



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

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The Eucharist, "a taste of eternity in time"

1. "In the earthly liturgy we share, by way of foretaste, in that heavenly liturgy" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 8; cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 38). These limpid and essential words of the Second Vatican Council show us a fundamental dimension of the Eucharist: its being a "*future glorie pignus*", a pledge of future glory, as beautifully expressed by the Christian tradition (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 47). "This sacrament", St Thomas Aquinas notes, "does not admit us at once to glory, but bestows on us the power of coming into glory and, therefore, is called *viaticum*" (*Summa Theol.*, III, 79, 2, *ad* 1). The communion with Christ that we enjoy now while we are pilgrims and wayfarers on the paths of history anticipates that supreme encounter on the day when "we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 *Jn* 3: 2). Elijah, who collapsed helplessly under a broom tree during his journey in the wilderness and was strengthened by a mysterious bread until he reached the summit of his encounter with God (cf. 1 *Kgs* 19: 1-8), is a traditional symbol of the journey of the faithful, who find strength in the Eucharistic bread to advance towards the shining goal of the holy city.

2. This is also the profound meaning of the manna prepared by God on the steppes of Sinai, the "food of angels", providing every pleasure and suited to every taste, a manifestation of God's sweetness toward his children (cf. *Wis* 16: 20-21). Christ himself will be the one to shed light on this spiritual significance of the Exodus event. He is the one who enables us to taste in the Eucharist the twofold savour of the pilgrim's food and the food of messianic fullness in eternity (cf. *Is* 25: 6).

To borrow a phrase from the Jewish Sabbath liturgy, the Eucharist is a "taste of eternity in time"

(A. J. Heschel). Just as Christ lived in the flesh while remaining in the glory of God's Son, so the Eucharist is a divine and transcendent presence, a communion with the eternal, a sign that "the earthly city and the heavenly city penetrate one another" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 40). The Eucharist, memorial of Christ's Passover, is by its nature the bearer of the eternal and the infinite in human history.

3. This aspect, which opens the Eucharist to God's future while leaving it anchored to present reality, is illustrated by the words Jesus spoke over the cup of wine at the Last Supper (cf. Lk 22: 20; 1 *Cor* 11: 25). With these same words Mark and Matthew evoke the covenant in the blood of the sacrifices on Sinai (cf. *Mk* 14: 24; *Mt* 26: 28; *Ex* 24: 8). Luke and Paul, however, reveal the fulfilment of the "new covenant" foretold by the prophet Jeremiah: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant I made with their fathers" (Jer 31: 31-32). Jesus, in fact, declares: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood". In biblical language "new" usually means progress, final perfection.

It is also Luke and Paul who stress that the Eucharist is an anticipation of the horizon of glorious light belonging to the kingdom of God. Before the Last Supper Jesus said: "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer; for I tell you I shall not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God. And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he said, "Take this, and divide it among yourselves; for I tell you that from now on I shall not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes" (*Lk* 22: 15-18). And Paul explicitly recalls that the Eucharistic supper looks forward to the Lord's final coming: "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" (1 *Cor* 11: 26).

4. The fourth Evangelist, John, extols this orientation of the Eucharist towards the fullness of God's kingdom in the well-known discourse on the "bread of life" that Jesus gave at the synagogue in Capernaum. The symbol he used as a biblical reference was, as was already mentioned, the manna offered by God to Israel on its pilgrimage through the desert. Regarding the Eucharist, Jesus solemnly declared: "If anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever.... He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.... This is the bread which came down from heaven, not such as the fathers ate and died; he who eats this bread will live for ever" (*Jn* 6: 51, 54, 58). In the language of the fourth Gospel, "eternal life" is the divine life itself which transcends the bounds of time. Being a communion with Christ, the Eucharist is thus a sharing in God's life, which is eternal and conquers death. Jesus therefore says: "This is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up at the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (*Jn* 6: 39-40).

5. In this light - as a Russian theologian, Sergei Bulgakov, evocatively said - "the liturgy is heaven on earth". For this reason, in the Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* I quoted the words of Paul VI, urging

Christians not to neglect "this encounter, this banquet which Christ prepares for us in his love.

May our sharing in it be most worthy and joyful! It is Christ, crucified and glorified, who comes among his disciples, to lead them all together into the newness of his Resurrection. This is the climax, here below, of the covenant of love between God and his people: the sign and source of Christian joy, a stage on the way to the eternal feast" (n. 58; cf. *Gaudete in Domino*, conclusion).

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I am happy to welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present here today. I greet the pilgrims from the Diocese of Portsmouth in England, led by Bishop Hollis, and from the United States, the Archdiocese of Portland, led by Archbishop Vlazny, the Diocese of Saint Petersburg, led by Bishop Lynch, the Diocese of Jackson, led by Bishop Houck, the Diocese of La Crosse, led by Bishop Burke, the Diocese of Wilmington, led by Bishop Saltarelli, and the Diocese of Albany, led by Bishop Hubbard. I gladly welcome the participants in the World Congress of the International Uro-Gynecological Association. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Wales and the United States of America, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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