

THE EUCHARIST IN THE APOSTOLIC SPIRIT OF DON BOSCO

The most vital theme for measuring our spirit and activity. - Don Bosco and the Eucharist: Mass, Communion, Adoration. - The eucharistic outlook of Vatican II. - The Father's masterpiece: «making Christ the heart of the world». - The insuperable paschal work of Christ. - The living and permanent nature of the event of the New Covenant. - The wonder of the Church's sacramental character. - Adoration and mission. - The pastoral obligation of creating «Church». - Some concrete requirements of Don Bosco's eucharistic pedagogy. - A Marian devotion which leads to the Eucharist.

Rome, Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception
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My dear confreres,

I am writing to you on the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, harbinger of the birth of Christ at Christmas. It is a day unusually dear to the Salesian Family: it not only takes us back in gratitude to our origins but at the same time urges us to go boldly forward to even greater realities. May my greeting to each of you bring you also the hope and trust that goes with the period of Advent.

We are beginning a new year which is dedicated in a special way to the prophetic memory of our Founder. We feel his invitation to approach with deep interior feelings and apostolic creativity the renewal on 14 May next of our salesian profession: one of the loftiest choices we could possibly make,

and one which endorses anew the mystery of our Covenant with God by giving it a deeper and fuller expression.¹

¹ cf. C 23

The most vital theme for measuring our spirit and activity

In view of this Year of grace, I very much want to reflect with you on an aspect which I consider central in Don Bosco's personality and in the apostolic heritage he bequeathed to us: the place occupied by the Eucharist in our spirit and activity.

I already broached this subject in my circular letter on the «Salesian educative project», when I reflected on the meaning of «educating by evangelizing».²

² cf. ASC 290, July - December 1978

It is the most vital standard against which we can measure ourselves. The Eucharist in fact is the source of our salesian pastoral charity,³ our sharing in Christ's heart;⁴ the experience of our union with God;⁵ our individual living communion with the Church;⁶ the endorsement of the special gift of our predilection for the young;⁷ the energetic source of our kindness, friendship, optimism and joy; of our daily commitment to work and temperance, and of the practical and creative nature of our approach to apostolic work:⁸ in other words it is the great motivating force behind the «salesian spirit».

³ cf. C 10

⁴ cf. C 11

⁵ cf. C 12

⁶ cf. C 13

⁷ C 14

⁸ cf. C 15, 16, 17, 18, 19

The Constitutions recall that the celebration of the Eucharist is «the central act of every salesian community», and that the presence of the tabernacle in our houses is «a reason for frequent encounters with Christ», from whom «we draw energy and endurance in our work for the young».⁹

⁹ C 88

We are deeply aware of what the Vatican Coun-

cil declares: that the Liturgy (of which the Eucharist is the highest expression) is «the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed, and at the same time the fount from which all her power flows».¹⁰

¹⁰ 10. SC 10

The Fathers of the Church had already said that the liturgy is «at the same time the summit of wisdom and the vertex of religion», «the salvation of the faithful and their spiritual progress».

Those mysterious words of Christ: «he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him»¹¹ have been throughout the centuries the true measure of christian faith. And as it was at the time of Christ so it is at the present day, there are too many who fail to understand: «after this many of his disciples drew back and no longer went about with him».¹²

¹¹ Jn 6,56

¹² Jn 6,66

The obscuring of the central place of the Eucharist in the salesian spirit and apostolate, my dear confreres, would result in a deviation from Don Bosco's living tradition (enshrined in the perennial tradition of the Church), and a very dangerous manifestation of superficiality in our pastoral work and pedagogy.

Don Bosco and the Eucharist

A sketch of the life of Don Bosco written from the eucharistic point of view would be both attractive and stimulating. Here we shall just recall one or two aspects which are well known but which serve as a true guide.

The Christ who dominated the whole existence of Don Bosco was, by preference, Jesus alive and present in the Eucharist, the «master of the house»

(as he used to put it), the centre of gravitation towards which everything converged, the «bread of life», the «Son of Mary» Mother of God and of the Church. Don Bosco lived by and in this presence, which was always close at hand.

When he spoke of God, it was often in terms of Jesus in the Eucharist, true man and true God, who came down from heaven to save us, who died on the cross for us and who is living still on our altars and in our tabernacles. Nothing could be more easily accessible and at the same time more thrilling. To have Jesus in the house, in fact, meant that one could go and meet him whenever one wished, take part in his death and resurrection, have a heart to heart conversation with him, receive him in Communion and be transformed by his Spirit for the mission.¹³

The life of our Father, right from his early boyhood, and the history of the first Oratory constitute a hymn of praise to the Eucharist. What feelings filled the minds of the better ones among his boys can be deduced from the following burning words of Dominic Savio: «When I pass close to him (Jesus in the Eucharist), not only would I cast myself in the mud to honour him; I would even throw myself into a furnace so as to share in some way in that infinite fire of love which drove him to institute this great Sacrament».¹⁴

Behind the saintly lad there was Don Bosco, his spiritual guide, who passed on to him his own eucharistic ardour. In fact, we are told by Don Lemoyne, «when Don Bosco preached on the extent of Our Lord's love for us, he would often weep and bring tears to the eyes of his hearers. Even during recreation time, if the conversation turned to the subject of the Holy Eucharist, he would beam with

¹³ cf. e.g. G. BOSCO, *Il Giovane Provveduto*, Turin 1863, p. 129

¹⁴ *Opere e Scritti* ed. e ined. di D. B., v. 6 Turin SEI, 1929-1965 = cit: ed. Caviglia, v. 4, Savio, c. 14, p. 37

holy ardour, and he would frequently say to the boys: 'My dear boys, love Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament with all your hearts, and you will be truly happy!' His words made the boys more convinced than ever of the truth of the real presence of Jesus Christ. He was truly happy when he managed to have a good number of the boys take turns in receiving holy communion each day». ¹⁵

¹⁵ BM 4, 317

We may recall some of the more significant things said by Don Bosco about the three great aspects of the Eucharist: the celebration of Mass, sacramental communion, and adoration of the consecrated species.

— **The Mass.** «The sacrifice of the altar», wrote Don Bosco. «is the glory, the life and the heart of christianity». ¹⁶ «One cannot imagine anything more holy and precious than the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, and so when you go to Mass», he said to the boys, «I want you to be convinced that you are doing something which is the greatest and holiest thing you could possibly do, something which gives greatest glory to God and is most useful for your own soul. Jesus Christ comes himself in person to apply to each one individually the merits of his adorable blood which he shed for us on the cross of Calvary». ¹⁷

¹⁶ G. BOSCO, *Il cattolico istruito nella sua religione* = *Lecture Cattoliche I* (1853-54) 9, p. 191

¹⁷ G. BOSCO, *Il Giovane Provveduto*, Turin 1847, p. 85 in «Opere Edite», v. II (p. 265)

Even more eloquent than his words was his example. Don Ceria wrote: «He was recollected, attentive, devout and exact in his celebration of Mass; he pronounced the words with clarity and feeling; he visibly enjoyed distributing holy communion, hardly able to conceal his inner fervour. But in it all there was no trace of affectation or serving the eye; without either haste or undue lingering he proceeded from start to finish in a calm and natural manner. This is how the early Salesians saw him,

and this too is how he appears to us, the latest arrivals».¹⁸

His union with Christ in the celebration of the Eucharist reached sublime heights: «occasionally his face would be bathed in tears... It also happened that at times he looked so ecstatic after the elevation that he appeared to be seeing Jesus Christ with his own eyes».¹⁹ This happened with greater frequency during his last years.²⁰ His manner of celebration was in truth that of one who deeply believed, and more than a few people came long distances to be present at his Mass, while benefactors and cooperators who had the privilege of a private chapel in their own house vied with each other to have him with them.

His great educational concern was to help his boys to grasp the sacramental reality of the Mass: «Understand well, my children, that when you assist at holy Mass it is just the same as if you were seeing our divine Saviour coming out of Jerusalem and carrying his cross to Calvary where he is crucified and sheds the last drop of his blood. When the priest celebrates holy Mass, this same sacrifice is renewed, but in a bloodless manner».²¹

The Mass was always the central point of the feasts celebrated by the boys, and was prepared with great solemnity with music, singing and lots of servers. People used to come to Valdocco from other parts of the city to take part in the festive eucharistic celebrations.

— **Holy Communion.** The reception of Communion is another focal point in the spirit and action of Don Bosco. He spoke of it as «essential to the smooth running of the house»;²² the «column which supports the material and moral world»;²³

¹⁸ E. CERIA, *Don Bosco con Dio*, Colle Don Bosco (Asti) 1947, p. 97-98; cf. BM 1, 387

¹⁹ BM 4, 314; cf. BM 13, 702

²⁰ cf. MB 17, 558-559

²¹ G. BOSCO, *Il Giovane Provveduto*, Turin 1847, p. 84-85, op. cit. p. 264-265

²² BM 7, 466

²³ *Collected Letters*, ed. E. CERIA, SEI Turin, 1955, v. I, p. 299

²⁴ cf. BM 6, 77²⁵ MB 14, 44

«the strongest moral support of the young»;²⁴ «the foundation of vocations».²⁵

These are significant expressions, but they do not contain the whole of Don Bosco's thought, i.e. that the one receiving Communion experiences personally a most intimate encounter with Jesus Christ, who incorporates him into Himself and makes him an apostle by the power of the Holy Spirit.

We can detect a distant echo of this in the words with which he concluded the conference he gave at Rome in 1876: «'Grant us, O Lord (the Church prays), that by participating in the merits of your Body and Blood sacrificed on the cross, we may be deserve to be included among your members'... As members of the most Sacred Body of Jesus, we must keep ourselves closely united with him, not in an abstract but in a concrete manner, in believing and in our actions».²⁶

²⁶ MB 12, 641

There is no greater happiness on earth, he used to tell his boys, than a well made Communion: «What joy it is to receive our Divine Redeemer into our hearts, that same God from whom we must draw the strength and constancy needed every moment of our lives».²⁷

²⁷ BM 12, 18

The biographies of Comollo, Savio, Magone and Besucco all contain, among other things, burning references to the Mass, to Communion and to Viaticum which transforms the fear of death into a loving embrace of Jesus. «If I want something important», said Dominic Savio, «I go to Communion and receive the Sacred Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus, offered for us to his eternal Father on the cross. What else do I need to be happy? Nothing in this world, but just to be able to see face to face the God I adore in faith on the altar».²⁸

²⁸ ed. Caviglia, v. 4, Savio, c. 14, p. 35

At the school of Don Bosco, the promoter of

frequent Communion, his boys achieved real growth in a strong and clear faith, and through the Eucharist scaled the heights of sanctity.

Significant in this connection is the inserting in his «Companion of Youth» of the translation of a text from the Council of Trent, which had previously been quoted only as regards its general sense, but which is much more incisive when expressed literally: «It would be highly desirable that every faithful christian should keep himself in such a state of conscience that he could receive holy Communion each time he assists at Mass, and that this Communion should be not only spiritual but also sacramental, so that greater fruit may be reaped from this august and divine Sacrament».²⁹

He was also one of the strongest and most convinced supporters of the desirability of making the First Communion at an early age: «Avoid as a plague the opinion that the first communion should be deferred to a late age».³⁰

— **Adoration.** The awareness of the living presence of Christ in the consecrated Host is a stimulus to a convinced attitude of adoration. This was a particular characteristic of Catholic piety in the nineteenth century, and especially at Turin, city of the Blessed Sacrament. At the Valdocco Oratory this kind of piety flourished in the eucharistic heart of Don Bosco, and this also from the conviction that he was able to inculcate among the boys that Jesus lived in the house with them: he was present there with his infinite love to be their daily Friend.

It is true that the kinds of eucharistic piety lived at the Oratory were those which flourished at the time in dioceses and parishes: hours of adoration, eucharistic triduum, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament, processions and (especially for their

²⁹ G. BOSCO, *Il Giovane Provveduto*, Turin 1885, p. 108, in Op. Ed. v. XXXV; cf. Conc. Trent Sess. 22, c. 6 in DENZINGER-RAHNER 1955 n. 944; cf. also G. BOSCO, *Il Giovane Provveduto*, 2, VIII (append Const. p. 250)

³⁰ G. BOSCO, *Il Sistema Preventivo*, 2, VII (ibid.)

pedagogical value) individual and group visits; but Don Bosco knew how to motivate them from an educational point of view with a sanctifying quality which remains as a challenge to us at the present day.

If Jesus, with his permanent presence, is at the centre and heart of every salesian house, he cannot possibly be forgotten. Hence the importance of cultivating various expressions of contemplative piety in the life and activity of those who belong to him. Don Bosco's urging of the boys themselves to visit frequently Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, to ask him for spiritual and material graces, to talk with him, to think about his death and resurrection, to spend a little time with him, is one of his most frequently occurring exhortations: «Remember, my sons,» he used to say, «that Jesus is in the Blessed Sacrament with lots of graces that he wants to give to those who ask for them».³¹

And again: «I also recommend visits to the Blessed Sacrament: 'Our gentle Lord Jesus Christ is there in person', the Cure of Ars used to exclaim; 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».³²

And in one of his Good-Nights³³ he insisted with fatherly conviction: «There are two things the devil is deadly afraid of: fervent Communion and frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament. Do you want Our Lord to grant you many graces? Visit him often. Do you want him to grant you only a few? Visit him but seldom». Such visits, he added, are a powerful defence against the attacks of the enemy. «Visiting the Blessed Sacrament, my dear boys, is essential if you want to overcome the devil. Therefore make frequent visits to Jesus; if you do that,

³¹ G. BOSCO, *Il Giovane Provveduto*, Turin 1847, p. 103

³² BM 9, 167

³³ 24 February 1865

the devil will never prevail against you».³⁴

³⁴ BM 8, 32

There is no doubt that Don Bosco's spirit and pedagogy give special importance to adoration as a manner of practising friendship with Christ present in the Eucharist. Dominic Savio, Magone, Besucco all made good use of this method; and if the same cannot be said of all the Oratory boys, there were more than a few who imitated them.

This dominating character of the Eucharist however went hand in hand with an educative practice that aimed at the integral overall formation of the youngster, in which human needs and requirements are seriously attended to in all their aspects, from their primary material needs (like food, lodging and clothing) to those of an intellectual, moral and cultural nature; from education for work, for study and for art, so as to be able to take a proper place in society, to the satisfaction of the insuppressible needs of the young, such as self affirmation, the correct use of freedom («let them have full freedom to run, jump and make as much noise as they like»), the fostering of recreational activities, theatre, music, etc.

An education, therefore, which is full and joyful, but one whose secret (as is evident from the models described in detail by Don Bosco himself) we see to be youthful hearts centred on the Eucharist (Mass, Communion and Adoration), or in other words on Jesus who is alive and present, and whom they know, love and visit as their dearest Friend. Youngsters in whom kindness, commitment and joy are obviously present and spring from a sacramental experience of Christ, whose loving influence on all their behaviour is evident.

We may conclude this rapid glance at the central place of the Eucharist in the spirit and and acti-

vity of Don Bosco by recalling what a heroic task he accepted because of a devotion inseparable from the Eucharist, that of the Sacred Heart, expressed in the building of the Church of the Sacred Heart in Rome as his culminating work. He said himself that «devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus includes all the rest» and that the source of this devotion is to be found precisely in the Blessed Sacrament. «Keep always before your minds», he said at Paris, «the thought of the love of God in the Holy Eucharist».³⁵

³⁵ MB 16, 195

The Constitutions assure us that «under the inspiration of God, Don Bosco lived and handed on to us an original style of life and action: the salesian spirit».³⁶

³⁶ C 10

This spirit «finds its model and source in the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father».³⁷

³⁷ C 11

And to this we may just add that for Don Bosco this reality of living and sharing the deep redemptive concern of the Heart of Jesus was intensely concentrated on the great and ineffable mystery of the Eucharist.

The eucharistic outlook of Vatican II

It is often said that the mentality, language and catechesis of the nineteenth century concerning the eucharistic mystery reflect a vision which is not organic and is rather incomplete. We know that for historical reasons mediaeval christianity intensified the cult of the permanent real presence in the consecrated species. The Council of Trent itself, as the legatee of what had gone before it, dealt separately with the Eucharist as a permanent Sacrament³⁸ and the Sacrifice of the Mass;³⁹ subsequent interpreters emphasized from a pastoral point of view a

³⁸ Conc. Trent sess. 21

³⁹ Conc. Trent sess. 22

certain separation in popular devotion between the «sacrifice» of the Mass and the permanence of the real presence in the consecrated species. Religious practices of the time, without detracting from the value of the Mass, leaned rather towards the permanence of the sacrament through multiple and varied devotional expressions.

For us at the present day the nineteenth century was certainly a long time ago; but we have to admit that in those days it was certainly possible to develop a concrete holiness in both educators and young people.

After Vatican II there has been in the Church's ecclesiology a genuine and qualitative leap in the strongly organic doctrine of the paschal mystery (of which the Eucharist is the sacrament) and in the whole of liturgical cult. There is a fresh and deeper understanding of the concepts of the Paschal mystery, of the New Covenant, Priesthood, Real Presence, the Body of Christ, Communion and Mission; in a word, of the «Sacrament» which sees the whole eucharistic cult from the standpoint of a liturgy and kind of piety that have undergone great renewal. We can certainly say that the directives that have followed the Council⁴⁰ make it possible for us to salvage in a renewed form more than a few of the devotional values of the past, even though they were linked with an imperfect outlook.

Here we find ourselves facing a massive challenge: to this richer and more organic eucharistic vision launched by the Vatican Council there should correspond a spiritual praxis and pastoral pedagogy very much more intense and incisive.

One wonders in fact what is actually taking place in certain environments which see themselves as being in the vanguard of progress: in these pla-

⁴⁰ cf. e.g. *Eucharisticum mysterium*, Cong. Rites, 25 May 1967

ces we are witnessing a lopsided over-evaluation of the importance of human and cultural values, without there having been first the careful and indispensable discernment of prophetic values to which Don Bosco always bore witness on the basis of the central nature of the Eucharist, precisely in view of a more genuine and valid human formation.

Sometimes we find ourselves face to face with a kind of impoverished pedagogical activity that lacks a genuinely «pastoral» inspiration: it does not respond sufficiently to the stimulus of «*Da mihi animas*».

The purpose of Vatican II was not to eliminate the tremendous efficacy of the Eucharist in our spirit and activity, but rather to intensify it and relaunch it with more authentic truth.

What we are called upon to do at the present day is to permeate the praxis left us by Don Bosco with the conciliar indications concerning the eucharistic mystery. We must know this widening of horizons and be able to translate it into life as it is lived.

How our Father would rejoice at some of the Council statements, and how he would translate them into educational initiatives. Take for instance the following passage from the Decree «*Presbyterorum Ordinis*»: «In the most blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church... The Eucharist appears as the source and the summit of all preaching of the Gospel, and the faithful who have already been consecrated in baptism and confirmation are fully incorporated in the Body of Christ by the reception of the Eucharist. Therefore the eucharistic celebration is the centre of the assembly of the faithful... The house of prayer in which the most holy Eucharist is celebrated and re-

served, where the faithful assemble, and where is worshipped the presence of the Son of God our Saviour, offered for us on the sacrificial altar for the help and consolation of the faithful – this house ought to be in good taste and a worthy place for prayer and sacred ceremonial. In it pastors and faithful are called upon to respond with grateful hearts to the gifts of him who through his humanity is unceasingly pouring the divine life into the members of his Body. Priests ought to take the trouble to properly cultivate liturgical knowledge and art».⁴¹

⁴¹ PO 5

Don Bosco became the great pastor of youth that we know, precisely because of his deep adherence to the eucharistic mystery and his sharing in it. If a certain mentality and mode of expression of his time have need of updating, this should not imply any impoverishment of his role as a prophetic Founder.

What we have to do is discern in his way of acting the formative values of the Eucharist in the harmony of that same faith which made of him, as it must make of us at the present day, an insuperable model of pastor and educator, constantly stimulated by holy initiatives. The substance in fact is the same: Jesus Christ is with us! The paschal event is at our disposal here and now: the Emmanuel who intervenes daily in the formation of the New Man!

It is therefore worth the trouble, my dear confreres, to dwell for a while on so substantial a topic; it will enable us to enrich our centenary year with the rediscovery in depth of that «pedagogy of kindness» which is proposed to us in the Strenna to celebrate the memory and prophetic presence of Don Bosco.

The reflections I am offering you will serve to

recall and summarize the many meditations each one will have made in the course of his salesian life, so as to better understand and relaunch everything in the eucharistic practice of our Father that was not merely transitory – and that means the substance of it. Only in this way shall we be able to bring about a genuine renewal of a kind of pastoral work and pedagogy which without the central position of the Eucharist would no longer be the precious legacy we have inherited.

Let us begin in a rather roundabout fashion so as to make sure that we have a proper and, as far as possible, adequate understanding of so vital a theme.

The Father's masterpiece: «making Christ the heart of the world»

If we had to seek in the whole universe the most perfect expression of the brilliant ability of the Creator, we should at first be well and truly at a loss.

Before the immensity of the macrocosm we are left astonished and well nigh dismayed in our admiration as we give free reign to our imagination, and we seem to be in a shifting whirlwind rather than in a position to make judgements and comparisons as one would do in a museum. Everything is so unbelievably above the normal ideas of time and space which circumscribe our thoughts and imagination that we are well nigh unable to compare one planet with another.

And as we continue to contemplate the wonders of the universe we become still more bewildered and almost incredulous in finding that in it there is a perfection which is not at first noticeable, and

that furthermore an enormous power and tremendous vitality are involved.

We realize that we are dealing with a higher and ineffable capacity for planning that leaves us no alternative but to conclude that what is done by the Creator exceeds our wildest imaginings. In fact the sciences, as they progress, are simply engaged in a learning process as they strive to penetrate the laws and secrets of creation.

Nevertheless, even as we contemplate the wonders of the world, we are aware that as human beings we have a higher gift: the acute penetrating power of the spirit which enables us to reach far beyond the perfections of nature; our intelligence takes us always beyond the labours of Hercules with a courage that outdoes the legend of Ulysses.

And so, in so far as we are men we find present in creation the treasure we call love, a thing which is worth more than any macro or microcosm because it transcends matter and introduces us to the intimate mystery of the life of the Creator.

There we discover without too much difficulty that *God's real masterpiece is Man*, made in his own image, the living synthesis of cosmic wonders, free and enterprising, who thinks, who makes judgements, who creates, who loves, and who is therefore destined to be the minister of all created things, the voice of praise, the mediator of glory in joyful dialogue with the Creator himself.

Unfortunately man's history and the very meaning of the cosmos have been deformed by sin. St Paul in fact says: «the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God».⁴²

⁴² Rom 8, 20-21

And it is precisely in our own history that when the fullness of time had come God raised up the «*new Man*», his definitive masterpiece: Jesus Christ! He is the culmination of the whole work of creation. In Him «the mystery of man truly becomes clear... He is the image of the invisible God, the perfect man... who in a certain way has united himself with each and every man... the firstborn of many brothers».⁴³

⁴³ GS 22

In his life on earth he felt himself solid with every man of every century, from the first Adam (his progenitor) to the last of his brothers born at the end of time. Solid with them in good and evil, he has overcome sin by the power of his great love, to which he bore witness by giving his own life in the supreme event of his death and resurrection. Through his permanent paschal presence in the sacrament of the Eucharist he continues to generate in history in union with the Church, his spouse, the new Man until his victorious return at the end of time. As the liturgy says, God the Father «has hidden from us the day and the hour when Christ, the Lord and judge of history, will appear on the clouds of heaven robed in power and splendour. On that glorious day the present world will pass away and there will arise new heavens and a new earth».⁴⁴ And there Christ will offer his Kingdom to the Father.

⁴⁴ Advent Preface I/A

Rightly therefore does the Council declare that «the Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the desires of history and civilization, the centre of mankind, the joy of all hearts and the fulfilment of all aspirations... (the Father's loving design) to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and things on earth... And the Lord himself said: «Behold I am coming soon, bringing my recom-

pense... I am the alpha and the omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end!». ⁴⁵

⁴⁵ GS 45

I think it important, dear confreres, to come back continually on this synthesis of faith, so as to be able to understand the ineffable value of the eucharistic mystery, and to convince ourselves that it is not possible to prescind from Christ in the promotion of man and in the development of a true salesian pedagogy.

It is certainly our duty to take up everything that is positive in the various processes of the signs of the times, but we must also be able to discern their ambivalence and to harmonize their novel and positive contributions with the immense and definitive innovation of Christ's Passover.

The insuperable paschal work of Christ

Jesus Christ was aware that he had a very personal vocation which called him to a mission which was impossible from a human standpoint: to face up radically to evil, to re-establish the Covenant of all humanity with God, to give back sense to the cosmos, to proclaim the truth about the sense of life and history, to point out the way to be followed in practice, and to provide a superabundant supply of energy to keep Man moving along in his pilgrimage throughout the centuries.

Jesus understood ever more clearly that the Father's plan was directing his vocation and mission to a strategic moment which would be the culmination of his existence in earthly history: what he called «His» hour!

His great historical hour is called his «Passover» («Pasch» or «Easter» in English). *It is a master-*

piece of Christ the Man, within the masterpiece of the Father. It is something so sublime that not even the Creator could think up something greater, as it has been happily said: «id quod maius fieri nequit»! (that than which it is impossible to do anything greater). It is the maximum gesture which the all-powerful brilliance of the creative love of the Father could think of as possible in human history.

Jesus, born of Mary through the work of the Holy Spirit, as a true and responsible descendant of Adam is the living synthesis of cosmic marvels; he gives back to man the vocation of being the minister of everything created, the voice of praise, the mediator of glory, through his sacrificial love endorsed by the resurrection.

This masterly work he carried out as One of us, our best representative, fraternally solid with all the rest. He did it «once for all».⁴⁶ He did it and left it permanently imprinted on his human existence after rising from the dead. The historical events of his death and resurrection have, in fact, given a definitive constitution to Christ's soul and body, they have perfected his individual human nature by giving to it traits and features which remain for ever as indications of his victorious physiognomy. We may say that they established the soul of Christ (his heart) in the supreme act of his self-oblation in extreme love, and have adorned his physical body with the consequences of his total donation, made visible in the scars of his bloody immolation.

The man Christ, in fact, stands before the Father «as a Lamb that seemed to have been sacrificed... and a choir of thousands and thousands of voices cried out: 'Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing'».⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Heb 9, 12.28

⁴⁷ Rev 5, 6.12

These paschal events are the liturgical and sacrificial realization of the New Covenant, the last and eternal covenant which gives his place to the new Man, to the new Heavens and the new Earth.

The penetrating letter to the Hebrews assures us that «Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once and for all into the Holy Place, taking not the blood of goats and calves but his own blood thus securing for us an eternal redemption».⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Heb 9, 11-12

In the light of the paschal events and of Christ's command to make a «sacramental memorial» of them in the celebration of the Eucharist, the Apostles beheld with wonder the realization of the New Covenant he had promised. There you have the full sense of his «presence»! *The Passover and the Eucharist signified for them in the first place the great and ardently awaited hour of the definitive Covenant.*

This Covenant put an end to the loss of sense of the cosmos and the ancient cult, which had not been sufficient, and began a new one, thought up, planned and realized only by Christ, by his love and solidarity as the Second Adam. This was a new cult in which priest, victim, temple, altar, sacrifice and liturgical banquet are concentrated in the unique reality of Christ's person.

And so He it is, Jesus Christ, his heart, his love, his word, his body, his blood, his priestly consecration (in the hypostatic union), which constitute the great treasure of the New and Eternal Covenant. One only Love, one only Gospel, one only Priest, one only Sacrifice, one only Communion, for ever: the only valid objective for the hope of man and of the cosmos.

There you have the Father's masterpiece: «making Christ the heart of the world»! He is the new Man, He is the truth, He is the way and the life; He offers his flesh as food and his blood as drink to give birth and growth to the new Man.

It is well for us to come back frequently on these thoughts and keep in our minds for the benefit of ourselves and our young people this supreme and vital historic work of Christ. Objectively we cannot prescind from it: it would be ignorance, the emptying out of faith, ingenuous secularism, and unpardonable superficiality to forget these realities in order to make space for a transitory and mundane mode of life which would render our vocation and mission frail and without strength.

The supreme paschal events of Christ, within the masterpiece of the Father in the limitless and wonderful universe of his creation, constitute the high point of greatness, love and beauty in all the Creator's work.

Who could possibly fail to see that this is at the centre of the life of believers, and in particular of the spirituality, pedagogy and pastoral work of Don Bosco's Salesian Family?

The living and permanent nature of the New Covenant

«The renewal in the Eucharist of the covenant between the Lord and man», we are told by Vatican II, «draws the faithful and sets them aflame with Christ's insistent love. From the liturgy, therefore, and especially from the Eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain, and the

sanctification of men in Christ and the glorification of God to which all other activities of the Church are directed, as toward their end, are achieved with maximum effectiveness».⁴⁹

⁴⁹ SC 10

This is a solemn statement which should influence all our pastoral and pedagogical planning if we do not want to waste time following obsolescent ideas.

Through a sacramental action, the Eucharist makes present for us here and now in a very real way the same substantial reality of the paschal events of Christ, by continually renewing and communicating to us the sure and certain riches of the New Covenant. In the course of the centuries there have been either denials of the existence among us of the «real presence» of Christ who died and rose again, or attempts at explanations which have only upset the integral and organic nature of the cult of the Eucharist by undervaluing at various times either the priestly ministry, or the sacrificial aspect, or ecclesial growth, or the transformation in the liturgy of life and history which give to the cosmos its true sense.

It is urgently necessary to get back to the organic truth of the doctrine in the whole of our renewed pastoral activity, whether as regards spirituality, catechesis or pedagogy.

This is the Church's great treasure: the Eucharist is the common boon for use in the future of all the work of salvation.

«To accomplish so great a work», says the Council again, «Christ is *always present* in his Church: he is *present* in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of his minister ... but especially in the eucharistic species... He is present in his word... He is present when the Church prays

and sings. Christ, indeed, always associates the Church with himself; she is his beloved bride... And so (the Eucharist), because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body, which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree».⁵⁰

⁵⁰ SC 7

The theme of the living presence among us of the New Covenant is precisely one of the central aspects of the eucharistic mystery which the Council wanted to restore in all its greatness and wonderful fertility.

In his encyclical «*Mysterium fidei*» on the doctrine and cult of the Eucharist,⁵¹ Pope Paul VI, while setting out on the one hand motives for pastoral concern and anxiety with regard to possible reductive interpretations concerning the permanent real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the consecrated species, insists also on the objectivity of other modes of the «real» presence of Christ in the celebration of the Breaking of the bread. «All of us realize», he says, «that *there is more than one way in which Christ is present in his Church*»; and he goes on to list the various modes. «The mind boggles», he concludes, «at these different ways in which Christ is present; they confront the Church with a mystery ever to be pondered».⁵²

⁵² *Mysterium fidei* (MF) in «*Enchirid. Vat.*», Edizione Dehoniane, Bologna, v. 2 1976, n. 422

What concern us here are those modes of presence which are directly linked with the celebration of the Eucharist. Let us concentrate on three of them which ensure the living presence among us of the New Covenant.

— The first refers to Christ in so far as «he is present in the Sacrifice of the Mass *in the person of the minister*, 'the same now offering through the ministry of priests, who formerly offered himself on

the cross';⁵³ the one who presides at the Eucharist is therefore playing a sacramental role. 53 SC 7

— The second emphasizes that Christ «is present *under the eucharistic species*».⁵⁴ Paul VI adds the comment in the encyclical «*Mysterium fidei*»: «This presence is called 'real', not with the intention of excluding all other types of presence as if they could not be 'real' too, but because it is presence in the fullest sense: that is to say it is a substantial presence by which Christ, the God-Man, is wholly and entirely present. It would therefore be wrong to explain this presence by having recourse to the 'spiritual nature', as it is called, of the glorified body of Christ, which is present everywhere; or by reducing it to a kind of symbolism».⁵⁵ 54 ibid.

— The third says that Christ is also present «*when the Church prays and sings*, for he has promised 'where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them (Mt 18,20)'».⁵⁶ And the celebrating priests represent also the Church which, in union with Christ, has recourse to the Father. 55 MF, op. cit. n. 424

These modes of «real presence» offer an admirable manifestation of the originality of the ways in which Christ is with us. We need to concentrate our reflection on them so as to be enlightened in our eucharistic awareness.

We know that the redemptive effects of the Pasch have been realized in history once only for all time, and that in consequence the personal oblation and immolation of Christ are the great and unique sacrificial event of the New Covenant.

«Christ does not have to offer himself again and again, ... or else he would have had to suffer over and over again since the world began. Instead of

⁵⁶ SC 7

that, he has made his appearance once and for all, now at the end of the last age, to do away with sin by sacrificing himself».⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Heb 9,25-26

The starting point for an understanding of this mystery must be a consideration of Christ's resurrection as the indispensable foundation of his Church's liturgy.

«The great point of all that we have said», (from the letter to the Hebrews again), «is that we have a high priest of exactly this kind. He has his place at the right of the throne of the divine Majesty in the heavens, and he is the minister of the sanctuary and of the true Tent of Meeting which the Lord, and not any man, set up».⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Heb 8,1-2

There you have the tremendous aspect of originality! The sacrifice of the New Covenant is not simply a fact from the past, but is renewed here and now in a sacramental manner; when we celebrate the Eucharist, it is Christ himself who is acting in the presence of the Father; Christ is therefore with us as «the mediator of the New Covenant between God and men».⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Heb 9,15

In the eucharistic liturgy Christ himself is actively involved, and makes of his Passover a living act which continues through all time in the Church.

During our eucharistic celebrations we need to close our eyes sometimes and make the effort to meditate so as to understand the transcendent density of the mystery in which we are taking part.

In the very course of the celebration itself, after the consecration of the bread and wine, we even interrupt the solemn prayer to the Father to exclaim with admiration: «The mystery of faith! When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, Lord Jesus, until you come in glory»!

During the celebration of the Eucharist, enlivening periods of silence are indispensable. The heart of the believer has need of certain moments of recollection. The mystery calls also for silence at times, not simply as a pause but as an opportunity for listening to the Spirit. It is a moment reserved for a movement of love to enable a personal penetration of the sacramental veil to take place.

The richer the mystery, the greater is the need for silent contemplation.

It is a matter of «savouring» the presence of Christ, who involves us in the New Covenant.

The wonder of the Church's sacramental character

Let us try to analyse more deeply this living presence of Christ in the New Covenant.

First let us look at its components.

The one Priest, with his act of self-sacrificing oblation («a death he freely accepted» – Eucharistic prayer II) is Christ the High Priest who stands before the Father.

The one sacrificial Victim is the flesh and blood of his human body, which is risen but which continues to appear in heaven as the «Lamb that was slain».⁶⁰

⁶⁰ Rev. 5,6

The sacrificial Banquet, is the true incorporation, through the mediation of the sacrament, into that same body of Christ, which in this way continues to grow in a mystical fashion throughout history. In fact, says St Paul: «The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we

⁶¹ 1 Cor 10, 16-17

all partake of the one bread».⁶¹

There is indeed a mine of authentic wonders to be discovered; they are contained and manifested (albeit in a hidden manner) in the sacramental character of the Church, when she celebrates the Eucharist. The Council's expression that makes of the Church itself the great «sacrament of salvation», goes beyond pure symbolism; it objectively transcends the limits of time and space. Only with the eyes of faith can one perceive the paschal reality.

At the conclusion of the Eucharistic Prayer, which is addressed personally to the Father, we proclaim in fact with reference to Christ: «Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever. Amen!»

Everything is realized through the real presence of Christ.

Let us dwell briefly on these three points in the eucharistic celebration so as to better appreciate their density concerning Christ's «real presence».

— *In the first place the Priests* who preside at the celebration of the Eucharist have an exceedingly high «sacramental» role to fill. They render Christ himself present and renew the content of his sacrificial offering, of adoration, praise, covenant and apostolic commitment.⁶² They also represent the Church. In the name of Christ and as representatives of his Church, they speak to the Father; Paul VI says in fact: «Christ is present in his Church as she governs the people of God, since her sacred power comes from Christ, and since Christ, the 'Shepherd of shepherds', is present in the pastors who exercise that power, according to his promise to the Apostles».⁶³

⁶² cf. PO 2⁶³ MF, op. cit. n. 422

In this sacramental role the priests gather together the daily lives of the faithful and insert them into the very love of Christ; in this way every human generation enters into the paschal work of the Lord, as a spiritual sacrifice in solidarity with him. It is the sublime moment when history becomes transformed into liturgy. It is not a question of some alienating rite, but rather of the highest degree of celebration of the most concrete realization of human love in the unrolling of daily life and in all the vicissitudes of existence through the authentic significance of the universe itself.

And within this role of ecclesial representation, there is a very special sacramental function in the ministry of celebrating priests. While carrying out the liturgical commemoration of the paschal events they act directly in the person of Christ; they lend him their voice, through the help of a special «sacred power». «In the person of Christ», says the Council, «they effect the eucharistic sacrifice»,⁶⁴ and elsewhere the same Council goes on to say: «acting in the person of Christ and proclaiming his mystery, they unite the votive offerings of the faithful to the sacrifice of Christ their head, and in the sacrifice of the Mass they make present again and apply, until the coming of the Lord, the unique sacrifice of the New Testament».⁶⁵

⁶⁴ LG 10

⁶⁵ *ibid.* 28

What a great mystery this is!

— *Secondly*, we need to consider that the priest's ministerial activity is permeated by the power of the Holy Spirit *for the consecration of the bread and wine «so that they may become the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ»*,⁶⁶ and for the invocation of the fullness of the Holy Spirit upon the assembly.

⁶⁶ Eucharistic Prayer II

The sacramental manner of this presence is sac-

rificial; under the sacramental signs of the body and blood (which were in fact separated during the bloody immolation on Calvary), it makes «truly, really and substantially»⁶⁷ present before the Father, Christ's risen body with the scars of the sacrificed and acceptable victim. The reality contained in the eucharistic species, said St Ambrose, «is not what nature formed, but what the blessing created».⁶⁸

⁶⁷ DENZINGER
RAHNER, *Enchirid.*
symbol. 1955, n. 874

⁶⁸ MF, op. cit. n. 429

And there, once again, you have another aspect of the great mystery!

— *Thirdly*, the real and substantial presence of Christ's risen body brings with it a new and wonderful sacramental effect: that of *assimilation to him in the Communion banquet*. *It is there that «all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ are brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit».*⁶⁹

⁶⁹ cf. Eucharistic
Prayer II

This is a truly striking vision of faith. The sacramental rite of eating and drinking carries with it, by analogy with the natural process of assimilation, a mystical incorporation of ourselves in Christ, so as to form with him a single body as time passes; for, as St Leo the Great says: «The sharing in the body and blood of Christ has no other effect than to accomplish our transformation into that which we receive».⁷⁰

⁷⁰ LG 26

When the Council speaks of the Church as the «Body of Christ» it is not its intention that the phrase should be understood simply as a figure or a metaphor. 'Lumen gentium' makes a clear distinction between «images of the Church»,⁷¹ and the deeper expression «the Church, the Body of Christ».⁷² This latter expression indicates, in fact, an objective and divinely mysterious reality which can-

⁷¹ LG 6

⁷² LG 7

not be reduced to the level of a simple metaphor; the term implies that the Church is in reality a visible organism of spiritual life which, in virtue of its being an assembly of persons in communion with Christ, becomes the overall «universal sacrament of salvation».

In the Mystical Body «the life of Christ is communicated to those who believe and who, through the sacraments, are united in a hidden but real way to Christ in his passion and glorification... Really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him and with one another... The head of this body is Christ. He is before all creatures and in him all things hold together... From him 'the whole body, supplied and built up by joints and ligaments, attains a growth that is of God' (Col 2,19)... And in order that we might be unceasingly renewed in him, he has shared with us his Spirit who, being one and the same in head and members, gives life to, unifies and moves the whole body. Consequently his work could be compared by the Fathers of the Church to the function that the principle of life, the soul, fulfils in the human body».⁷³

⁷³ LG 7

This realistic description, while plunging us into the insuperable originality of the sacramental dimension of the New Covenant, makes us more clearly aware of why the Council spoke to us of the «mystery of the Church».

It is in the Eucharist that we perceive with wondering contemplation the tremendous innovation of «being christians». Rightly should we recognize that «all the sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate are bound up with the Eucharist and are directed to-

wards it. For in the most blessed Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church».⁷⁴

⁷⁴ PO 5

Adoration and mission

The wonder of the multiplication of the «real presence» is an incentive to us to place at the centre of our life of faith an attitude of adoration. The various stages in the celebration of the Eucharist and the permanence of the consecrated species are an invitation to a cult of contemplation in faith. It is something of an excelling nature which provokes in us an intelligent adoring silence while we venerate and contemplate its different aspects of cult, sanctification, profession of faith, self-sacrificing witness, apostolic commitment, deepening of truth, and triumph of love.

— *In the Mass*, we may contemplate who is the priest who («here and now») makes the true sacrificial oblation. As we have seen, it is Christ himself; and he does it for us and together with us, so as to incorporate into his offering also the contributions of our own daily life and troubled existence.

Here our meditation should lead us to discover what is «specifically christian», what was lived and revealed by Christ in his Passover. In the Eucharist there is no danger of ambiguous or distorted interpretations. What is specifically christian is not to be measured by the yardstick of the Old Testament or by hasty temporal expressions; it is presented in its full originality in the gift of self in love which has become sacrifice: the ability to make a joyful offering of the concrete and generous commitment of one's love.

The new Man, the result of the Passover, lives

in its fullness the love of a non-violent charity, directing himself simultaneously towards its two objectives, God and Man, through an intrinsic «grace of unity» which springs from the heart of Christ where the love of the Father is the cause, the source and the strength of our love for our neighbour, for the poor, for the young, for those in need.

— *In the consecrated species* too, we may contemplate the manner in which Christ offers himself to us in the guise of a victim, prompting us to an understanding of the rich value of suffering in life when it brings about an increase of love through the giving of ourselves in sacrifice. This is why Christ remains always, even after the Ascension, as the true «Emmanuel, i.e. as 'God with us' because», as Paul VI recalls, «day and night he is in our midst, he dwells with us, full of grace and truth; he restores morality, nourishes virtues, consoles the afflicted, strengthens the weak, and proposes his own example to those who come to him».⁷⁵

⁷⁵ MF, op. cit. n. 438

Not without reason does the same great Pope Paul VI exhort us to «tirelessly promote the cult of the Eucharist, the focus where all other forms of piety must ultimately emerge».⁷⁶

⁷⁶ MF, op. cit. n. 436

And John Paul II has reminded us that it is impossible to conceive of a local religious community which does not unite in contemplative faith around the tabernacle.

— *Finally in sacramental Communion*, we may contemplate the marvel of our assimilation into Christ, as a result of which we become his Body to continue his redeeming mission in the world.

At the communion banquet we have two won-

derful aspects on which to meditate: the fertility of the Eucharist which daily generates the Church, and in addition its being sent forth in history with a concrete mission for the salvation of men. These are two quite fascinating considerations.

The Church, by the strength of the Spirit, is reborn from Christ every day, born of his priestly mediation; in the Eucharist he mystically unites the Church, his Spouse, with himself, thus forming a single fertile body which gives new life to so many children. Here alone can the authentic matrix be found for the origin of the Church! She does not rise up from below by some process of self-generation, but is vitally inserted by sacramental action in a pre-existing and structured living organism which is the Body of Christ. One does not receive communion simply to take part in a ritual celebration, but by its reception one enters into a living participation of what is specifically christian so as to feel being sent forth for a mission of salvation.

This is why communion prompts vital decisions, stimulates criteria for apostolic work and provides paschal energy for growth and perseverance.

In adoration of the Eucharist, therefore, it can be clearly perceived that the New Covenant is not a thing of the past, a simple doctrine or a mere ritual celebration, but the permanent origin of the new Man in a People united by God to be the protagonist of true human progress and of the gathering of all creation into Christ.

The pastoral obligation of creating «Church»

At this point, my dear confreres, we have to ask ourselves whether so dense a panorama of paschal

marvels is really the guiding factor in our lives as consecrated people and our commitment to pastoral work for the young and the poor.

None of us has any right to forget or to pass over in silence the rich content of the «Mystery of faith». To prescind from the Eucharist in salesian life and in our pastoral and pedagogical activity would be to betray the sense and plan of our apostolic consecration.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ cf. C 3

In 1988 Don Bosco expects us to rethink our preventive system in depth. Young people ask for our sincere witness to the authenticity of the christian mystery, and that we set it out for them. They have the right to expect that we appear to them as signs and bearers of the wonders of the New Covenant. Any dodging, any camouflage, any desire to appear as no longer out of date, would disqualify us from being disciples of Christ and Don Bosco's legatees.

1988 challenges us: either to be with Don Bosco through the centuries, or to adopt certain fleeting modern styles!

We must be able to live and pass on to the young an authentic experience of Church at this great historic moment of conciliar renewal at the dawn of the third millennium of the christian faith.

There is a delicate and very important aspect which has been in my mind like a question mark while making these reflections: what are we to think and do about the non-christian youngsters who, in many parts of the world, frequent our centres of education?

Clearly we cannot use with them the same methods of «christian initiation» which must be used in the case of those who are baptized. But in such a case must we say that Don Bosco's preventive

system would lose its meaning?

It is an undeniable fact that salesian pedagogy works with singular efficacy among a lot of youngsters of other religions. Our own experience assures us that commitments of this kind are fully justified and has prompted us to make altogether new evaluations and appraisals in this regard.

In going into this field we have followed precise indications of the Constitutions: «People still awaiting the gospel message», they tell us, «were the special object of Don Bosco's concern and apostolic effort. They continue to stimulate our zeal and keep it alive: ... *the salesian missionary* makes his own the values of these people and shares their hopes and anxieties».⁷⁸

⁷⁸ C 30

Furthermore, speaking of human advancement the Constitutions remind us that «we labour in economically depressed areas and for poor youth. We educate them to a sense of moral, professional and social responsibility. In this way we contribute to the development of both people and environment... While not getting involved in ideologies or party politics, we reject everything that encourages deprivation, injustice and violence. We cooperate with all who are trying to build a society more worthy of man's dignity. The advancement *to which we dedicate ourselves in the spirit of the Gospel* makes tangible the love of Christ which makes men free, and is a sign that the Kingdom of God is among us».⁷⁹

⁷⁹ C 33

And again: «*Imitating God's patience*, we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom».⁸⁰

⁸⁰ C 38

«Our apostolic activity», they tell us still further, «is carried out in a variety of ways, which depend in the first place upon the actual needs of those for

whom we are working. Sensitive to the signs of the times and with initiative and continual flexibility, we evaluate our activities».⁸¹

⁸¹ C 41

We must therefore act in a whole variety of ways, but always as «missionaries».

The missionary spirit does not prescind from the Eucharist nor diminish its central position. Missionaries, in fact, as agents in a commitment to education, dedicate themselves to their work «in the spirit of the Gospel», imitating God's patience and being educators «in complete fidelity to Don Bosco». Together with their work for the large non-christian majority, on the other hand, they also educate and form groups of baptized youngsters and believers.

And therefore, both to nourish the spiritual life of confreres in this difficult apostolate, to promote the growth of young people who are already christian, and also to let others see what in practice is the secret motive force behind all their kindness and activity and the real significance of their educational plan, there is need to cultivate among them (and I would say especially among them) in adequate fashion the absolute centrality of the eucharistic mystery.

Our reflections up to this point, dear confreres, give us the assurance that there is an objective relationship of mutual causality between eucharistic celebration, apostolic and missionary spirit, and experience of Church. It is a vital relationship: the one and only hope for the future. It has been expressed: «the Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church».

«Being christians» means being members of Christ's Church. But the mutual causative relationship between Eucharist and Church will be neither

incisive nor fruitful unless pastors and flock are reached and moved by its paschal content. Introduction to such a sublime christian reality poses a particularly urgent challenge at the present day to the pedagogical ability of communities and all workers in the pastoral field. Among other things, all are in need of greater liturgical knowledge and competence.

To form true christians means to introduce them to an experience of Church. And every true experience of Church makes the believer a sharer in the reality of the Mystery. It is true that today one must be able to begin from the hermeneutic sensitivity to the signs of the times which has led to the present cultural transformation; but if we want to introduce the young to the New Covenant, we must be able to give pride of place to the immense innovation of the Passover, and situate it before the interesting but comparatively tiny innovations of the anthropological turnabout. The paschal novelty judges and assumes in the course of time but also infinitely surpasses so many progressive cultural innovations which, although having a certain value, pale into insignificance in comparison.

Workers in the pastoral field are invited to become qualified at one and the same time in both the emerging culture and above all in the deep and precise sense of the paschal mystery, always «thinking with the Church», and eschewing unworthy exploitations. No one will ever be able to present anything greater and more novel than Christ's Passover, the great masterpiece of the Father and the supreme work of Man.

And so it will be necessary to lead up to the great contents of the Eucharist by a most adequate cultural mediation. At the present day cultural in-

novations are certainly exacting; but the goal to be aimed at will always be that of making understood, accepted and shared the paschal mystery of Christ.

Our task is to single out the pedagogical and pastoral path that will best lead to a true christian initiation (the «mystagogy» so dear to the Fathers of the Church). Every pastoral commitment must seek to find the road which leads to the indispensable meeting between contemporary sensitivity and the saving contribution, so necessary and insuperable, of the New Covenant.

The pastoral path to be followed in the generation of «Church» demands a strong commitment to renewal, both in catechesis about the Eucharist and in its liturgical celebration.

In such a celebration the Church proclaims both the mystery of its own precise nature (= ecclesiology) and the fruitfulness of its specific mission (= ecclesiogenesis). She is the Second Eve, with whom Christ, the Second Adam, gives origin to a new human race.

Hence one cannot be satisfied with seeking in the Eucharist something new about God or about man; one cannot stop at a simple introduction to rites (though this is necessary); nor will it suffice to celebrate mere human, youthful or social values. What is required is a true introduction to the mystery of Christ.

In this way the eucharistic celebration will appear as a genuine meeting between existence and faith, between daily life and the Gospel, between the saving truth and current problems.

Together with the «paschal memorial» will grow the discovery of love and the precious nature of life; it will be urgently necessary to educate to a sacramental sensitivity with its original and symbol-

ic richness; and the attitude of contemplative adoration will need to be intensified. Pastoral pedagogy will be concerned to foster active participation, the awareness of being sons in Christ, the peculiar christian values of gratitude, the settings of solidarity, and the historical requirements of the mission.

This is the practical way to generate «Church», a way that offers society «upright citizens», who are competent and responsibly committed. It is through the Eucharist that will be formed that valid Laity to which the recent Synod of Bishops referred.

We, who are sons of Don Bosco and have inherited a precious pedagogical legacy, must be able to propose and communicate always to the young the specifically christian content of the Passover of Christ offered to them in the Eucharist.

Some concrete requirements of Don Bosco's eucharistic pedagogy

The Strenna of the Jubilee Year invites us to attach great importance to the «pedagogy of kindness», which is a characteristic of the preventive system.

Allow me, dear confreres, to put a fundamental question to you: *what place in our educative projects at the present day is taken by the eucharistic mystery?*

Let us be honest! Perhaps many of us are just wasting time. Don Bosco does not agree with certain kinds of rationalization. We need to do some serious revision and then make a courageous fresh commitment. The preventive system, in its most genuine expression, will always be based on pasto-

ral charity sustained by the two great columns of the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. These statements are not just relics of an obsolete religious culture, but prophetic perspectives of Vatican II.

From the spiritual and pedagogical legacy left to us by our Founder there emerge among other things the following practical requirements to which we must give our attention.

— *First of all for ourselves.* Don Bosco's spirit, as we have seen, is entirely concentrated on Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, from which comes forth the fire of «Da mihi animas». Our communities must grow around the altar, and draw on the riches associated with Emmanuel's dwelling with us.

Christ is not only the great personage of our ideals, but also the Friend who lives in our house with us and for us. We look continually to him in the supreme expression of his Passover. Don Bosco wrote in the spiritual testament he left us: «Your first Rector is dead. But our true Superior, Jesus Christ, will never die. He will always be our Master, our guide, our model. But remember that in his own time he will also be our judge and the rewarder of our faithfulness in his service».⁸²

The central place of Christ is lived, in our spirit, with an unusual sensitivity as regards contemplation and friendship towards the Eucharist, and hence with a particular delicacy and studious respect for its humble sacramental dimension. It should be embellished by art, by dignified liturgical vestments, by an elegance of cult which rejects oversights, bad taste, coarseness, and the decay of its inherent symbolic messages.

From a merely external point of view, every-

⁸² F. MOTTO, *Memorie dal 1841 al 1884-54-6* (Spiritual Testament) ed. LAS Rome 1985, p. 31

thing about the Eucharist seems almost insignificant: the person of the priest (one of us like all the others), a piece of bread, a little wine, some words of prayer. If we do not raise these elements to the much higher and dignified level of the ecclesial part they play through their sacramental expression, if we present the persons of the celebrants as just ordinary people, if we trivialize the rite of Mass, if we carelessly change the liturgical Prayer to suit our arbitrary and passing fancy (or even our ideology), we deprive the heart and contemplative thrust of the liturgical rite of its content of mystery, which in fact is substantially inherent in it.

Let us not forget, my dear confreres, that the Eucharist is something than which nothing can be greater; and it is this as a reality of the entire Church: «in the Church, with the Church, for the Church»!

This demands on the part of priests a special contemplative ability, whose interior vitality must be concentrated on the risen Christ (the one and only High Priest!) and on the Church his Spouse to serve her and represent her worthily.

And here allow me to remind you, dear confreres who are priests, of the importance of a daily nuptial attitude deeply linked with the Eucharist: I am speaking of the praying of the Divine Office. We priests recite it with the Church and in the Church's name for the benefit of all. Unfortunately there are some who have no clear awareness of its nature and ecclesial value, and skip over it as though it were simply a personal prayer to be said or not according to one's taste.

Article 89 of our Constitutions says explicitly that «the Liturgy of the Hours extends the grace of the eucharistic mystery throughout the day».⁸³

And it further reminds priests and deacons (the «clerics») of the «obligations assumed at their ordination».⁸⁴

⁸⁴ cf. CIC can. 1174,1

I think it will be useful here to quote in its entirety a passage from the decree on the «General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours»⁸⁵ which deals precisely with the relationship between this official prayer and the Eucharist.

⁸⁵ 2 February 1971

«The Liturgy of the Hours», we read, «extends to the different hours of the day the praise and prayer, the memorial of the mysteries of salvation and the foretaste of heavenly glory, which are offered to us in the eucharistic mystery, the centre and culmination of the whole life of the christian community. The Liturgy of the Hours is in itself an excellent preparation for the fruitful celebration of the Eucharist because it fosters the necessary dispositions, such as faith, hope and love, devotion and a spirit of sacrifice».⁸⁶

⁸⁶ *General Instruction on Liturgy of the Hours*, n. 12

The priestly attitude of Jesus Christ is centred without any doubt in prayer. He himself has said that we «ought always to pray and not lose heart».⁸⁷ We know too that through him we «continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God»: ⁸³ we give back to the universe its true sense: being made the voice of praise of all created things.

⁸⁷ Lk 18,1

⁸⁸ Heb 13,15

It will therefore be necessary for this more intimate relationship between the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours that greater attention be given, especially by priests and deacons, to the Church's prayer of the Divine Office.

(N.B. It will be a good thing to read, both individually and in community, what was suggested by the Councillor for Formation, Fr Paolo Natali, in AGC 321 [April-June 1987, pp. 44-56] concerning our liturgical celebrations. He gives some directives

and guidelines which are needed in a particular manner at the present day!)

And so Don Bosco wants from us a higher level of spirituality and celebration in the liturgy. It does not matter that others may follow poorer and even trivialized ways of doing things, justifying themselves with pseudo-cultural reasons. The great criterion which must enlighten our own celebrations and prayer is the ineffable and definitive value of the paschal events.

We must have the courage to face up to the educational consequences of such a criterion if we want to achieve success in the laborious pedagogical work of leading young people to live the Eucharist.

And this leads us to a second group of practical requirements called for by the prophetic legacy of our Founder.

— *For the education of the young and of people in general.* Don Bosco's apostolic activity was designed to lead to the Eucharist those to whom it was addressed. In his biography of Francis Besucco we find him saying categorically in Chapter 19: «They can say what they like about various educational systems, but I find no other sure foundation than frequent Confession and Communion; and I do not think it an exaggeration to say that if these two elements are left out, you can say good-bye to morality».⁸⁹

⁸⁹ ed. Caviglia, v. 6, *Besucco*, c. 9

Such a peremptory tone is unusual in Don Bosco; it is explained by the polemical context in which he was speaking, but it reflects his real feelings.

The sacrament of Reconciliation combined with a living participation in the Eucharist was in the hands of Don Bosco «the pedagogical means 'par

excellence' for correcting his boys and building a true and solid piety, of the kind that is required in life and penetrates it».⁹⁰

⁹⁰ ed. Caviglia, v. 4, Savio, *Studio* p. 355

The richness of our Father's pedagogy is certainly of wide extent, but it would be difficult to deny that these two sacraments – Reconciliation and the Eucharist – constitute its source and summit.

Our very Constitutions (to which we look in order to prepare ourselves for our great relaunching on 14 May next) recall the same thing in various articles:

«Our highest knowledge is to know Jesus Christ, and our greatest delight is to reveal to all people the unfathomable riches of his mystery. We walk side by side with the young so as to lead them to the risen Lord, and so discover in him and in his Gospel the deepest meaning of their own existence, and thus grow into new men».⁹¹

⁹¹ C 34

«We introduce the young to the experience of ecclesial life by bringing them into a faith community and helping them to take part in it».⁹²

⁹² C 35

«The Eucharist and the sacrament of Reconciliation, celebrated with care, are means of exceptional value for education to christian liberty, to conversion of heart and to a spirit of sharing and service in the ecclesial community».⁹³

⁹³ C 36

We must therefore revise the way in which we carry out our daily work for the young. We must move gradually: «Imitating God's patience», say the Constitutions, «we encounter the young at their present stage of freedom. We then accompany them, so that they may develop solid convictions and gradually assume the responsibility for the delicate process of their growth as human beings and as men of faith»;⁹⁴ but it should be always clear in

⁹⁴ C 38

our educational projects that «we introduce the young to a conscious and active participation in the Church's liturgy, the summit and source of all christian life».⁹⁵

⁹⁵ C 36

This introducing the young «to a conscious and active participation in the Church's liturgy» means, in practice, introducing them to the paschal mystery. In Don Bosco's method of education it meant building up an awareness of faith and of the friendship of living with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

A fundamental attitude of this kind requires, among other things, careful pedagogical attention to the following *six eucharistic aspects*:

1. «conversion»: without a sense of sin it is impossible to understand the central and indispensable place of Christ; and on the other hand, without a deep understanding of the truth of love, sin will be incomprehensible;
2. «enlightenment» by the Word of God: only the light of the Gospel can provide a valid response to life's pressing problems;
3. awareness of the «real presence» of Christ in the New Covenant; we cannot insist too strongly on the need to make known and understood the wonders of the sacramental character of the Church in the celebration of the sacrifice of the Mass;
4. «living incorporation into Christ»: sacramental communion is the true cradle of the new Man; it should be continually presented and inculcated as the source of deep convictions and as strength for courageous christian behaviour;
5. «mission»: being the Body of Christ in the world requires the daily commitment to take part in his saving activity; one of the charac-

teristics of our educational work must be to introduce young people to the apostolate;

6. finally, the friendship of «adoration», not forgetting its reparation aspect. Don Bosco gave special importance to the fact of having Jesus in the house, close at hand and available to us; the inculcating of the Emmanuel mystery banishes the depression of feeling lonely, and ensures that each one has a strategic starting point for the revival of his appreciation of the good of his own existence.

There you have some guidelines for drawing up practical programmes.

A little earlier I mentioned the step by step pedagogical approach. Initiation to the eucharistic mystery is a dynamic and pedagogically creative process, which develops gradually as those to whom it is addressed grow in their understanding of the paschal events, and the consequent demands they make for faith in personal and social life.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ cf. Eph 4,13

But going slowly is no excuse for stopping half-way or, worse still, for not starting at all. It keeps always clearly in mind the goal to be achieved, and the process is no longer gradual if there is not a continual movement towards the objective. It always supposes therefore a pedagogical and concrete growth which provides a permanent stimulus to those who want to be true christians and live by the Eucharist.

And that leads me to repeat with deep conviction what I said at the outset: the theme of the Eucharist is a vital one for us; it is the measure of our spirit and activity!

A Marian devotion which leads to the Eucharist

In conclusion, dear confreres, I suggest to you a stimulating aspect suited to the Marian Year we are at present living. I will mention it only briefly without developing the idea. I am thinking of the eucharistic perspective of Don Bosco's devotion to our Lady.

The 1860s were a critical period in the Italian Risorgimento, especially in Piedmont. Everything seemed to be conspiring against the Church. Don Bosco watched attentively, suffered, and then went into action. He saw in the rebirth of eucharistic devotion and of that to Mary Help of Christians the two columns on which to lean to avert catastrophe.

In a political and cultural context which compelled the Pope and the Church to live in a «state of siege», he could find no better course of action than to place unlimited trust in the mystery of the Eucharist and the powerful intercession of the «Help of Christians».

Though he was not a theologian by profession, he sensed as a pastor and educator that the line of force of the faith passes always through the Eucharist with the motherly mediation of Mary.

On 30 May 1862 (the year and month of the first salesian profession ceremony!) Don Bosco narrated his famous «dream of the two columns» which rose «in the midst of an endless sea». One was surmounted by a statue of Mary Immaculate at whose feet a large inscription read «Auxilium christianorum»; the other, far loftier and sturdier, supported a Host of proportionate size and bore beneath it the inscription «Salus credentium».⁹⁷ They are the two who have been raised from the dead:

⁹⁷ BM 7, 107 ff.

Christ and Mary, the new Adam and the new Eve, who guide the Church!

The «flagship» – symbol of the Church, the «one ark of salvation» – after a furious struggle with the stormy sea and the concentrated attacks of the enemy ships, fought back and won through as soon as it had tied up to the two columns, i.e. the Eucharist and Mary Help of Christians.

Undoubtedly the dream has a strong apologetics message, but it also expresses Don Bosco's state of mind and deep convictions.

In December of the following year, 1863 – writes Don Ruffino – our Father gave as the Strenna for 1864 «Devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to Mary», taking up once more the dream of the two columns. «Listen carefully to what I say. Picture to yourselves a huge globe hanging at its poles from two columns. On one is written: 'Regina mundi', and on the other 'Panis vitae'». The columns give out «a very brilliant light», while places remote from them are «shrouded in darkness».⁹⁸

⁹⁸ BM 7, 354

Jesus and Mary are for Don Bosco people who are alive and living in history; they intervene powerfully in favour of the Church. Mary leads to Jesus, but his real presence to which she leads is that of the eucharistic mystery.

Away beyond every contingent and limited social and political situation, there remains as a living and contemporary fact the perennial and prophetic significance of the two columns. To them we too must have recourse in our interior life and in our pastoral and pedagogical commitment to the education of the new Man.

I think it will be meaningful to recall here the moving episode concerning the foundation of the house at Liege in Belgium, which emphasizes this

relationship. Mgr Doutreloux, the energetic Bishop of that city, had gone to Turin on 7 December 1887. Don Bosco was seriously ill at the time. The Superiors, who had already discussed with Don Bosco the Bishop's request for a foundation, told him that the project would have to be delayed because of lack of the necessary personnel. On the following morning, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception, the Bishop went personally to greet Don Bosco who, to the surprise of all the others, gave him an immediate affirmative reply. What had happened in the meantime? Our Father had said to his Secretary, Don Viglietti, that morning: «Get some paper, take your pen and write down what I am about to say: These are literally the words which the Immaculate Virgin said to me when she appeared to me during the night: 'It is the wish of God and of the Blessed Virgin Mary that the sons of St Francis de Sales should go and open a house at Liege in honour of the Blessed Sacrament. There public honour began to be given to the glories of Jesus, and from there the same glories must spread to all your houses and communities, and specifically to the young people who will be entrusted to their care all over the world. Feast of Mary's Immaculate Conception. 1887'. And there he stopped. While he had been dictating he wept and sobbed; and he was moved with emotion for quite some time afterwards».⁹⁹

⁹⁹ MB 18, 438-439

Do you not think that this is an emblematic incident which, while revealing the Marian heart of our Father as he lay dying, manifests the living and concrete trend of his Marian devotion to Jesus in the Eucharist?

It must be our hope and prayer, dear confreres, that Don Bosco, going beyond the mentality and

language of his time, will always remain – a hundred years after his death – our Teacher and Guide towards the living presence of Christ who involves us in the wonderful sacramental gift of the New Covenant.

Each day Mary leads us to Christ. And may Christ be always for us the Emmanuel of the Church's liturgy and of the tabernacle

Dear confreres, let 1988 reawaken in our hearts the salesian spirit in so intense a form that with intelligence and courage we shall be able to renew through the Eucharist Don Bosco's legacy in our pastoral work for the young and the poor.

I send you my cordial greetings and best wishes, especially for 14 May!

With hope and trust in the Lord,

Fr Egidio Viganò

A handwritten signature in dark ink, reading "Fr E. Viganò". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'F' and 'V'.