1 From celebration to conformity. - 3.2.2 From conformity to adoration. - 3.2.3 From adoration to mission. **Conclusion.**

7 June 2007

*Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ*

My Dear Confreres,

I send you my affectionate greetings on my return from Aparecida, Brazil, the site of the Vth Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, which was attended by 13 Salesian Bishops and two FMA, in addition to the Rector Major. It was an extraordinary experience of Church that I shall speak about on another occasion. For the present I just express the hope that this great Assembly may be a source of hope and life to the peoples of that continent, through a Church – and us SDB within it – that becomes the loving and faithful disciple of Christ and a convinced and courageous missionary. Now I prefer to speak to you on a subject that is very much in my heart and on which I have been reflecting during the past year, the Eucharist.

I am well aware that some of you may think a new letter on the Eucharist repetitive if not superfluous. You will certainly not have forgotten what Fr Vecchi wrote on the subject in the Jubilee Year

of 2000 “to rediscover the eucharistic mystery and its significance in our life and pastoral work”.<sup>1</sup> I can tell you, however, that for some time I have felt the need to take up the question again and to tell you of my concerns. The reasons are indeed quite serious.

## 1. ‘MAKING THE EUCHARIST’ TODAY

Involved as we are in the “return to Don Bosco”, in the creative recovery of his inspired charismatic options, of his inspired pedagogical intuitions, how much I wish that in the Congregation we were to live the Eucharist – always better, always more – celebrated with regularity and gratitude, contemplated in personal and community adoration! How could we better proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes, than by eating this bread and drinking this chalice, and we ourselves becoming “bread broken” for the confreres and the young, and “wine poured out”, so that they may have life to the full? (cf. *1 Cor* 11,26). How can we more effectively bring our young people to know God who has loved them first, (cf. *1 Jn* 4,8-9.19) and to the end (cf. *Jn* 13,1)?

### 1.1 The Eucharist in the recent life of the Church

Fount and summit of the life and mission of the Church,<sup>2</sup> the gift of the Eucharist, “always devoutly guarded as her most precious treasure”,<sup>3</sup> has accompanied and encouraged the process of renewal that the Church has followed from Vatican II until our own days. It would have been very difficult for it to have been otherwise: “the celebration of the eucharist is at the centre of the process of the Church’s growth”;<sup>4</sup> “the Church”, in fact, “draws

<sup>1</sup> JUAN E. VECCHI, “This is my body, which is given for you”: AGC 371 (2000), p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Council Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. 4 December 1963, 10.

<sup>3</sup> PAUL VI, *Mysterium fidei*. Encyclical Letter on the doctrine and the worship of the Holy Eucharist. 3 September 1965, 1.

<sup>4</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church. 17 April 2003, 21.



her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates *the heart of the mystery of the Church*".<sup>5</sup>

The Council was not yet finished and already Paul VI had published the encyclical letter *Mysterium Fidei* (3 September 1965) on the doctrine and the worship of the Most Holy Eucharist: "the Council Fathers" – wrote the Pope – "regard it as a matter of highest importance to urge the faithful to participate actively, with undivided faith and the utmost devotion, in the celebration of this Most Holy Mystery".<sup>6</sup>

But it was in the long years of the magisterium of John Paul II during which there was "an extraordinary concentration on the sacrament of the Eucharist".<sup>7</sup> In the first years of his magisterium he wrote the Apostolic Letter *Dominicae Cenae* (24 February 1980), in which he indicated "certain aspects of the Eucharistic Mystery and its impact on the lives of those who are the ministers of It".<sup>8</sup> Later, "to emphasis the living and saving presence in the Church and in the world" John Paul II wanted, on the occasion of the great Jubilee, an *International Eucharistic Congress* to be held in Rome; "The Year 2000" he promised, "will be intensely Eucharistic".<sup>9</sup> Three years later, in 2003, in his Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (17 April 2003) he reminded us that "the gaze of the Church is constantly turned to her Lord, present in the Sacrament of the Altar, in which she discovers the full manifestation of his boundless love".<sup>10</sup> The following year, with the Apostolic Letter

<sup>5</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church 17 April 2003, 1.

<sup>6</sup> PAUL VI, *Mysterium fidei*. Encyclical Letter on the doctrine and the worship of the Holy Eucharist. 3 September 1965, 1.

<sup>7</sup> GIOVANNI MARCHESI, "L'Eucaristia: 'Sacramento della Carità'. L'Esortazione Apostolica postsinodale di Benedetto XVI": *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3764 (2007) p. 171.

<sup>8</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Dominicae Cenae*. Apostolic Letter on the mystery and the worship of the Eucharist. 24 February 1980, 2.

<sup>9</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*. Letter on preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000. 10 November 1994, 55.

<sup>10</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church 17 April 2003, 1.

*Mane nobiscum Domine* (7 October 2004), John Paul II proclaimed a whole year in which he wanted the Church to “be particularly engaged in living out the mystery of the Holy Eucharist... amid our questions and difficulties, and even our bitter disappointments”.<sup>11</sup> The International Eucharistic Congress, held between 10 and 17 October 2004 at Guadalajara (Mexico); the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the theme: «The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church», held in the Vatican between 2 and 23 October 2005; and the World Youth Day, celebrated in Cologne, Germany, between 16 and 21 August 2005, to make the Eucharist “the vital source” around which the young ought to recollect themselves “to nourish their faith and enthusiasm”,<sup>12</sup> were the events that marked this Year of the Eucharist, which brought to an end a clear process “in the wake of the Council and the Jubilee”.<sup>13</sup>

Two of these events, the “natural development of the pastoral impulse” that John Paul II wanted to give to the Church at the beginning of the Third Millennium,<sup>14</sup> were well taken up and brought to their conclusion by Benedict XVI.

On the Marienfeld esplanade, during the vigil on 20 August 2005, the Pope urged the young people to return to adoration of the mystery, before inviting them at the Mass the next day to take part in the mystery and to make themselves one with Christ: “bread and wine”, said the Pope, “become his Body and Blood. But it must not stop there; on the contrary, the process of trans-

<sup>11</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Mane nobiscum Domine*. Apostolic Letter for the year of the Eucharist. 7 October 2004, 2

<sup>12</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Mane nobiscum Domine*. Apostolic Letter for the year of the Eucharist. 7 October 2004, 4.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Mane nobiscum Domine*. Apostolic Letter for the year of the Eucharist. 7 October 2004, 6-10. To the teachings given by John Paul II should be added the valuable suggestions of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments: *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (25 March 2004): AAS 96 (2004) p. 549-601; *Anno dell'Eucaristia: suggerimenti e proposte* (15 October 2004): Osservatore Romano, 15 October 2004. Supplement.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Mane nobiscum Domine*. Apostolic Letter for the year of the Eucharist. 7 October 2004, 4.

formation must now gather momentum. The Body and Blood of Christ are given to us so that we ourselves will be transformed in our turn. We are to become the Body of Christ, his own Flesh and Blood... Adoration [...] becomes union. God no longer simply stands before us as the One who is totally Other. He is within us, and we are in him".<sup>15</sup>

Benedict XVI, who had personally presided at the key moments of the Synod Assembly, then published the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* (22 February 2007), "to take up the richness and variety of the reflections and proposals which emerged [...] and to offer some basic directions aimed at a renewed commitment to eucharistic enthusiasm and fervour in the Church".<sup>16</sup> In addition to accepting and expressly quoting many of the valuable contribution of the Synodal Fathers, the Pope wanted "to set the present Exhortation alongside my first Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, in which I frequently mentioned the sacrament of the Eucharist and stressed its relationship to Christian love, both of God and of neighbour: «God incarnate draws us all to himself. We can thus understand how *agape* also became a term for the Eucharist: there God's own *agape* comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us»".<sup>17</sup>

The journey of the Church in recent years, in particular following the Jubilee Year, "clearly had a significant eucharistic dimension".<sup>18</sup> It could not have been otherwise: "The Eucharist is Christ who gives himself to us and continually builds us up as his body... The Eucharist is thus constitutive of the Church's being and activity";<sup>19</sup> if it is true that "*the Church draws her life from*

<sup>15</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Homily at Cologne, Marienfeld Sunday, 21 August 2005.

<sup>16</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 5

<sup>17</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Ibidem*.

<sup>18</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 4.

<sup>19</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 14-15.

*Christ in the Eucharist*; by him she is fed and by him she is enlightened”,<sup>20</sup> it is equally true that “thanks to the Eucharist, the Church is reborn ever anew!”<sup>21</sup> The Church cannot remain faithful to its origins, nor can it grow without the celebration of the Eucharist: “the more lively the eucharistic faith of the People of God, the deeper is its sharing in ecclesial life”. Further, “Every great reform has in some way been linked to the rediscovery of belief in the Lord’s eucharistic presence among his people”.<sup>22</sup>

## 1.2 The Eucharist in the present state of the Congregation

“And so for us too”, Fr Vecchi wrote to us those years ago, “the personal and communal renewal, which is also spiritual and apostolic [...] includes the convinced and joyful rediscovery of the riches the Eucharist offers us and of the responsibilities to which it calls us”.<sup>23</sup> I make my own his words and I propose them to you as an essential task to take up and implement Don Bosco’s spiritual and apostolic programme which, I hope will enable us to “find once again the origin of our charism, the purpose of our mission and the future of our Congregation”.<sup>24</sup>

In the letter convoking the next General Chapter I told you in fact that “the conviction has been growing on me that today the Congregation needs to reawaken in the heart of every confrere the passionate zeal of ‘Da mihi animas’ and so take up again “the inspiration, motivation and energy to respond to what God expects of us and to the needs of the young”.<sup>25</sup> Our hearts will real-

<sup>20</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church 17 April 2003, 6.

<sup>21</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Homily on the occasion of the possession of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome (7 May 2005): AAS 97 (2005), p. 752.

<sup>22</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 6.

<sup>23</sup> JUAN E. VECCHI, “This is my body, which is given for you”: AGC 371 (2000), p. 4.

<sup>24</sup> PASCUAL CHÁVEZ, “‘Da mihi animas, cetera tolle’. Charismatic identity and apostolic zeal. Starting again from Don Bosco to reawaken the heart of every Salesian”: AGC 394 (2006), p. 6.

<sup>25</sup> PASCUAL CHÁVEZ, *Ibidem*.

ly waken up, only if we somehow succeed in feeling the passion of God for his own, or rather feeling it with Him. And there is no pathway more direct and effective than the celebration of the eucharist; since “the Eucharist is thus the source and summit not only of the Church’s life, but also of her mission: ...We cannot approach the eucharistic table without being drawn into the mission which, beginning in the very heart of God, is meant to reach all people. Missionary outreach is thus an essential part of the eucharistic form of the Christian life”.<sup>26</sup>

Without eucharistic life therefore, there is no apostolic life. Don Bosco, “man of the eucharist”,<sup>27</sup> is for us the special model, the decisive proof: “he promised God that he would give of himself to his last breath for the young. And that is precisely what he did. Sacramental participation in the sacrifice of Christ leads us to make ourselves one with him in his apostolic sentiments and in his generous dedication for the demands of the kingdom”. So wrote Fr Vecchi, adding: “but the element which reveals more than any other the extent to which the eucharistic mystery marked the life of Don Bosco [...] is the relationship with pastoral charity which he expressed in his motto ‘Da mihi animas, cetera tolle’”. These words [...] are the plan and process of Don Bosco for modelling himself on Christ, who offers his own life to the Father for the salvation of mankind”.<sup>28</sup> Like him, the Salesian draws from the Eucharist “encouragement and strength to be a sign, in our own times too, of God’s gracious and fruitful love for humanity”.<sup>29</sup> “Therefore always keep your eyes fixed on Don Bosco” – the late John Paul II encouraged us. – “He lived his life entirely in God and recommended the unity of the communities around the Eucharist”.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>26</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 84.

<sup>27</sup> JUAN E. VECCHI, “This is my body, which is given for you”: AGC 371 (2000), p. 33

<sup>28</sup> JUAN E. VECCHI, “This is my body, which is given for you”: AGC 371 (2000) p. 41.39.

<sup>29</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 81.

<sup>30</sup> JOHN PAUL II, “Message for the beginning of the General Chapter XXV”. CG25, 144: ACG 378 (2002) p. 117.

If becoming missionaries of the young, full of zeal for their salvation, urges us to live in a eucharistic manner, being consecrated to God, being full of zeal for Him, obliges us to become men of the Eucharist for the sake of “*eucharistic consistency*, a quality which our lives are objectively called to embody”.<sup>31</sup> It is easy to understand: “*a living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to the Father and in relation to the brethren*”,<sup>32</sup> consecrated persons live in order to make *a sacramental*, therefore efficacious, *memorial* of the sacrifice of Christ, and even better, to be a memorial of Christ who sacrifices himself and continues to give himself for us and for others through us. The sacramental effectiveness of the eucharistic memorial is not limited to remembering the giving *pro nobis* of Jesus; it also leads, and here its real effectiveness comes into play, to the giving of one’s own life on the part of those who commemorate Him. Like all the baptised, but in a special and demanding way, religious, “taking part in the eucharistic sacrifice, the fount and apex of the whole Christian life, they offer the divine Victim to God and offer themselves along with it”;<sup>33</sup> and it is by means of this offering of themselves that they become a *living* memorial of Christ: the giving of their lives repeats, and precisely in this way ‘recalls,’ the sacrifice of Christ. Consecrated persons live eucharistically, not so much because they often celebrate the Eucharist, but because they spend their life for others.

We Salesians, as consecrated persons who have chosen Christ as the only one to give meaning to our lives, cannot but desire to establish with Him a fuller living communion, one, in fact, that comes from giving one’s own life. The Eucharist, celebrated *in the sacrament* when we receive the gift of the Body of Jesus given for us and, above all, celebrated *with life* every time we give

<sup>31</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 83.

<sup>32</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 25 March 1996, 22.

<sup>33</sup> Ecumenical Council Vaticano II, *Lumen Gentium*. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. 21 November 1964, 11.

ourselves body and soul to others, “is the daily viaticum and source of the spiritual life for the individual and for the Institute. By means of the Eucharist all consecrated persons are called to live Christ’s Paschal Mystery, uniting themselves to him by offering their own lives to the Father through the Holy Spirit”.<sup>34</sup>

Dear confreres, I cannot think of us as consecrated Salesians if we do not succeed in finding “in the celebration of the Eucharist and in eucharistic adoration the strength necessary for the radical following of Christ, obedient, poor and chaste”.<sup>35</sup> How can we respond to our vocation, personal and communitarian, if we do not live *by and for* the Eucharist?

### 1.3 The Eucharist in the life of the confreres

I have the impression, I must confess and feeling somewhat worried, that among us not all have succeeded in making the journey that the Church and the Congregation were expecting of us. From studying the reports of the extraordinary visitations to the Provinces, as also in my own visits, I have come to realise that in the Congregation there is a certain *deficit in eucharistic life*, a situation not altogether new; Fr Vecchi, in fact, had already identified and accurately described it;<sup>36</sup> even just looking at the quality of our community celebrations, and it is only one example, he mentioned “confusion, the extolling of spontaneity, haste, the giving of too little importance to actions and symbolic language, and the ‘secularisation of Sunday’”.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>34</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consacrata*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 25 March 1996, 95.

<sup>35</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 81.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. JUAN E. VECCHI, “This is my body, which is given for you”: AGC 371 (2000) p. 6-14. The 25th General Chapter complained of “a weakening in faith reflected in the abandonment of prayer, of the daily celebration of the eucharist..”. (GC25, 54: AGC 378 (2002) p. 57).

<sup>37</sup> Cf. LUC VAN LOOY, “The eucharistic celebration of our community. Examining its quality”: AGC 371 (2000) 55.

If this perception of mine were to be true, there would be well-founded grounds for concern. Certainly, this situation is not exclusive to us, it concerns the whole Christian community; with “profound sorrow” it was mentioned by John Paul II, who in fact wrote the ‘Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*: to “effectively help to banish the dark clouds of unacceptable doctrine and practice so that the Eucharist will continue to shine forth in all its radiant mystery”.<sup>38</sup> But in our case, the lack of or an insufficient eucharistic life would strike at the heart of a fundamental element of the charism and of Salesian pedagogy; called as we all are “to be educators to the faith at every opportunity [...] We walk side by side with the young so as to lead them to the risen Christ” (C. 34).

We know very well that for Don Bosco “what was attractive and desirable about the Eucharist is the fact that [...] it is where it is possible to discover the radical nature of the faith and of charity, the taste for heavenly things, and consequently, the height of Christian perfection”. Jesus, especially Jesus in the eucharistic, “dominates the spiritual life of Don Bosco and of the place in which he is at the centre [...] It is this Jesus with whom Don Bosco himself converses in the daily visit he makes in the afternoon in church; the Jesus before whom he places his youngsters in prayer when he goes into the city to beg for them. Communing with him in his old age, when he is no longer able to keep full control of himself, Don Bosco reveals his deep affection and his Masses are bathed in tears”.<sup>39</sup>

As an educator, Don Bosco made into a “pedagogical principle”<sup>40</sup> what was his conviction of faith and his personal experience: “frequent confession, frequent communion, daily Mass are the columns that ought to sustain an educational establishment,

<sup>38</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church. 17 April 2003, 10.

<sup>39</sup> PIETRO STELLA, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità Cattolica*. Vol II: Mentalità religiosa e Spiritualità. Roma: LAS 1981<sup>2</sup>, p. 105. 107.

<sup>40</sup> PIETRO BRAIDO, *L'esperienza pedagogica di Don Bosco*. Roma: LAS 1988, p. 125.



from which one wishes to keep far away threats and the lash". And with educational wisdom he used to add: "never oblige the boys to frequent the Sacraments, but just encourage them and make it easy for them to profit from them".<sup>41</sup> These principles of eucharistic pedagogy were applied at Valdocco "to the letter" and involved "as the general approach" the whole educational system.<sup>42</sup>

The deficit of eucharistic life that, in my view, can be hidden by and grow within a regular community life and an apostolate at times frenetic, shows itself, basically, in the first place, in the inability to make the celebration of the Eucharist "the central act of every Salesian community; it is a daily festive celebration" (C. 88) and, in the second place, in the lack of that "awe for the mystery of God",<sup>43</sup> that arises from the assiduous contemplation of his unlimited love revealed in Christ in the eucharist, whose presence "for us sons of Don Bosco [...] in our houses is a reason for frequent encounters" (C. 88). The mystery of the Eucharist, however, "*does not allow for reduction or exploitation*; it must be experienced and lived in its integrity, both in its celebration and in the intimate converse with Jesus which takes place after receiving communion or in a prayerful moment of Eucharistic adoration apart from Mass. These are times when the Church is firmly built up".<sup>44</sup>

To recognise the symptoms of the disease is not yet to identify its real cause. Personally I am convinced that the weaknesses that are to be found in our eucharistic practice are inherent, in a certain sense, in the very nature of the sacrament of the eucharist, but they increase and remain in the depth of our heart.

<sup>41</sup> PIETRO BRAIDO (ed.), *Don Bosco educatore. Scritti e testimonianze*. Roma: LAS 1997<sup>3</sup>, p. 262.

<sup>42</sup> PIETRO BRAIDO, *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di don Bosco*. Roma: LAS 1999, p. 259.

<sup>43</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 41.

<sup>44</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church. 17 April 2003, 61.

“The Church’s ability to “make” the Eucharist is completely rooted in Christ’s self-gift to her [...]. We too, at every celebration of the Eucharist, confess the primacy of Christ’s gift [...]. For all eternity he remains the one who loves us first”.<sup>45</sup> This “primacy”, not only chronological but also ontological”, of the love of God disturbs us. The Eucharist is a mystery because in it is revealed so much love (cf. *Jn* 15,13), a love so divine that, going far beyond our capabilities overwhelms us and leaves us astonished. Even though we are not always aware of it, usually we find it difficult to accept the gift of the Eucharist, the love of God manifested in the gift of the body of Christ (cf. *Jn* 3,16), which exceeds our capacity and challenges our freedom; God is always greater than our heart and reaches those places beyond our wildest desires.

And precisely because they consider such a desire to give oneself to God not possible, not reasonable, beyond measure, some people find plenty of excuses for not receiving him in the sacramental celebration and fail to contemplate him in the silence of adoration. A love so profound frightens us revealing the radical poverty of our being: the deep need to love does not leave us the time nor the energy to let ourselves be loved. And so we prefer to be busy, hiding ourselves behind doing so much for others and giving them so much of ourselves,<sup>46</sup> and we deprive ourselves of the wonder of knowing that we are so much loved by God. Becoming aware of it would oblige us to feel that we are and want to be always indebted to God, from whose love, adored in contemplation and received in eucharistic communion, we would never be free.

<sup>45</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 14.

<sup>46</sup> “The essential contribution that the Church expects from consecrated persons is much more in the order of being than of doing” (BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007 2005, 81).

## 2. RECALLING THE EXPERIENCE OF THE DISCIPLES

We shouldn't be surprised. This incapacity is not new; indeed, it is commonly found in those who follow Jesus closely. The one who experiences it – not the one who accepts it! – shows that he is a real disciple, since only the one who received Christ's body and blood, as a gift that is unexpected, undeserved and incomprehensible is aware of it. Who has ever said that receiving Christ, bread of life, is something of no significance, that we can take for granted that does not require preparation, that does not have consequences? In no way! This is not the testimony of the New Testament.

### 2.1 The first defection of the disciples (Jn 6,66-71)<sup>47</sup>

The fourth gospel reminds us about it. When Jesus in the synagogue at Cafarnaum identified himself as the bread from heaven and offered his flesh as real food and his blood as real drink (cf. *Jn* 6,55-59), "many of his disciples", for the first time publicly showed their inability to "listen to this hard saying" (*Jn* 6,60).

Let us not forget that in John's gospel, the disciples begin to follow a Jesus who was passing by, alerted by the Baptist and curious about where he lived (*Jn* 1,35-38); they were not called personally by Jesus (cf. *Mk* 1,16-20), they were the ones who wanted to stay with him (*Jn* 1,39). They begin to believe in him only when, as the wine runs out at a wedding at Cana in Galilee, Jesus intervenes and provides it for the guests in abundance (*Jn* 2,1-11). Nevertheless, that faith, born at a banquet, dies when another new and stupendous feast is announced, in which Jesus would no longer be master of the house or table companion but the food and drink at the table. Jesus reveals himself not so much as someone who provides the food to eat but rather as the one who gives himself to be eaten (*Jn* 6,55-56).

<sup>47</sup> For these reflections I am basing myself on JUAN J. BARTOLOMÉ, *Cuarto evangelio. Cartas de Juan*. Introducción y comentario. Madrid: CCS 2002, p. 226-227.

Jesus makes this surprising promise after having fed a huge crowd, "about five thousand men" (*Jn* 6,10), presenting himself the following day, as "the bread of life" (*Jn* 6,35), precisely because, whoever eats this bread will live for ever (*Jn* 6,58). To the unbelief of the people is added the scandal of the disciples, many of whom left him.<sup>48</sup> For the first time, unfortunately not the last, Jesus, the bread of heaven, provoked dissent among his own and the abandonment by many: the fidelity of his followers was put to the test when Jesus told them of the gift of his body as real food and his blood as real drink. The disciples who had seen Jesus multiply the bread (*Jn* 6,9.13) and walk on the sea (*Jn* 6,19), could not understand that one achieves eternal life by eating his flesh. And so, while Jesus told them of his giving of himself, the disciples murmured at it (*Jn* 6,61) and many drew back (*Jn* 6,66).

By chance? Absolutely not! This statement (*Jn* 6,60a), the offering of himself, was – and remains – a real obstacle, a stumbling block, for his closest associates. For the disciple it will always be easier to follow Jesus than to eat him; it will be more palatable to accompany him than to have him as food. It wasn't sufficient then, and it never will be, for the disciple to follow the Master; he must feed on him, on his word and on his body. That Jesus should offer his body as real nourishment for life is hard, unacceptable (*Jn* 6, 51-58), so as to put to the test our ability to listen.

The evangelist affirms that Jesus knew from the beginning the inability to believe on the part of *many of his disciples* (*Jn* 6,60.66). The personal disappointment of the disciple, shared by many, first by leaving him and then in betrayal, is explained by Jesus theologically. The enigma of the infidelity of the disciple is given a paradoxical reply: it is not the one who wants to who

<sup>48</sup> The lack of understanding on the part of the people (*Jn* 6,41-45) and of the disciples (*Jn* 6,60) becomes a cause of protest and scandal. This is understandable: Jesus repeats three times that he has to be *eaten* (*Jn* 6,54.56.58) and *his blood drunk* (*Jn* 6,53.54.55), this last declaration especially detestable to the Jews- blood is life that only God can dispose of (cf. Gen 9,4; Lev 3,17; 17,10-16; Dt 12,16.23-25).

believes, but the one to whom the gift to believe is given; faith and fidelity are the effects of the grace of God (*Jn* 6,64-65). It is even more shocking: merely spending time with Jesus, living with him is not enough; in fact, the evangelist tells us that among those who stay with Jesus there is also the traitor. And Jesus knew it (*Jn* 6,64; cf. 13,27): one who had not been given to him by the Father (*Jn* 6,65), he will hand him over (*Jn* 6,70-71). The personal choice by Jesus is still not a guarantee against defection.

But where defection has actually happened, fidelity can be restored. The disciples will be incapable of understanding and of remaining faithful if they continue to rely on their own senses, on superficial appearances; those on the other hand will believe to whom "it is granted by the Father" (*Jn* 6,65): those who have not been led to him by God will not feel themselves attracted by Jesus, nor become his table companions. Welcoming Jesus as bread that has been given is a gift of the Father; only the believer who knows that he is a gift of God to Christ will be able to eat the body of Christ and drink his blood without putting his life at risk.

The grace of fidelity was given to a few, the twelve,<sup>49</sup> who remain. Their spokesman, Simon Peter, acknowledges that they do not know where else to go; they remain because – and this is the genuine motive for faith – only Jesus has the words of life, only He promises life without end (*Jn* 6,68). "*We have believed and have come to know* (*Jn* 6,69), he says in the name of all; because knowing Jesus goes hand in hand with believing in him: one knows in believing, entrusting oneself to him; and only the one who trusts, remains faithful. Fidelity does not come from one's own good will, nor from the deepest desires; it comes from the will of God, who has loved us, always, first. Fidelity becomes possible only if it is received as a grace.

<sup>49</sup> It is the first time the evangelist refers to the Twelve (*Jn* 6,67.70.71; 20,24), whose selection he does not mention nor does he mention their names (cf. *Mk* 3,13-19; *Mt* 10,1-4; *Lk* 6,12-16).

## 2.2 The abandonment by the Twelve (*Mk 14,17-31*)<sup>50</sup>

A promise to be faithful is not the same thing as proven fidelity. At Cafarnaum the Twelve chose to stay with Jesus; but even though warned during the last supper, at Gethsemani “they all forsook him and fled” (*Mk 14,50*). They made the decision to stay with the one who offered himself to them as the bread of life; but when Jesus kept his promise (*Mk 14,22-25*), he had to foretell the betrayal by one of them (*Mk 14,17-21*), denial by a second (*Mk 14,29-30*) and the scandal and the flight of all the others (*Mk 14,26-27*).

It is really tragic, and in this all the four gospels are in agreement, that the infidelity of the disciples, its anticipation (*Mk 14, 17-21; Mt 26,20-25; Lk 22,14.21-23; Jn 13,21-30*) and its fulfilment (*Mk 14,26-42; Mt 26,30-46; Lk 22,33-34.40-46; Jn 13,37-38*), have as the setting a meal with Jesus, the last supper (*Mk 14,22-25; Mt 26,26-29; Lk 22,15-20*), when Jesus keeps his promise to give himself as bread and wine (*Mk 14,22.24*). The announcement of the betrayal in the same setting, in addition to uniting the death of Jesus and the Eucharist, the gift of life and the bread of life, means that the giving of himself on the cross is the last, and the most difficult, of the stumbling blocks that the disciples have to cope with. During the last supper, the first Eucharist, darkness was still in the heart of the disciples: only the hour of the cross will dissipate the night (*Jn 13,1.27*).

### 2.2.1 *Following Jesus does not ensure that we don't betray him*

Mark, the first chronicler of the passion and death of Jesus, narrates the betrayal of Judas in three separate scenes in the course of the account of Jesus' last day, before his death (*Mk 14,1-72*). With surprising objectivity, the narrator shows the determination of Judas to hand over Jesus to the authorities and the

<sup>50</sup> Cf. JUAN J. BARTOLOMÉ, *Jesús de Nazaret, formador de discípulos*. Motivo, meta y metodología de su pedagogía en el evangelio de Marcos. Madrid: CCS 2007, p. 219-263.

resolute commitment of Jesus to hand himself over. The plan is hatched by "Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve", who approaches the High Priests "in order to betray Jesus to them ... and he sought an opportunity to betray him" (*Mk* 14,10). Jesus, "as they were at table eating" (*Mk* 14,18), before instituting the Eucharist (*Mk* 14,22-25), discloses the betrayal approaching and the traitor. Then in Gethsemane, in the depth of the night, Judas came with "a crowd with swords and clubs" and paradoxically betrays Jesus with a kiss, as though he were his friend (*Mk* 14,43-49).

The decision taken by Judas to betray Jesus does not prevent him taking his place at table with Jesus, nor being beside him as a table companion (*Mk* 14,18) and having dipped bread in the same dish (*Mt* 14,20), doesn't deter him from his intention (*Mk* 14,45-46). It is therefore astonishing that while Judas is preparing to betray Jesus, Jesus gives himself to his own in the bread broken and the wine poured out. If his presence at the first celebration of the eucharistic supper did not save Judas from the crime of betraying his Master, the presence of the traitor did not prevent Jesus from giving himself for all. And this means that, today as yesterday, it is possible to take part in the Eucharist and at the same time nurture in one's heart disloyalty and bad faith. Judas too had left everything one day to be with Jesus (cf. *Mk* 3,13); but afterwards he ended up leaving him in the hands of enemies for money (*Mk* 14,11).

But perhaps worse still, the betrayal on the part of one is the basis of the insecurity of all: the other disciples having got over their initial surprise are so uncertain of their fidelity as to ask Jesus one after the other if he were the traitor mentioned: "Is it I?" (*Mk* 14,19). At the last supper all receive the bread that is his body and the wine that is the blood of the new covenant (*Mk* 14, 22-23); one of them, however, continues to plan to betray Jesus and the others are not sure about remaining faithful to him.

This passage for St Mark's gospel is really disturbing, and not only because it tells us what happened between Jesus and his

friends, but above all because it is also relevant today. Being chosen personally as a companion of Jesus (*Mk* 3,13), becoming his companion at table where Jesus serves bread that is his body is no guarantee of fidelity. The Twelve, those who had remained with Jesus because he had the words of life (*Jn* 6,68), all collapse in that night of the last supper. We may ask ourselves: how can it happen that being with him was not sufficient to stay with him? How can it happen that eating with him was not enough for them to remain faithful?

### *2.2.2 Promising Jesus a great deal does not prevent us from denying him*

Even a promise expressed in a love that is enthusiastic, genuine but immature is not sufficient.. In fact, immediately after having finished eating, with the Eucharist already instituted, while walking towards the Mount of Olives, Jesus announces that Peter will betray him three times (*Mk* 14,26-31); Peter, however, denies it vehemently, and “they all said the same” (*Mk* 14,31). On the one hand Jesus wants to forewarn them, but on the other they persist in declaring their readiness even to die with the Master. The most dramatic thing is that the one who has promised the most, will deny him the most.

Peter, not speaking here as the spokesman of the Twelve, reaffirms his personal attachment to Jesus: “even though all..., I will not” (*Mk* 14,29). Confident in himself, he believes that he can promise to be faithful, changing his certainty into rashness; he loves his Lord so much as not to want to hear and to accept his predictions: “if I must die with you I will not deny you” (*Mk* 14,31). He does not oppose the death that Jesus had already announced (*Mk* 8,32), rather, he says that he is ready to die beside him. It would be difficult to think of a greater love (cf. *Jn* 15,13) and fidelity; but it is precisely in this way that the distance that separates them is made clear. Jesus knows that Peter will deny him several times; Peter repeatedly refuses to accept this warning. The disciple who promises fidelity needs to remember Peter:



fidelity is the result not of promises but of grace, since it is the proof of a love to the bitter end.

With masterly skill, Mark contrasts the denials of Peter in the courtyard with the confession of Jesus before the Sanhedrin: in contrast with Jesus, who puts his own life at risk, Peter denies everything to save it (*Mk* 14,53-72). The one disciple who still followed Jesus was unable to face the questions of some servants. Peter, the one who denied that he would abandon Jesus, ends up denying that he was a follower of his. Peter personifies those disciples who deny their Lord so as not to deny themselves (cf. *Mk* 8,34): an attitude anything but eucharistic!

### *2.2.3 The covenant broken almost as soon as it was made needs to be remembered*

The body of Jesus given and his blood poured out seal the covenant and announce the kingdom of God (*Mk* 14,24-25). The covenant established at the supper is not limited to those who have just ratified it. The sacrifice of Jesus is for many (*Mk* 14,24; *Mt* 26,28). The Twelve were the first but they won't be the only ones.

In narrating the institution of the Eucharist, the gospel tradition for our benefit did not want to keep silent about the fact that all those who ate and drank at table with Jesus at the last supper, immediately afterwards left him (*Mk* 14,27.50). Being worthy to be the first to receive the body and blood of their Lord did not make them so very faithful.

The journey of Jesus to the cross begins not when his enemies capture him but when the disciples abandon him. The closeness of the cross disclosed the weakness of the disciples and the poverty of their motives in following Jesus. No one can follow Jesus and give their life for him if Jesus has not given his for them. The Twelve who ate with Jesus didn't know this when he gave himself to them in the bread and the wine; but they will be able to remember, when Jesus is dead and risen, that giving their life for Him is the task of whoever has received him at the table of the eucharist.

This precisely, is the “memorial” to be done (1 Cor 11,24), the remembrance of Jesus to be re-lived continuously until he comes again (1 Cor 11,26). And carrying out this memorial is not the question of a free choice; it was a precise command of Jesus, given, before handing himself over, to those who were eating with him. Although Jesus knew his disciples would not remain faithful, nevertheless he obliged them keep the memorial of him and his gesture. Quite curious the way Jesus behaves! He does not wait for the disciples to remain faithful in order to command them to carry out this memorial of him. But this too is grace: it is not necessary to be perfect in order to make the Eucharist, it is enough to feel ourselves loved by Jesus to the end.

### **2.3 The gesture in the hour of Jesus: loving even to the end (Jn 13,1-20)<sup>51</sup>**

Again it is the fourth gospel that offers us a reply. The fact, strange and not yet satisfactorily explained, is well known that John in his account of Jesus’ passion has not passed on the words of institution at the supper and has preferred to concentrate on the implementation of the hour of Jesus and his love to the end (Jn 13,1) “giving pre-eminence to the relationship to Jesus Christ of the individual believer”,<sup>52</sup> a relationship that is exemplified in the gesture carried out by the Master of washing the feet of his disciples “during supper” (Jn 13,2). In this way the evangelist reveals “the meaning of the institution of the Holy Eucharist [...] Jesus kneels down to wash the feet of his disciples as a sign of his love that goes to the very end. This prophetic gesture anticipates the stripping of himself even to death on the cross”.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Cf. JUAN J. BARTOLOMÉ, *Cuarto evangelio. Cartas de Juan*. Introducción y comentario. Madrid: CCS, 2002, 283-289.

<sup>52</sup> XAVIER LÉON-DUFOUR, *Condividere il pane eucaristico secondo il Nuovo Testamento*. Torino, Elledici 2005, p. 234.

<sup>53</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Message to the XI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*. “Eucaristia: Pane vivo per la pace del mondo”. 22 October 2005, 18.

Jesus' action, unexpected and surprising,<sup>54</sup> only he could explain (*Jn* 13,6-20); and he does so, even before the washing of the feet, in conversation with Peter (*Jn* 13,6-11) and then as the Master sitting once more at table, teaching all the disciples (*Jn* 13,12-20). According to Jesus, the gesture symbolises the total giving of himself, absolute love for his own,<sup>55</sup> since the hour had come for him to depart from this world to the Father (*Jn* 13,1). Love for his own brings his life to its end, since he hands it over; the life given proves his love without reserve. The washing of the feet is nothing less than the image and sign of this highest love (*Jn* 13,5). And in fact, even before it is described (*Jn* 13,4-5), the action of Jesus has already been defined as a practical expression of love (*Jn* 13,1), of total fidelity (cf. *Jn* 10,17-18).

With a humble act of service to his own, Jesus establishes the community of the disciples:<sup>56</sup> whoever wishes *to have part* in him must allow himself to be served as Lord by his Lord (*Jn* 13,9.14). The "communion with Christ", that is brought about by the blessing of the cup and the breaking of the bread (*1 Cor* 10,16), is now presented as "having part" in him (*Jn* 13,8); the price to pay, in fact, is allowing oneself to be served by the Master and Lord himself. Peter's objections are quite reasonable (*Jn* 13,8), even though he continues not to understand and to think in human fashion (*Jn* 13,7; cf. *Jn* 7,24; 8,15). He tries to refuse an inappropriate gesture, one that is humiliating for his Lord (*Jn* 13,6), and that goes against the image, and the wishes he has/nourishes for him (cf. *Mt* 16,22). But the one who does not allow himself to be served in this extreme way – Jesus declares – runs the risk of not sharing

<sup>54</sup> Washing the feet was the task of slaves (*1 Sam* 25,41), so contemptible that a Jewish slave could not be forced to do it (*Lev* 25,39); it could certainly be a sign of respect for a father or devotion for a master (Bill I 707; II 557). Washing the feet of one's table companions was a gesture as unusual as Jesus serving at supper (*Jn* 13,2.5).

<sup>55</sup> The expression 'loving to the end', can be understood in terms of *time* until the last moment of life, or of *quality*, to the extreme, to perfection. In either case, the end is the climax of his life and of his love; in retrospect, loving is synonymous with the way Jesus acted and the explanation for his death (*Jn* 13,34; 15,9; 17 23; 19,28.30).

<sup>56</sup> XAVIER LÉON-DUFOUR, *Lectura del evangelio de Juan*. Vol. III: Juan 13-17. Salamanca: Sígueme, 1995, 50.

his lot (*Jn* 13,8). The disciple acquires his Lord's inheritance only if he allows himself to be served by him.

That Jesus is serious in speaking to Peter becomes clear from what he says in addition: it is possible to be washed but not cleaned (*Jn* 13,10; cf. *1 Cor* 11,26); it is possible to eat with Jesus and lift the heel against him (*Jn* 13,18). Purification is not automatic, it has to be accepted, even if it comes about through an humiliating washing of the feet. The one who does not allow himself to be cleansed by the servant Jesus, who does not accept him as he is, as he wants to become for us (*Jn* 13,20), does not deserve to stay with him and will be excluded from the community of believers (*Jn* 13,27-30). The traitor remains unclean, because unbelieving, and is unbelieving because he does not accept Jesus as a gift (*Jn* 13,11; 6,64.70.71). The one who does not allow himself to be served by Jesus does not remain in the community; indeed, he continued to eat morsels from Jesus' hand, but Satan was his nourishment (*Jn* 13,26-27a; cf. *Lk* 22,3)! Only the one who allows Christ to give himself in the bread of the eucharist, only the one who allows himself to be served by his Lord, will be his companion, not only at table but for the whole of his life. It is not by chance that only after Judas has gone out from the upper room does Jesus 'feel glorified' (*Jn* 13,31) and commands his own to love one another as he has loved them (*Jn* 13,34-35). Jesus gave the commandment of love to those who allowed themselves to be loved to the end.

"When he had washed their feet, and taken his garments" (*Jn* 13,12a), Jesus sits down, resuming his authority, and begins to teach the disciples. What he had done was not to be something exceptional; it is the a pattern of conduct, a norm of behaviour among them (*Jn* 13,12b-14). Jesus does not want it to remain a beautiful memory, he requires that it become the law of Christian living. The gesture is more than a sign, it is a demonstration of the new way of living in common the fact of being disciples of Jesus: the one who commands is to serve everyone (*Jn* 13,15; *1 Jn* 3,16).

The one who knows that he is a servant cannot dream of becoming a master; the one who knows that he has been sent, cannot avoid allowing himself to be sent; serving each other is not a free option, it is the compulsory norm of behaviour for those sent by Christ (*Jn* 13,16). The carrying out of fraternal service is, in addition, the joy of the Christian, his blessing (*Jn* 13,17). It is worth noting that the first of John's beatitudes (cf. *Jn* 20,29) is linked to a way of *doing as* Jesus does. The single gesture needs to become an habitual way of acting; precisely because it is not an example to be imitated, but a gift to be accepted. The *way* Jesus acts is the basis of the command: the person of Jesus, his gesture, is the norm to be followed in interpersonal relationships in the community. A community that comes into being in an act of service by Jesus cannot continue to live without repeating this service in itself.<sup>57</sup>

And so, the "do this in remembrance of me" (*Lk* 22,19; *1 Cor* 11,24), the eucharistic anamnesis the Church must carry out, becomes in John a "you also should do as I have done" *Jn* 13,14-15). The 'eucharistic' gesture to be repeated by the Christian communities will always be the total giving of one's life to the end, recalled both in the breaking of the bread and in the service of the brethren. Why, then, – I would dare to ask – has the washing of the feet not managed to become a eucharistic memorial of the Lord Jesus until he comes? Service to the brethren is also an effective way of commemorating Christ. Living in the service of the brothers ought to constitute the other practical way of keeping the memory of the eucharistic Christ.

### 3. 'BECOMING EUCHARIST' TODAY

*Starting afresh from Christ*, the spiritual programme for the Church of the Third Millennium,<sup>58</sup> ought to be at "the centre of

<sup>57</sup> Cf. RUDOLF BULTMANN, *Das Evangelium nach Johannes*. Gottinga, 1968<sup>10</sup>, 365.

<sup>58</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*. Apostolic Letter at the close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. 6 January 2001, 29.

every personal and community project”, John Paul II reminded religious, and added: “Meet him, dear friends, and contemplate him in a most special way in the *Eucharist*, celebrated and adored each day as the source and summit of life and apostolic action”.<sup>59</sup> There is no shortage of reasons. In addition to “being ever more united to Christ”, starting afresh from Christ “means proclaiming that consecrated life is [...] “*a living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting*””.<sup>60</sup>

And so I repeat it, there is no other memorial of Christ so effective as that of the eucharist: it is the only one to make the remembered Christ present. It is true, “in the celebration of the eucharist and in adoration” we consecrated persons, find “strength for the radical following of Christ”. But not only this; the mystery of the Eucharist, “the daily viaticum and source of the spiritual life for the individual and for the Institute”,<sup>61</sup> “draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving”.<sup>62</sup> Making the eucharist reminds us “to live Christ’s Paschal Mystery, uniting ourselves to him by offering our own lives”; we are thus invited to unite ourselves with him, with the giving of one’s own life making a living memorial of Christ. “In fact, by sharing in the sacrifice of the Cross, the Christian partakes of Christ’s self-giving love and is equipped and committed to live this same charity in all his thoughts and deeds”.<sup>63</sup> Don Bosco expressed it with these words so dear to us: «*For you. I study, work, make myself holy*». Finally, “‘worship’ itself, eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not

<sup>59</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Homily* on the V Day of Religious Life. 2 February 2001, 4.

<sup>60</sup> CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*. A renewed commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium. Instruction. 19 May 2002, 21.22.

<sup>61</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 25 March 1996, 95.

<sup>62</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas est*. Encyclical Letter on Christian love. 25 December 2005, 13.

<sup>63</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 82.

pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented”.<sup>64</sup>

“«Becoming eucharist», that is to say the gift of love for others”,<sup>65</sup> is, precisely, “the essential contribution that the Church expects”<sup>66</sup> from us. It will not be possible to make this contribution to the Church, if we don’t live by making the eucharist and making ourselves eucharist; the Eucharist in fact, “is at the root of every form of holiness [...]. How many saints have advanced along the way of perfection thanks to their eucharistic devotion!”,<sup>67</sup> among these, we know well was also Don Bosco.

To offer you more encouragement to start afresh from Christ in the Eucharist on the journey towards our holiness, “our principal task”,<sup>68</sup> “the most precious gift we can offer the young” (C. 25), allow me a further reflection on the essential elements of consecrated life and a eucharistic way of living.

Consecrated life encounters its identity when it reflects in what it does the *living memorial of Jesus’ way of living and acting*. If it is a characteristic of the consecrated person to live the evangelical values in the same way that Jesus lived them, it is good to point out that this Jesus, dead and risen, we meet alive and present in the Eucharist: therefore “by its very nature the Eucharist is at the centre of the consecrated life, both for individuals and for communities”.<sup>69</sup> Further, we can say that consecrated life has a form of being that is fully eucharistic, if it wishes to remain consistent with itself. In the Eucharist, in fact, consecrated persons come into

<sup>64</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Ibidem*.

<sup>65</sup> Card. JOSÉ SARAIVA MARTINS, “Eucaristia: ‘Sacramentum sanctitatis’: *L’Osservatore Romano*. 9 May 2007, 5.

<sup>66</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 81.

<sup>67</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 94.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, “Discorso ai partecipanti al Capitolo Generale”. CG25, 170: *ACG* 378 (2002) p. 138.

<sup>69</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 25 March 1996, 95.

contact with their ideal model and the perfect fulfilment of the fundamental demands of their life.

### 3.1 Consecrated life, “eucharistic life”

“In this framework” (that of eucharistic spirituality and of daily life) – and I quote one of the proposals, the 39th of the recent Synod on the Eucharist – “is seen in a particularly vivid way “the prophetic witness of consecrated men and women, who find in the celebration of the Eucharist and in eucharistic adoration the strength necessary for the radical following of Christ, obedient, poor and chaste. Consecrated life finds here the source of contemplation, light for apostolic and missionary activity, the fundamental reason for its commitment to the poor and the marginalised and the pledge of the reality of the Kingdom”.

This reference by the Synod to the Eucharist is not directed primarily to the Sacrament in itself, nor does it relate only to its liturgical celebration, but to the fact that in them we find, alive and present, Jesus Christ, precisely in his existence in the Paschal Mystery. In this sense one can perfectly understand the affirmation of John Paul II that the Eucharist of Christ “is not one gift, however precious among others, *but the gift par excellence*, for it is the gift of himself”.<sup>70</sup>

Following the suggestion of the Synod, I therefore invite you to contemplate the fundamental element of the consecrated life in a eucharistic key, through an image, that is at the same time both simple and significant: the heart. The profession of the evangelical counsels, as the heart of the consecrated life, beats according to the twofold movements of fraternity (*sistole*) and mission (*diastole*), both of them lived according to the different charisms. It seems to me there is, in fact, a very profound and significant similarity between the great dimensions of the Eucharist, as “the

<sup>70</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church. 17 April 2003, 11.



heart of the Church's life", <sup>71</sup> and this 'heart' of the consecrated life that is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels. As John Paul II says, "The Mass is at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial *memorial* in which the *sacrifice* of the Cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord's body and blood". <sup>72</sup>

### 3.1.1 Consecrated life, "memorial" through obedience

"A living memorial of Jesus' way of living and acting", consecrated life "is a living tradition of the Saviour's life and message". <sup>73</sup>

The category of "memorial", as we well know, does not indicate a "repetition" of the event, nor is it limited simply to a "remembering it", but *makes it present and actual*. Our western way of thinking accepts this actualisation of an event, with difficulty even though it is fundamental to the understanding of the meaning of a feast in traditional cultures. <sup>74</sup>

To describe the *memorial* as the "actualisation of the event" can lend itself to a certain "mythical" understanding, as though the history of salvation was not made up of unique and unrepeatable events, including the death of the Lord (cf. *Heb* 7,27; 9,12; 10,10). It would be preferable to speak, rather than of an "event that takes place", of a living real presence of the protagonist of the event, Jesus Christ, dead and risen. Consecrated life can only be a *memorial* of Jesus Christ if it continues to make present, at all times and in all places, the same *form of life*. It is this precisely that constitutes the nucleus of consecrated obedience and that Don Bosco used to express with his well-known phrase; "I am always a priest...".

<sup>71</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 25 March 1996, 95.

<sup>72</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church. 17 April 2003, 12. The Pope quotes a text from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1382.

<sup>73</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 25 March 1996, 22.

<sup>74</sup> Cf. MIRCEA ELIADE, *Lo Sagrado y lo Profano*, Madrid, Paidós 1998, 53-85.

A close reading of the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* shows that the fulcrum and the centre of the evangelical counsels is to be found in obedience: this simply reflects the witness of biblical tradition. In the OT we find obedience as the principal expression of faith: the great believers, consequently, are the great *obedient ones*. On the threshold of the NT we meet Mary, the One who believed and totally accepted to collaborate with God in his plan of salvation. And above all, the whole life of Jesus, from his incarnation (cf. *Heb* 10,5.7; *Jn* 6,38), his mission (cf. *Mk* 1,38; *Lk* 4,43, *Jn* 4,34), and especially, his passion (cf. *Mk* 14,36; *Jn* 12, 27-28; *Heb* 5,7-9) is a continuous path of perfect obedience.<sup>75</sup>

Further, according to *Vita Consecrata*, both virginity and poverty are, in a certain sense, the consequence of obedience: “Jesus is the exemplar of obedience, (...). In this attitude of submissiveness to the Father, Christ lives his life as a virgin, even while affirming and defending the dignity and sanctity of married life. He thus reveals the sublime excellence and mysterious spiritual fruitfulness of virginity. His full acceptance of the Father’s plan is also seen in his detachment from earthly goods (...). The depth of his poverty is revealed in the perfect offering of all that is his to the Father”.<sup>76</sup>

The memorial element is not simply reduced to the liturgical celebration in which the words of Jesus are repeated “This is my body offered in sacrifice for you” and therefore, it does not consist in sacramentally repeating an event that has happened once and for all, but in making it present in the Eucharist (“making the eucharist”) and in becoming a living memorial of his way of being and acting (“making oneself eucharist”). This prolongation of Christ’s total gift of himself in the life of each one of the consecrated comes about through the vow of obedience. The vow of obedience is the vow that best expressed this total belonging to God,

<sup>75</sup> Cf. JUAN J. BARTOLOMÉ, “La obediencia de Cristo, filiación probada”: in *Vida Religiosa* 94 (2003) p. 38-45, showed how obedience to the Father is an appropriate gospel category to explain the whole personal mystery of Christ and the carrying out of his work.

<sup>76</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 25 March 1996, 22.

this total giving of oneself to God to the point of having nothing else to do but to identify oneself with the will of the Father. And so eucharistic spirituality is not only celebrating the Eucharist in a dignified manner with devotion. It should be expressed in a life of obedience, where indeed one commemorates Christ and we become his living memorial.

### 3.1.2 Consecrated life, “sacrifice” through chastity

The second great dimension of the Eucharist is the *sacrifice*. Now isn’t the time to enter into the discussion about whether the post-conciliar reform obscured or, actually marginalised the sacrificial character of the eucharistic celebration.<sup>77</sup> The biblical witnesses both in the synoptic and in the Pauline tradition are in agreement in attesting that

- Jesus established a parallel between the bread broken and his own body (*Mk* 14,22; *Mt* 26,26; *Lk* 22,19; *1 Cor* 11,24);
- Jesus made a comparison between the wine (which was to be drunk during the paschal supper) and his blood, adding that through his blood the New Covenant would come into being (*Mk* 14,24; *Mt* 26,28; *Lk* 22,20; *1 Cor* 11,25).
- The presence of the expression *for* in five texts directs all the attention on “for whom” the body is being given and the blood being poured out (*Mk* 14,24; *Mt* 26,28; *Lk* 22,20).<sup>78</sup>

Historical thinking on the sacrificial meaning of the Eucharist – derived, obviously from the Paschal Mystery – gives us some valuable teaching: it is not suffering but love at the centre of the redemption as the work of the Father through Christ, in the Spirit: Jesus can give his life as the highest expression of his own love, as he greatest gift! “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends” (*Jn* 15,13).

<sup>77</sup> A programme that had its roots in the theological history of protestantism according to P. STUHLMACHER, *Jesús de Nazaret – Cristo de la Fe*. Salamanca, Sígueme 1996, 90.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. JOACHIM JEREMIAS, *Abba. El Mensaje Central del Nuevo Testamento*, Salamanca, Sígueme 1993, 270.

It is usual to say that the Eucharist is the “memorial” of the death and resurrection of the Lord, but that is not exact if it is a reference to the *first* Eucharist, the Last Supper. In fact it was not only *anámnesis*, memorial, but *prolepsis*, anticipation: it preceded, giving full meaning to that which would happen on Golgotha. “Jesus gave this act of oblation an enduring presence through his institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. He anticipated his death and resurrection by giving his disciples, in the bread and wine, his very self, his body and blood as the new manna”.<sup>79</sup>

Without the celebration of the Last Supper, we would not have had the strongest and most direct proof of the meaning that Jesus wished to give to his own death. In other words: the “unbloody sacrifice” (for love) *precedes* the “bloody sacrifice” (the death of Jesus on the cross). This fundamental aspect of the Eucharist as *sacrifice* and as the supreme expression of the love of Jesus for us, is closely linked to *consecrated chastity*.

The human being is called to fulfil himself in love and this, in the form of self-giving, implies the total giving of the body. The usual form this self-giving takes is in the “language” of sex; in this the body is the protagonist, although there is always the hidden danger that this does not imply the total giving of the person, and in this case, it would become a lie, given that of its nature it is a self-giving that is exclusive and total.<sup>80</sup> Sexual self-donation, however, is not the only way of giving one’s body as an expression of love; in Jesus we find the *eucharistic self-giving* as the most profound expression of love, since here the body is the sign and the instrument of the donation of the person, the true protagonist of love, and in addition it is not limited in its extent: it is “for all”. Jesus does not live his love and the donation of himself in a “sexual key”, he lives it in a *eucharistic key*.

<sup>79</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas est*. Encyclical Letter on Christian love. 25 December 2005, 13.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas est*. Encyclical Letter on Christian love. 25 December 2005, 6.

Thus, for us consecrated persons, the special way in which we are living to the full our love and the consequent self-giving implies that: we abstain from giving our body and our affections to a single person, so as to give ourselves totally to everyone. Without doubt, here too one can run a parallel risk to that of sexual giving: there it is possible to give one's body without giving oneself; here it is possible for there to be a false giving of oneself, without that total giving of one's body, without that "using up and wearing out" also physically, that is the genuine and essential expression of a love lived in a eucharistic key.

In this way, therefore, the twofold dimension of consecrated chastity can be found, the 'sistole' of *life in fraternity* and the 'diastole' of the *total giving* in carrying out the mission. "In the Eucharist, consecrated virginity finds inspiration and nourishment for its complete dedication to Christ";<sup>81</sup> the Eucharist is also, the fount and summit of the life and mission of the Church, because "the love that we celebrate in the sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all".<sup>82</sup> In both directions, as an expression of a *love of agape*, that does not ignore the presence of *eros*, but that takes it up in such a way that it is converted into a love that is perceptible, affectionate, and not only an object of faith since it is impossible for it to be seen.<sup>83</sup>

### 3.1.3 Consecrated life, "shared meal" through poverty

Finally we consider consecrated life from the point of view of the Eucharist as *convivio*. From the anthropological point

<sup>81</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 81.

<sup>82</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 84.

<sup>83</sup> On this particular issue the first encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI is especially valuable. I mention just two texts in relation to *eros* and *agape*: "The more the two, in their different aspects, find a proper unity in the one reality of love, the more the true nature of love in general is realized (...). Yet when the two dimensions are totally cut off from one another, the result is a caricature or at least an impoverished form of love". (BENEDICT XVI, *Deus Caritas est*. Encyclical Letter on Christian love. 25 December 2005, 7-8).

of view, it is one of the more attractive biblical themes: "eating together" constitutes for traditional cultures in all climes, together with "fraternity" one of the more intense and significant experiences of sharing life together: "table fellowship is life fellowship".<sup>84</sup>

One of the most characteristic features of Jesus' ministry was indeed to have made it a practice to eat together, in particular with the little ones, the poor, the marginalised and, above all with the "publicans and sinners" (*Lk* 5,29-30; 15,2). By admitting to table fellowship people who were religiously and morally outside the pale, Jesus indicated that God finds joy in offering salvation to sinners and granting them his forgiveness.<sup>85</sup>

Not only in what Jesus *did* do we find the meal as an expression of the saving closeness of God; it is also there in his *preaching*, especially in the parables as the particular symbol of the Kingdom (*Mt* 8,11; 22,1-14; *Lk* 12,35-57; 14,12-24; 15,23-32; 19,5-10). In these there is a fundamental point that is scarcely to be found in other attitudes of Jesus, and it is the absolutely gratuitous nature of God's invitation to the banquet. No one is worthy to take part in this; hence the best approach is that of the *child* (cf. *Mk* 10,15), who accepts with joy and gratitude what he is given because he *doesn't deserve it*; it is the attitude of the poor person, of the beggar, the down and out, of the one who is in the squares, on the streets because he has nowhere to live (cf. *Lk* 14,21; *Mt* 22,8-10). On the other hand, the one who sticks to the rigid norms of 'justice' will be angry, and will not even want to go into the festive banquet for the return of his brother (cf. *Lk* 15,25-32), *or he will have so many things to do, that in his pride he will refuse an invitation as gratuitous as it is inopportune* (cf. *Lk* 14,18-20).

<sup>84</sup> JOACHIM JEREMIAS, *Abba. El Mensaje Central del Nuevo Testamento*, Salamanca, Sígueme 1993<sup>4</sup>, 259-260.

<sup>85</sup> Cf. JUAN J. BARTOLOMÉ, *La Alegría del Padre*. Estudio exegético de Lc 15. Estella: Verbo Divino, 2000.

The dimension of the *shared meal* is reflected in religious life in its truest sense in the life of *poverty*, not as a natural lack of means nor voluntary deprivation, but as a *sharing* of what one is, of what one has, *as something totally gratuitous*; so much so that the first account of the institution of the Eucharist (1 Cor 11,17-34) has as *Sitz im Leben* a community situation in which the Supper of the Lord was celebrated without the sharing one's own goods with those who were in need; the Corinthians were far from the ideal of the community as portrayed in Luke, in which "all who believed were together and had all things in common [...]. And day by day attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes they partook of food with glad and generous hearts" (Act 2,44.46; cf. 4,32).

The poverty of the consecrated person is in no way a kind of rejection of material goods, nor does it suggest that the total deprival of everything is an ideal to be achieved, as it might be in some kinds of oriental religious thinking. The poor person, because he is a believer, accepts the gifts of God with simplicity and moderation, sharing in them as an expression of his love, in a twofold movement: internally of the fraternal community, in a total sharing of goods, and externally, in the invitation to take part in this "banquet of the Kingdom", with an evangelical predilection, that is the option of the revealed God, for the poorest and the abandoned, for the marginalised, for the sinners, for all those, in human terms, insignificant. The invitation is not addressed to friends or relatives (cf. Lk 14,12-13; Mt 5,46-47), which wouldn't be a bad thing; but which wouldn't be an 'evangelical sign', nor produce the salutary shock of recognising that "the Gentiles do the same" (Mt 5,47). Evangelical poverty becomes *freedom* in order to be able to go and invite those far away to the banquet of the Kingdom, missionary zeal that comes to birth only in the heart of the poor man, who literally "has nothing to lose" and everything to gain... for Christ and his Kingdom.

### 3.2 The Salesian, man of the Eucharist

Between the mystery of the Eucharist and consecrated life there is such a close connection that there can be no explanation or foundation for the one without the other. The consecrated person if he wishes to remain such must become a man of the Eucharist; religious consecration, in fact, has “a Eucharistic structure, it is the total offering of self”, and precisely for this reason is “closely joined to the Eucharistic Sacrifice”.<sup>86</sup>

Having stated the centrality of the Eucharist for each one of us and for the Congregation, I would like, if only briefly, to point out the way in which it, “the daily viaticum and source of the spiritual life”,<sup>87</sup> is a model of “a eucharistic way of life”, in so far as it assists conformity to Christ, making us, that is, eucharistic persons. I begin from the internal dynamics of the Sacrament itself, that lead from the *celebration* of a rite to *conformity* with the mystery; from effective *attachment*, the most intense there can be in the giving of one’s life, to *adoration* of the crucified and risen Lord present in the Eucharist; from *contemplation* of Christ given for us, to the *mission* of transforming oneself into bread broken for others.

#### 3.2.1 *From celebration to conformity*

The Eucharist, “the [daily] central act of every Salesian community” (C. 88), “reveals the loving plan that guides all of salvation history (cf. *Eph* 1:10; 3:8-11). There the *Deus Trinitas*, who is essentially love (cf. *1 Jn* 4:7-8), becomes fully a part of our human condition. In the bread and wine [...] God’s whole life encounters us and is sacramentally shared with us. [...] This is an absolutely free gift, the superabundant fulfilment of God’s promises”.<sup>88</sup>

<sup>86</sup> CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*. A renewed commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium. Instruction (19 May 2002) 26.

<sup>87</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation 25 March 1996, 95.

<sup>88</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 8.



The one who celebrates the Eucharist will not only confess with wonder and gratitude the absolute primacy of the gift of Christ, but will also allow his Lord to enter into his life, that is to say, “to let himself be possessed by God’s love”.<sup>89</sup> In Christ in the eucharist God is not perceived as an abstract idea, nor even as a programme of life, but as “Someone with whom I cultivate a strong personal relationship of friendship, a filial, adult and responsible one, a covenant relationship and unconditional commitment to the mission of the salvation of mankind”.<sup>90</sup> And so here “the fullness of *intimacy* with Christ is realized, *becoming one with him, total conformity to him* to whom consecrated persons are called by vocation”:<sup>91</sup> “the truth of God’s love in Christ encounters us, attracts us and delights us, enabling us to emerge from ourselves and drawing us towards our true vocation, which is love”.<sup>92</sup>

Caught up by love, personally loved by him, the Salesian becomes capable of loving and of giving himself, first to God and then with God to others. It is in this giving of oneself that one becomes one with Christ, because communicating with his Body and Blood, one takes on that eucharistic way of living that characterised the life and death of Jesus. Therefore, celebrating the Eucharist each day, “even if the faithful are unable to be present”,<sup>93</sup> in addition to its infinite value objectively, has a singular spiritual effectiveness; precisely for this reason the GC25 encouraged us to develop the community dimension of our spiritual life “celebrating the daily Eucharist with joy, creativity and enthusiasm”.<sup>94</sup> The celebration of the Eucharist “is formative

<sup>89</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 80.

<sup>90</sup> Card. CLÁUDIO HUMMES, “Priestly Spirituality in ‘Sacramentum caritatis’”: in *L’Osservatore Romano*. 16 May 2007, 8.

<sup>91</sup> CIVCSVA, *Starting afresh from Christ*. A renewed commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium. Instruction. 19 May 2002, 26.

<sup>92</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 35.

<sup>93</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church. 17 April 2003, 31.

<sup>94</sup> GC25, 31: ACG 378 (2002) p. 38.

in the deepest sense of the word, since it fosters the priest's configuration to Christ".<sup>95</sup> As St Augustine dared to say: "not only have we become Christians, we have become Christ himself". Since, in the eucharistic bread and wine "Christ the Lord wanted to entrust to us his body and his blood, that he shed for us for the remission of sins. If you have received them well, you yourself are what you have received".<sup>96</sup>

But precisely because in the Eucharist celebrated "in obedience to Christ's command", God gives us his Son, "the eucharistic liturgy is essentially an *actio Dei*", and "its basic structure is not something within our power to change, nor can it be held hostage by the latest trends".<sup>97</sup> Only docile respect for the structure of the celebration will make effective our recognition of the ineffable gift and the genuine commitment to welcome it with gratitude. It is unthinkable that someone who wants to identify himself with Christ who gives himself to him totally, should celebrate the Eucharist without paying attention to its ritual structure. There is no doubt: "the *ars celebrandi* is the best way to ensure their *actuosa participatio*".<sup>98</sup>

### 3.2.2 *From conformity to adoration*

The challenge to live "*by conforming one's whole existence to Christ*"<sup>99</sup> is to be found, precisely, in what we do so that the rite we celebrate every day as a feast (cf. C. 88) does not become reduced to a mere *mimesis* of what happened in the Upper Room, repeating the same external gestures of Jesus, but that it may be a real

<sup>95</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 80.

<sup>96</sup> SAINT AUGUSTINE, *In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus* 21, 8: *PL* 35, 1568; *Sermo* 227,1: *PL* 38, 1099. In the Catechesis of Jerusalem it says: "Receiving the body and blood of Christ, you become one body and one blood with Christ" (22 1,3: *PG* 33 1098).

<sup>97</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 37.

<sup>98</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 38.

<sup>99</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 25 March 1996, 16.

*anámnesis*, that commemorates while it actualises and makes present the fact that is remembered. This is possible to the extent to which the celebration leads to *contemplation* of the mystery that is brought about. In fact, “eucharistic adoration is simply the natural consequence of the eucharistic celebration, which is itself the Church’s supreme act of adoration. Receiving the Eucharist means adoring him whom we receive”.<sup>100</sup>

Contemplation necessarily leads to wonder for the gift that God has made us in Christ, to amazement in one who feels himself loved in such a way and to such a degree that he does not know how to explain it nor to be sufficiently grateful. “Why”, – affirms an astonished Paul – “one will hardly die for a righteous man... but God shows his love for us in that while we were sinners, Christ died for us” (*Rm* 5,7-8). Someone who sees himself loved in such a divine manner can only allow himself to be loved without limit and will succeed in giving himself to the end. Such a great love is not deserved nor understood; one admires it and one adores it in grateful silence.

Adoring God “not to see the world that surrounds us solely as raw material with which we can do something”, but “to discover in it “the Creator’s handwriting”, the creative reason and the love from which the world was born and of which the universe speaks to us [...]. Before every activity and every change in the world there needs to be adoration. Only this will make us really free; only this gives us the criteria for what we are doing. Precisely in a world in which progressively there is a lack of criteria for guidance and there is a risk that everyone sees himself as being the criteria, it is fundamental to emphasise adoration”. But for the Christian to adore God, is, above all to adore his Lord, “present in the Eucharist with flesh and blood, with body and soul, with divinity and humanity”. In the Eucharist Christ is not only bread to be eaten but love to be contemplated; indeed, without love given the eucharis-

<sup>100</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 66.

tic sign would have no reason nor support. "Indeed, we do not merely receive something in the Eucharist. It is the encounter and unification of persons; the person, however, who comes to meet us and desires to unite himself to us is the Son of God. Such unification can only be brought about by means of adoration. Receiving the Eucharist means adoring the One whom we receive. Precisely in this way and only in this way do we become one with him".<sup>101</sup> "No one" – Saint Augustine wrote – "should eat this flesh without first adoring it; we should sin were we not to adore it".<sup>102</sup>

As for ourselves, "called by that very consecration to more prolonged contemplation [...] Jesus in the tabernacle wants us to be at his side, so that he can fill our hearts with the experience of his friendship, which alone gives meaning and fulfilment to our lives".<sup>103</sup> How much therefore, dear confreres, I would like that among us there should be strengthened, and where necessary recovered, that eucharistic devotion, simple yet effective, so Salesian, that has in visits and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament one of its most precious and traditional expressions! Not only because I would like us to let ourselves be formed by the real presence of the Lord we adore, but because it corresponds to a characteristic feature of our charismatic way of life.

As we all well know, frequent reception of Holy Communion was one of the practices of piety to which the "eucharistic pedagogy"<sup>104</sup> of Don Bosco gave priority in the education of his boys, and in the spiritual formation of the Salesians. If concerning Dominic Savio he wrote that "for him it was a real happiness when

<sup>101</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia*. 22 December 2005: AAS 98 (2006) p. 44-45.

<sup>102</sup> SAINT AUGUSTINE, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 98,9: CCL XXXIX, 1385.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Mane nobiscum Domine*. Apostolic Letter for the year of the Eucharist. 7 October 2004, 30.

<sup>104</sup> Pietro Braidò, *Prevenire non reprimere*. Il sistema educativo di don Bosco. Roma, LAS 1999, p. 261. It was due to him, in fact, that "at the Oratory the custom developed of the visit to the Blessed Sacrament, as soon as students and artisans stopped work and studies for some brief recreation in the courtyard" (PIETRO STELLA, *Don Bosco nella Storia della Religiosità Cattolica*. Vol. II: Mentalità religiosa e Spiritualità. Roma, LAS 1981, p. 309).

he could pass a few moments in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament",<sup>105</sup> to the confreres during a retreat, at Trofarello in 1868, he recommended among the daily practices the visit to the Blessed Sacrament: "if time is limited, let us at least kneel before the tabernacle and say a *Pater*, *Ave* and *Gloria*. This alone will steel us against temptation".<sup>106</sup> "For us sons of Don Bosco, the eucharistic presence in our houses is a reason for frequent encounters with Christ". Is it from Christ in the eucharist visited with perseverance that we "draw energy and endurance in our work for the young" (C. 88)? Is it in this way that we are "able to counteract the daily tensions which lead to a lack of focus and find in the Eucharistic Sacrifice – the true centre of their lives and ministry – the spiritual strength needed to deal with our different pastoral responsibilities. Our daily activity will thus become truly Eucharistic".<sup>107</sup>

### 3.2.3 *From adoration to mission*

Since, dear confreres, "only in adoration can profound and true acceptance develop" of Christ in the eucharistic, "it is precisely this personal act of encounter with the Lord that develops the social mission which is contained in the Eucharist".<sup>108</sup> The one who adores the love of God in the Eucharist feels himself loved, he experiences the love he receives, that is the source of the strength to give one's life in the measure of Christ adored and received sacramentally. "*The agape* of God comes to us in corporal fashion to continue his work in us and through us",<sup>109</sup> before being

<sup>105</sup> GIOVANNI BOSCO, *Vita del giovanetto Savio Domenico, allievo dell'Oratorio di San Francesco di Sales*. Torino 1959, 71: OE XI, p. 221. Francis Desramaut comments: "The reader of the life of Dominic Savio is aware of the long silent moments of contemplation of this boy before the tabernacle and recognises the connection between them and his heroic love for God" (*Don Bosco e la vita spirituale* Turin, LDC 1967, p. 122).

<sup>106</sup> GIOVANNI BATTISTA LEMOYNE, *Biographical Memoirs of Saint John Bosco*. Vol. IX. New Rochelle 1975, p. 167.

<sup>107</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church. 17 April 2003, 31.

<sup>108</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia*. 22 December 2005. AAS 98 (2006) p. 45.

<sup>109</sup> PAUL JOSEF CORDES, "L'Eucaristia e la carità": *L'Osservatore Romano*. 18-19 March 2007, p. 7.

commanded love has been given; and because it has been given it can be requested.

How can we worthily celebrate the giving of the flesh of Christ for many and becoming united totally with Him, if we then remain indifferent to one another? How can we receive from God his greatest gift, Christ the eucharist, without drawing from it the capacity to give one's own life for many? How can we adore Christ present in the sacrament and not renew our commitment to give our life in the service of those most in need? A devotion emptied of dedication betrays the spirit and the letter of the Christian Eucharist.

Adoration leads to the desire to respond with the same extreme love (*Jn* 13,1), and produces as its fruit personal conversion; there is a close "connection between the *eucharistic form of life* and *moral transformation*. [...]. In fact, by sharing in the sacrifice of the Cross, the Christian partakes of Christ's self-giving love and is equipped and committed to live this same charity in all his thoughts and deeds".<sup>110</sup> The believer who allows Christ to give himself, is converted into his table companion; and the table companion is himself transformed, by identification, into bread broken for the life of the world, completing in his body what is lacking in the passion of the Lord (cf. *Col* 1,24).

Thus, the most perfect identification with Christ occurs when the one who feels loved by Him, loves others in his turn: "A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented".<sup>111</sup> "We cannot delude ourselves: by our mutual love and, in particular, by our concern for those in need we will be recognized as true followers of Christ (cf. *Jn* 13:35; *Mt* 25: 31-46). This will be the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations is judged".<sup>112</sup> Participation in the Eucharist

<sup>110</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 82.

<sup>111</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Deus caritas est*. Encyclical Letter. 25 December 2005, 14

<sup>112</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Mane nobiscum Domine*. Apostolic Letter for the year of the Eucharist. 7 October 2004, 28.

would not be authentic if it did not lead to an effective commitment to the building of a world that is more fraternal, united; since precisely in the Eucharist “our God has shown love in the extreme, overturning all those criteria of power which too often govern human relations and radically affirming the criterion of service”.<sup>113</sup>

“The wonder we experience at the gift God has made to us in Christ” “commits us to becoming witnesses of his love”. And we become so, “when, through our actions, words and way of being, Another makes himself present”, Christ. Being nourished by Him naturally leads to our bearing witness to Him with our lives; a witness that comes from our eucharistic way of living, of making ourselves eucharist, that can lead “even to the offering of one’s own life, to the point of martyrdom, [which] throughout the history of the Church, has always been seen as the culmination of the new spiritual worship”.<sup>114</sup> “The love that we celebrate in the sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all. [...] The Eucharist is thus the source and summit not only of the Church’s life, but also of her mission: ‘an authentically eucharistic Church is a missionary Church’ [...]. We cannot approach the eucharistic table without being drawn into the mission which, beginning in the very heart of God, is meant to reach all people. Missionary outreach is thus an essential part of the eucharistic form of the Christian life”.<sup>115</sup>

We need to seriously ask ourselves, my dear confreres, from where apostolic charity takes its origin in us and how we can make it take on fresh life, “that youthful dynamism which was revealed so strongly in our Founder and at the beginnings of our Society” (C. 10). If our mission does not find its source in his, “the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father” (C. 11), revealed and adored in the Eucharist, it will neither be effective nor have a future.

<sup>113</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *ibidem*.

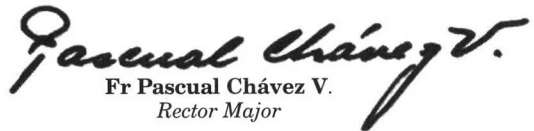
<sup>114</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 85.

<sup>115</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation. 22 February 2007, 84.

## CONCLUSION

I want to conclude entrusting you to Mary, the teacher of Eucharistic spirituality. Even though at first glance the gospels do not speak about this subject, “Mary can guide us towards this most holy sacrament, because she herself has a profound relationship with it”. It is true as John Paul II states, that, “The account of the institution of the Eucharist on the night of Holy Thursday makes no mention of Mary”. In fact there was no need. Because, over and above some uncertainty about her participation at the last supper, “an indirect picture of Mary’s relationship with the Eucharist can be had, beginning with her interior disposition. *Mary is a “woman of the Eucharist” in her whole life*”.<sup>116</sup> Indeed, “in a certain sense Mary lived her *Eucharistic faith* even before the institution of the Eucharist”; she welcomed the Word in faith and made him flesh in her womb “thus anticipating within herself what to some degree happens sacramentally in every believer who receives, under the signs of bread and wine, the Lord’s body and blood. As a result, there is a profound analogy -between the *Fiat* which Mary said in reply to the angel, and the *Amen* which every believer says when receiving the body of the Lord”.<sup>117</sup> It is my most fervent wish that God may give us the ability to welcome him like Mary, to make him flesh and blood in our flesh and to give him to the young as their Saviour.

Affectionately in Don Bosco,

  
Fr Pascual Chávez V.  
Rector Major

<sup>116</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church 17 April 2003, 53.

<sup>117</sup> JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church. 17 April 2003, 55.