

7. Eucharist and Social Mission

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For those of us who participate in the weekly or even daily celebration of the Eucharist, we find strength and spiritual nourishment in our hearing the Word of God and in our eating and drinking of the Body and Blood of our Lord. Participation in the Mass brings us joy, hope, and spiritual food. However, our participation in the Mass is also a participation in the sacrifice of Christ, a participation in his selfless giving for the life of the world. In other words, participation in the Eucharist goes beyond the celebration. There are social implications; we are called to wash feet.

In recent decades, our popes have spoken extensively and quite eloquently on the connection between the Eucharist and the social mission of the Church. Their insights into the connection between liturgy and life bear repeating. For example, Saint John Paul II, in his apostolic letter, *Mane nobiscum Domine* concluded his letter with several paragraphs on the connection between the Eucharist and social mission:

The encounter with Christ, constantly intensified and deepened in the Eucharist, issues in the Church and in every Christian an urgent summons to testimony and evangelization. . . The dismissal at the end of Mass is a charge given to Christians, inviting them to work for the spread of the Gospel and the imbuing of society with Christian values.⁶³

He then goes onto say:

There is one other point which I would like to emphasize, since it significantly affects the authenticity of our communal sharing in the Eucharist. It is the impulse which the Eucharist gives to the community for a practical commitment to building a more just and fraternal society. In the Eucharist our God has shown love in the extreme, overturning all those criteria of power which too often govern human relations and radically affirming the criterion of service: "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mc 9:35). It is not by chance that the Gospel of John contains no account of the institution of the Eucharist, but instead relates the "washing of the feet" (cf Jn 13:1-20): by bending down to wash the feet of his disciples, Jesus explains the meaning of the Eucharist unequivocally.⁶⁴

And finally, he says:

We cannot delude ourselves: by our mutual love and, in particular, by our concern for those in need we will be recognized as true followers of Christ (cf. Jn 13:35; Mt. 25:31-46). This will be the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations is judged.⁶⁵

Clearly, for Saint John Paul II, the Eucharist must be evaluated on the grounds of our service to others most in need.

During his pontificate, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, wrote two significant documents on the Eucharist: his encyclical letter, *Deus caritatis est* (2005) and his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Sacramentum caritatis* (2007). He highlights in clear terms the same connection between the Eucharist and mission. In *Deus caritatis est*, he writes:

Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own... A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented.⁶⁶

A few years later after the Synod on the Eucharist, he wrote in his apostolic exhortation, *Sacramentum caritatis*:

What the world needs is God's love; it needs to encounter Christ and to believe in him. The Eucharist is thus the source and summit not only of the Church's life, but also of her mission: "an authentically eucharistic Church is a missionary Church." (234)... We cannot approach the eucharistic table without being drawn into the mission which, beginning in the very heart of God, is meant to reach all people. Missionary outreach is thus an essential part of the eucharistic form of the Christian life.⁶⁷

Pope Benedict's clarity on the implications of the Eucharist challenges us to go out to the world, to be the face of God's love to all whom we meet.

Finally, Pope Francis is no stranger to this connection between the Eucharist and social mission. One of his very first acts as Supreme Pontiff, showed us in word, and more importantly, in deed, the social implication of the Eucharist for our lives. On Holy Thursday, 2013, a few short days after his installation as our Holy Father, Pope Francis traveled to a youth detention center to celebrate Mass and wash the feet of young people who were all but outcasts in society. Pope Francis continues this custom of celebrating the Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord's Supper with those who live on the margins of society. He washes the feet of prisoners, outcasts, women and men, Muslims, Hindus, refugees, and the disabled. His actions fulfill Jesus' command at the Last Supper, "Do this in memory of me."

In his first Corpus Christi homily as pontiff, Pope Francis reminded us of the transformative power of the Eucharist. In his homily, he tells us that God changes our own human weakness, our own human imperfections that we might go out to serve others with his own power of love:

And in the Eucharist the Lord makes us walk on his road, that of service, of sharing, of giving; and if it is shared, that little we have, that little we are, becomes riches, for the power of God—which is the power of love—comes down into our poverty to transform it.⁶⁸

As these three great pontiffs have reminded us, participation in Jesus' greatest gift to us, the Eucharist, has implications for our lives. We cannot simply attend Mass every Sunday, receive Holy Communion, only to return to our old way of living. The Eucharist demands that we give of ourselves, that we wash the feet of others, that we love as Christ loved. These demands fall squarely on our shoulders. As those who bring Christ to others, we must be clear signs of the connection between our participation in the Eucharist leading to our participation in the world.

