

## **Meeting Jesus in the Holy Eucharist in Asia**

*(Homily at Opening of Solemn Mass of the IX Plenary Assembly of the FABC in Manila 11 August, 2009)*

It is most fitting that the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences has chosen for this IX Plenary assembly the theme: "Living the Eucharist in Asia." As the Mystery of Faith, the Eucharistic Sacrifice is "the font and apex of the whole Christian life." (*Lumen Gentium, 11*) "The other sacraments, as well as every ministry of the Church and every work of the apostolate, are linked with the Holy Eucharist and are directed toward it. For the most Blessed Eucharist contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth, that is, Christ himself, our Passover and living bread." (*Presbyt. Ordinis, 5*)

It matters, therefore, a great deal for the life of the Church in Asia how the ineffable mystery of the Holy Eucharist is believed, celebrated and lived in this vast continent in which more than 60 percent of humanity lives. I bring you the greetings, good wishes and blessings of our Holy Father, Pope Benedict. As you can see, Venerable Brothers, from his Apostolic Letter appointing me as his Special Envoy to this important ecclesial convention, the Holy Father rejoices at your choice of theme, and he prays that this Assembly be celebrated with great solemnity and that it brings abundant fruit for the peoples and cultures of the Asian continent. He requests the Bishops in particular to teach Christ's faithful the importance of participation at the Eucharistic Celebration especially on Sundays and of receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Priests, being ministers of the Eucharist, are to be greatly esteemed and supported and vocations to the priesthood to be promoted especially in the year for Priests.

This Plenary Assembly is going to reflect on sub-themes such as the following:

- The transforming power of the Holy Eucharist;
- The Eucharist Meal in the Service of Communion;
- Rooted in the Eucharist, we meet other believers;
- Eucharist and Solidarity;
- Eucharist and Evangelization.

A thought on each of these can help our prayer in offering to God this Eucharistic Sacrifice.

### **1. Transforming power of the holy Eucharist**

On the Cross, Jesus Christ offered himself to the Eternal Father as a sacrifice for the redemption of all humanity. He did so with love and obedience. In the midst of his intense suffering, he forgave those who were crucifying and mocking him.

In the Last Supper, the night before he suffered, Jesus gave to his Church the inestimable Sacrifice and Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. He ordered the Apostles, and through them the Church, to celebrate this memorial of the paschal mystery of his suffering, death and resurrection in remembrance of him. The Sacrifice of Calvary and the Sacrifice of the Mass are one single sacrifice because "the victim is one and the same: the same now offers through the ministry of priest, who then offered himself on the Cross; only the manner of offering is different." (*Council of Trent, in DS 1743*) In the

Eucharistic Sacrifice “the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his Body.” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1368*)

In the midst of tremendous economic and technological development, Asia also has her poor and suffering people, her oppressed and repressed, her homeless and needy. The Church in Asia lives in this context. To live the Holy Eucharist here means to bring Jesus to the poor of Asia, the Incarnate Word who did not disdain to take on human nature and to undergo pain and poverty, suffering and persecution and eventually even death on the Cross. Jesus teaches us to be willing to sacrifice ourselves, to forgive those who have offended us (cf Lk 23: 34) and to live in harmony with our neighbour. The Holy Eucharist, lived authentically, transforms us and leads us to share this effect with others. Blessed Mother Teresa of Kolkota and her Sisters serving the poorest of the poor are serving Christ and living the transforming power of the Eucharist. Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe, giving his life for a brother, was powerfully following Christ who washed the Apostles’ feet and taught us that “greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” (Jn 15:13)

The Eucharist also transforms us by leading us to seek ways in which to help the poor to get out of their condition of poverty and live a more dignified human life, as far as possible. The Gospel of Jesus Christ preaches conversion of heart, brotherly love, and the universal destination of earthly goods, in the sense that God does not want a few people to grab most of the good things in this world and thus become an oasis of enjoyment and overspending, while majority remain a dessert of want and misery (cf *Gaudium et Spes, 69*).

In his latest Encyclical Letter, *Caritatis in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI has given us the most up-to-date directive of the Church on the promotion of the integral human development.

The Eucharist, therefore, empowers us to live more worthy human lives, whether we are poor or rich in things of this world. If we continually allow ourselves to be transformed by the Holy Eucharist, we shall grow as followers of Christ.

## **2. The Holy Eucharist creates and fosters Communion.**

The Holy Eucharist is a culmination of all the sacraments because it perfects our communion with God the Father by identification with his Only-begotten Son through the working of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Eccl. De Euch., 34*). The celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice and the reception of Jesus in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist presuppose that this communion already exists. Invisible communion with God is the life of grace by which we become “partakers of the divine nature” (II Pet. 1:4) and practice the virtues of faith, hope and charity. That is why the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* recalls St. Paul’s warning also repeated by the Council of Trent (cf DS 1674, 1661), that “anyone conscious of grave sin must receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation before coming to Communion” (CCC, 1385; cf also C.I.C. canon 916; *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, can. 711).

Communion has also a visible dimension. It entails communion in the teaching of the Apostles, in the sacraments and in the hierarchical order of the Church. “The Eucharist, as the supreme sacramental manifestation of communion in the Church, demands to be celebrated in a context where the outward bonds of communion are also intact” (*Eccl. de Euch. 38*). This explains why the names of the Pope and of the Bishops in whose diocese a Mass is being celebrated are always mentioned in the Eucharistic Prayer.

All this emphasizes the importance of unity and communion between the Pope and the Bishops, between the Bishops themselves, and between the Bishops, his priests and his laity and consecrated people. “Whoever receives the mystery of unity without preserving the bonds of peace” says St Augustine, “receives not a mystery for his benefit but evidence against himself” (*Sermo 272:PL 38,1248*).

### **3. Rooted in the Eucharist, we meet other believers.**

Catholics in Asia live with other Christians who do not yet share with us full Catholic unity, and with a yet greater number of people who have other religions. Relations with other Christians and relations with other believers have to be considered separately, especially with reference to the Holy Eucharist.

In relations with other Christians, careful note has to be taken of the fact that the Eucharistic celebration is a celebration of the family of faith that is the Catholic Church. It demands full ecclesiastical communion. It is not an ecumenical service. It is not therefore possible to celebrate together the same Eucharistic liturgy until the bonds of communion are fully re-established. (cf. *Eccl. de Euch. 44*). “The more painful the experience of divisions in the Church which break the common participation in the table of the Lord, the more urgent are our prayers to the Lord that the time of complete unity among all who believe in Him may return” (CCC, 1398). As to the rare possibility of giving Holy Communion to an individual Christian whose religious family does not fully adhere to the Catholic fold, the stringent and demanding conditions laid down by the Church have to be present (cf. CIC, can 844; *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, can 671; *Eccl. de Euch. 45-46*; CCC, 1401).

When it is a question of Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and other believers, it is clear that the absence of faith in Christ and of Baptism fundamentally renders a reception of Holy Communion impossible. But it is also important to consider that Asian cultures put high value on a sense of the sacred, respect for guests and desire to share with them. It is for the Church in Asia to carefully work out how to explain our Catholic faith and its demands to other believers, whether there is a risk in inviting them to the Eucharistic celebration when due explanations are not made, and what would be acceptable gestures of welcome and sharing which do not obscure or contradict the Catholic faith.

Aware that we can best be of help to other believers when we carefully keep our Catholic identity and propose our faith to those who willingly desire to share it, Catholics may find suitable ways and moments to share with other believers that Jesus is the living bread which came down from heaven and that he who eats his flesh and drinks his blood will live in Christ and Christ in him (cf. Jn 6:51; 56). By the Paschal mysteries

celebrated in the Holy Eucharist, God “has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the Kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (Col. 1:13-14).

#### **4. The Holy Eucharist and Solidarity**

The Holy Eucharist is a Sacrament of love, a bond of charity, an invitation to harmonious living. Jesus loved his chosen ones “to the end” (Jn. 13:1). He washed their feet (cf. Jn 13:1-15). He taught them forgiveness and reconciliation by word and example (cf. Lk. 23:34). He told them that by their mutual love, the world would recognize them as his disciples (cf. Jn. 13:35).

Asia has its poor and marginalized people. There are occasionally natural disasters. There are always populations which without words are calling for solidarity. Genuine Christianity does not tolerate interdependence between people. It accepts interdependence as a fact; it welcomes it and strives to live it. So, accepted and lived, interdependence becomes solidarity, another word for Christian charity. Other people especially the needy, are my brothers and sisters in the pilgrimage that is life’s journey on earth.

The Holy Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brothers and sisters (cf. CCC, 1397). St. John Chrysostom does not mince words: “You have tasted the Blood of the Lord, yet you do not recognize your brother... You dishonor this table when you do not judge worthy of sharing your food someone judged worthy to take part in this meal... God freed you from all your sins and invited you here, but you have not become merciful” (*Hom. In I Cor. 27, 4*; PG, 229-230; cf. Mt 25:40).

Pope John Paul II says that the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebration can be judged by what we do for the needy (cf. *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 28). Pope Benedict XVI puts it this way: “A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented” (*Deus Caritas Est*, 14). Every diocese or parish can ask itself how far its Social Services Commission succeeds in being close to people in need.

May God bless the FABC and the whole Church in Asia for all the initiatives taken to promote Christian solidarity.

#### **5. Eucharist and Evangelization**

At the end of Mass, the deacon, and in his absence the priest, sends the people home with the greeting: “Go, the Mass is ended.” This means, “Go home to live and share what we have celebrated, listened to, meditated, received and prayed.” Acceding to the desire for the 2005 Synod of Bishops, the Holy Father approved the addition of three alternatives to “Ite Missa Est.” They are: “Go and announce the Gospel of God,” “Go and glorify God by your lives,” and “Go in Peace.” These are meant to reflect more clearly the missionary dimension of the Eucharistic celebration.

The Holy Eucharist is bread broken for the life of the world. “The love that we celebrate in the sacrament is not something we can keep for ourselves. By its very nature, it demands to be shared by all... Missionary outreach is thus, an essential part of the Eucharistic form of the Christian life.” (*Sacramentum Caritatis*, 84).

Evangelization is not proselytism. Evangelization refers to sharing our faith, bringing the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ who freely and willingly welcome this proclamation. Proselytism, on the other hand, refers to seeking to influence people to embrace a certain religion by means that exploit their weak position or put some other pressure on them. Canon Law (Can 748 §2) and respect for the dignity of the human person forbid proselytism. After asserting the dignity of other religions and many positive values found in them, Pope Paul VI states the ever relevant importance of proclamation:

“Neither respect and esteem for these religions, nor the complexity of the questions raised is an invitation to the Church to withhold from these non-Christians the proclamation of Jesus Christ. On the contrary, the Church holds that these multitudes have the right to know the riches of the mystery of Christ – riches in which we believe that the whole of humanity can find in unsuspected fullness, everything that is gropingly searching for concerning God, man and his destiny, life and death, and truth.” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 53)

Venerable Brothers, dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, this Plenary Assembly has very important work in front of it. May the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, whose Assumption we shall soon celebrate, obtain for us the light and grace of the Holy Spirit, to see how best to live the mystery of the Holy Eucharist in Asia today. To Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist, be honour and glory for ever and ever.

+ Francis Cardinal Arinze  
11 August 2009