



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 8 November 2000

Eucharist is sacrament of the Church's unity

1. "O sacrament of devotion! O sign of unity! O bond of charity!". St Augustine's exclamation in his commentary on the Gospel of John (*In Joannis Evangelium*, 26, 13) captures the theme and sums up the words that Paul addressed to the Corinthians and we have just heard: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 *Cor* 10: 17). The Eucharist is the sacrament and source of the Church's unity. This has been stressed since the beginnings of the Christian tradition and is based on the sign of the bread and wine. This is how it is stated in the *Didache*, a writing composed at the dawn of Christianity: "Just as this broken bread was first scattered on the mountains and, after being harvested, became one reality, so may your Church be gathered from the ends of the earth into your kingdom" (9, 1).

2. St Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage, echoed these words in the third century, saying: "The sacrifices of the Lord themselves highlight the unanimity of Christians strengthened by solid, indivisible charity. For when the Lord calls the bread formed of the union of many grains his body, and when he calls the wine pressed from many clusters of grapes and poured together his blood, in the same way he indicates our flock formed of a multitude united together" (*Ep. ad Magnum*, 6). This Eucharistic symbolism of the Church's unity returns frequently in the Fathers and Scholastic theologians. "The Council of Trent summarized the doctrine, teaching that our Saviour left the Eucharist to his Church "as a symbol of her unity and of the charity with which he wanted all Christians to be closely united with one another"; and for this reason it is "a symbol of that one body of which he is the head" (Paul VI, *Mysterium fidei: Ench. Vat.*, 2, 424; cf. Council of Trent, *Decr. de SS. Eucharistia*, introd. and ch. 2). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sums it up very effectively: "Those who receive the Eucharist are united more closely to Christ. Through it Christ

unites them to all the faithful in one body - the Church" ([CCC, 1396](#)).

3. This traditional doctrine is deeply rooted in Scripture. Paul develops it in the passage already cited from the First Letter to the Corinthians, taking *koinonia* as the basic theme, that is, the communion which is established between the faithful and Christ in the Eucharist. "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ?" (10: 16). This communion is more precisely described in John's Gospel as an extraordinary relationship of "mutual interiority": "he in me and I in him". Jesus, in fact, says at the synagogue in Capernaum: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (*Jn* 6: 56).

It is a theme that will also be underscored in the discourses at the Last Supper with the symbol of the vine: the branch is verdant and fruitful only if it is grafted on to the vine stem, from which it receives sap and support (*Jn* 15: 1-7). Otherwise it is just a withered branch to be thrown into the fire: *aut vitis aut ignis*, "either the vine or the fire", St Augustine succinctly comments (*In Johannis Evangelium*, 81, 3). Here we see a unity, a communion, which is realized between the faithful and Christ present in the Eucharist, on the basis of the principle that Paul expresses this way: "Those who eat the sacrifices are partners in the altar" (1 *Cor* 10: 18).

4. Because this type of "vertical" communion-*koinonia* makes us one with the divine mystery, it produces at the same time a communion-*koinonia* we could call "horizontal", or ecclesial, fraternal, capable of uniting all who partake of the same table in a bond of love. "We who are many are one body", Paul reminds us, "for we all partake of the one bread" (1 *Cor* 10: 17). The discourse on the Eucharist anticipates the great ecclesial reflection which the Apostle will develop in chapter 12 of the same Letter, when he will speak of the body of Christ in its unity and multiplicity. The well-known description of the Jerusalem Church offered by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles also outlines this fraternal unity or *koinonia*, connecting it with the breaking of bread, that is, the Eucharistic celebration (cf. *Acts* 2: 42). This communion is realized in concrete historical reality: "They devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and the prayers.... All who believed were together and had all things in common" (*Acts* 2: 42-44).

5. The profound meaning of the Eucharist is thus denied when it is celebrated without taking into account the demands of charity and communion. Paul is severe with the Corinthians because when they meet together, "it is not the Lord's supper that you eat" (1 *Cor* 11: 20), as a result of their divisions, injustices and selfishness. In this case, the Eucharist is no longer *agape*, that is, the expression and source of love. And whoever partakes of it unworthily, without making it bear fruit in fraternal charity, "eats and drinks judgement upon himself" (1 *Cor* 11: 29). "In fact Christian life is expressed in the fulfilling of the greatest commandment, that is to say in the love of God and neighbour, and this love finds its source in the Blessed Sacrament, which is commonly called the sacrament of love" (*Dominicae cenae*, n. 5). The Eucharist recalls, makes present and brings

about this charity.

Let us then answer the appeal of the Bishop and martyr Ignatius, who exhorted the faithful of Philadelphia in Asia Minor to unity: "One is the flesh of our Lord Jesus Christ, one is the chalice in the unity of his blood, one is the altar, just as one is the Bishop" (*Ep. ad Philadelphenses*, 4). And let us pray with the liturgy to God the Father: "Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ" (*Eucharistic Prayer III*).

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I warmly welcome the group from the Shrine of Our Lady of Walsingham in England, and the members of the International *Path to Rome* pilgrimage. I also greet the United States pilgrims from the Archdiocese of Hartford, led by Archbishop Cronin; and from the Dioceses of Youngstown, led by Bishop Tobin; Knoxville, led by Bishop Kurtz; and Joliet, led by Bishop Kaffer. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Thailand, Japan, Malawi, Canada and the United States of America, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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