

A Turn Toward the Eucharist

On February 22, 2007, the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter, Pope Benedict XVI released Sacramentum Caritatis (Sacrament of Charity), the Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist in the Life and Mission of the Church. Less than a month later, on March 13, it became available to the Church worldwide via a press release, the Vatican website and the distribution of the full text to all of us who eagerly awaited its publication. The secular media took little notice of this papal exhortation except to make truncated observations about its passing references to priestly celibacy and the inability of those in invalid marriages to receive communion. That's to be expected. But even the Catholic media, for the most part, did little more than dutifully summarize the document's three parts about the Eucharist as a mystery to be believed, celebrated and lived. Is that all that happened? Was this merely our 80 year old pontiff waxing eloquent about his lifelong love for the Eucharist in the second year of his pontificate? For the Catholic faithful, nothing could be farther from the truth.

Back on Holy Thursday, 2003, Pope John Paul II initiated this 'turn toward the Eucharist' with the release of his encyclical letter, Ecclesia de Eucharistia (On the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church). In the final encyclical of his prolific papacy, after a quarter century of his Petrine ministry, Pope John Paul the Great turned the eyes of the Church toward the Eucharist as an apostolic mystery of faith that builds and binds the Church in dignity and love. To effect this pointed focus on the Eucharist, at the beginning of the new millennium, he designated 2004 as the Year of the Eucharist, making provisions for both a worldwide Eucharistic Congress in Guadalajara, Mexico and the closing Synod of Bishops in October of 2005. Of course, he died in the Spring of 2005 before that synod was held. That gathering of a representative group of bishops in Rome (including our former Bishop, Archbishop Donald Wuerl of Washington, D.C.) was presided over by the newly elected Pope Benedict XVI.

This recent apostolic exhortation, then, is the fruit and summation of the Church's prayerful and articulate dialogical meditation on the Eucharist over the past few years, spanning two papacies. Pope Benedict himself has said that it was "providential" that he presided over this specific synod of bishops, obliquely referring to his lifelong passion for the celebration of the sacred mysteries. Sacramentum Caritatis expresses the Pope's intense love and respect for the Eucharist that permeates his theological project over the past 50 years as a priest, professor, theologian (expert advisor to his archbishop at the Second Vatican Council), bishop, archbishop, cardinal prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and, now, pope. I've made it a point to read more than half of his books over the past couple years; anyone familiar with some of his 25 volume corpus of theological writing knows that the Eucharist is unequivocally at the center of his thought and faith.

I think this apostolic exhortation and its reception in the Church will be one of the most distinguishing features of the new pontificate. While some may have been looking for a more forceful call for the renewal of the Church's liturgical life, Catholics should note the restraint and prudence in this document, an apostolic exhortation, after all, following the synod, which chooses the pastoral approach of persuading the clergy and laity toward a more solemn and meaningful celebration of this central sacramental mystery of our faith. Lest anyone mistake his paternal and loving tone for nostalgia, read the document carefully. Not a stone is left unturned in his comprehensive treatment of the Eucharist. In the 'Compendium' on the Eucharist that he calls for in paragraph 93, he discloses the patient, thorough and inexorable authority with which he will focus the various Vatican dicasteries (departments) to follow through on the practical summary and implementation of his vision throughout the universal Church. As he has so often observed, the mistakes in implementation of the liturgical renewal following the Second Vatican Council caused an 'artificial fissure' in our Catholic tradition. We can be certain that he will not allow imprudent and abrupt changes in liturgical practice but rather will move the Church, over a billion people worldwide, slowly but surely toward a more solemn celebration of the sacred mysteries. Note, too, the humble way that Pope Benedict situates his deep and abiding eucharistic vision in continuity with his predecessor's initiation of this 'turn toward the Eucharist,' thus drawing on John Paul's sainted authority to reinforce his own teaching. Pope Benedict also believes that the authentic and beautiful celebration of the Eucharist is the most powerful means of evangelization in the ecclesial arsenal. With the contemporary hunger for a sense of the sacred, the holy, the spiritual dimension of human existence, who can disagree?

During this Easter Season, Catholics joyfully live out the implications of the Paschal Mystery: the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Eucharist re-presents that mystery as 'the source and summit of our faith', to borrow the phrase coined in Sacrosanctum Concilium (The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy) from the Second Vatican Council, at which both Bishop Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II) and Fr. Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) were present. With the coming of May, many of our children will make their First Holy Communion, turning their precious little lives toward the person of Jesus Christ, receiving His body, blood, soul and divinity for the initial time. Like those little children, sometimes we have to connect the ecclesiastical dots to see the larger pattern and movement of the Holy Spirit moving through the Church in 'this turn toward the Eucharist.' I am excitedly anticipating Pope Benedict XVI leading the Church toward a more solemn, beautiful and rich celebration of the sacred mysteries in the years to come.

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