
THE LITURGICAL LEGACY OF JOHN PAUL II

by Fr. Giles Dimock, O. P.

WHEN ONE THINKS of the late Pope John Paul II, some aspects of this person — bigger than life, a player on the world stage, a saint, presider of global ceremonies, yet at heart a holy priest — are caught in the great mysteries he celebrated. In my liturgical and theological formation in the Order, at Notre Dame, at Saint Anselmo, the professors whom I most admired believed in the mysteries they were teaching us. Pope John Paul not only taught us well about the holy mysteries of the Mass and the Sacraments, but he was seen praying them by millions of people over the world. Even one who knew little about Catholic doctrine would know, watching him celebrate, that something truly awesome and important was happening at the altar when he celebrated the Mass.

In 1979, at the beginning of his papal ministry, Pope John Paul issued his first encyclical, *Redemptor Hominis*. In it he puts the mystery of the redemption at the center of his mission. As he explores how the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ frees us and the world, he situates the Eucharist as the summit and center of this redemption, realized as the Mass is celebrated. He teaches us that the Eucharist is a sacrifice Sacrament, a communion Sacrament, and a presence Sacrament.

Sacrifice Sacrament

Treating of the Eucharist under the aspect of sacrifice, in his 1980 letter on the Eucharist, *Dominicae Cena*,



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the Holy Father strongly stresses that the Mass is a sacrifice, because the bread and wine become truly, really and substantially Christ's own body that is given up and His blood that is shed. Thus, by virtue of the consecration, the species of bread of wine represent in a Sacramental, unbloody manner the bloody and propitiatory sacrifice He offered on the cross to His Father for the salvation of the world.

Thus the sacrifice Sacrament.

Communion Sacrament

This reality, offered (Heb 7:27) on Calvary, is made present now so we can enter into this mystery. As we are joined with Christ, as we receive him into our very being, we are made one with him and one another. As John Paul II says: "Therefore in Eucharistic Communion we receive Christ, Christ Himself; and our union with Him, which is a gift and

grace for each individual, brings it about that in Him we are also associated in the unity of His Body which is the Church" (*Dominicae Cena*, 4). So we see his affirmation of the Eucharist as the communion Sacrament, although, of course, he treats it much more richly.

Presence Sacrament

Finally in *Dominicae Cena*, we find the Eucharist seen as a presence Sacrament. Because Christ is present in the Eucharist, worship must be prominent in all our encounters with the Blessed Sacrament. Because the Lord is truly present in this Sacrament, we must not stint our adoration for Him in the Eucharist; the Church and the world have a great need of Eucharistic worship. Jesus waits for us in this Sacrament of love. Let us be generous with our time in going to meet Him in adoration and in contemplation that is full of faith and really to make reparation for the great faults and crimes of the world. May our adoration never cease.

In this letter, the Holy Father stresses the sacredness of the Liturgy as a quality that is inherent because the Mass is a holy action, the holy action of the High Priest of the New Covenant who is the offerer, the offered, the consecrator and the consecrated. Therefore the Church has the duty to safeguard and strengthen the sacredness of the Eucharist. (*Ibid.*).

Pope John Paul II did this, not by changing the liturgy, but by celebrat-

ing it well and devoutly and by teaching Catholic doctrine clearly on this great mystery. One action of the Pontiff was somewhat controversial. In hopes of luring the Lefebvrites back from potential schism, John Paul issued *Quattuor Abhinc Annos* in 1984, allowing the use of 1962 Missal for groups of Catholics who found adjusting to the Mass of Paul VI difficult. Unfortunately, Archbishop Lefebvre consecrated four bishops and was excommunicated. In hopes of attracting some of his followers who did not want to follow suit, the Pope issued *Ecclesia Dei*, urging bishops to be generous with permission to celebrate the Tridentine Mass. The Pope was moved by pastoral concerns to bring all Catholics into the unity of the Church.

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An Enduring Eucharistic Reflection

All along, Pope John Paul II was encouraging the priests of the church by issuing letters for them on Holy Thursday of each year, treating the priesthood, the Eucharist and the Mass. On Holy Thursday 2003, in place of the usual letter, the Pope issued his fourteenth and last encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. He died two years later, so we might consider this his legacy to the church. This document is not only official teaching that hands on the

tradition of the Church, but it is also a deeply personal reflection on what the Eucharist means to him. He sees this great gift of the Eucharist, the *mysterium eucharisticum* as flowing from the *mysterium paschale*, as indeed does the church. The Mass, in a way, encapsulates the whole Triduum, since Holy Thursday and the institution of the Eucharist were celebrated in the light of Jesus' death on the cross on Good Friday, which further climaxed in His glorious resurrection on Easter. This mystery is the foundation and wellspring of the church; this is, as it were, gathered up, foreshadowed, and concentrated forever in the gift of the Eucharist.

At Mass, the Church becomes the Body of Christ, fed on the Body of Christ. Christ speaks through the priest, using the voice of the priest, turning the bread and wine into His own Body and Blood. The Pope remembered celebrating Mass in the cenacle, in his first parish church, for students in Cracow, as Pope at Saint Peter's in Rome. He reminisced about celebrating in chapels built on mountain paths, on lakeshores and seacoasts, in stadiums and city squares. These many venues reminded the Pope of the cosmic dimension of the Mass. Even if celebrated on a humble altar of a country church, it is celebrated on the altar of the world. It is cosmic because it is the Sacramental representation of the sacrifice of the Cross. It is the sacrifice of the Cross perpetuated down the ages, and the cross is the center of the cosmos. The Pope found it necessary to stress the sacrificial dimension of the Mass because some strip the Eucharist of its sacrificial meaning as if it were simply a fraternal banquet (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 11). He insists that it is a commemorative representation

(*memorialis representatio*), and because we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (1 Cor. 10:17). We, the mystical Body of Christ, become more so by feasting on the Sacramental Body of Christ and our communion is deepened.

Thus, the Communion Sacrament is also the sacrifice Sacrament and when the Pope treats of the presence Sacrament, he is not afraid to stress beauty as the setting for the reservation for the *panis angelorum*. He states the Church has never been afraid of extravagance in creating an atmosphere of beauty in architecture, sculpture, painting, and music (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 49). How much do we need that emphasis now!

I would like to conclude my reflection with a personal memory, not of the World Day Masses at which I concelebrated with the Holy Father in various capitals of the world, but rather my experience at his early Mass in his private chapel at the Vatican. We were ushered in, the priests all vested, and we found the Pope kneeling in rapt prayer. At times we could hear him groan in prayer (cf. Rom 8:26), the Vicar of Christ with all the cares of the world upon him. Then he vested and began the Mass. It was in Latin, though the readings were in English. I read the Gospel and later stood next to him during the Eucharistic prayer during which I had a part to read. John Paul was so caught up in the holy mysteries that he was celebrating, that we were caught up, too. This living example crystallized for me all he had written and engraved it on my heart. ❧