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## Beyond First Communion—Ongoing Catechesis on the Words, Signs, Rituals, and Symbols Used in the Eucharist

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Rightly is special care taken in the catechesis for First Communion. This is true for children and also for adults who are receiving Communion for the first time as the climax of the Sacraments of Initiation or of their being received into full communion with the Catholic Church. But that “special care” must not allow us to forget that First Communion is but the beginning of a lifetime need for growth in attempting to understand an inexhaustible mystery: the mystery of the Eucharistic celebration. There are many ways in which this growth can take place: prayer and reflection, reading essays or books from the different epochs of the Church’s life, or any number of approaches to ongoing catechesis. This essay offers one catechetical approach: training ourselves to pay closer attention to the words, signs, rituals, and symbols used in the Eucharist. What I offer here is a development of some key dimensions of the teaching of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which provides the larger context of the points I will make.

We are accustomed to think of the Eucharistic celebration as consisting in “two great parts that form a fundamental unity” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000], no. 1346). These are the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. But there is also a “movement of the celebration” in which a number of smaller parts or dimensions within these two great parts can be discerned. The *Catechism* speaks first of the gathering of the assembly, then of the Liturgy of the Word, next of the presentation of the offerings, then of the Eucharistic Prayer, and, finally, of Communion (CCC, nos. 1348-1355). All these parts are made up of words, signs, rituals, and symbols. By giving attention to their meaning, we can make some progress in our attempt to understand the inexhaustible mystery. All together they combine to proclaim and make present a wondrous divine deed. That deed, that event, is the Death of Jesus of Nazareth and his Resurrection from the dead. In virtue of his Resurrection, the proclamation of

that event causes what once happened to be present now as the event happening at Mass. Let us look at these five dimensions of the celebration that the *Catechism* designates and see how by means of words, signs, rituals, and symbols the event of Jesus' Death and Resurrection is rendered present.

### **All Gather Together**

When we come to a particular place for the celebration of Mass, we should be aware that our coming together is not like our coming to any other place. The grace of God brings us together in this place, and our very gathering is a ritual act. Coming together we form a sign—a sign that it is God who gathers and that now he will act. The assembly is presided over by a bishop or priest, and he is a visible sign, a sacrament, that Christ himself “presides invisibly over every Eucharistic celebration” (CCC, no. 1348). The special vestments of the priest, his place at the head of the assembly, and the way he directs all that happens and recites and enacts the key parts of this memorial of the Lord's Death and Resurrection all provide a very strong sign that Christ himself draws this assembly together and presides over it. But the priest does not act alone; that is to say Christ does not act alone. All in the assembly have their roles and functions to perform. What these indicate and accomplish is that Christ associates us with himself in the great action of his Death and Resurrection, in which, as we will see, he makes an offering to his Father of thanksgiving, intercession, and praise. All through the Mass it is worth paying attention to both priest and assembly and to their interaction. Everything that

is said and done is done together in complementary fashion. It is all a sign of the Church as Christ's body and Christ as head of the body.

### **The Liturgy of the Word**

The first major act to take place within this assembly is the proclamation of the Scripture. In the Sunday celebration, this includes a reading from the Old Testament (in the Easter season from the Acts of the Apostles), then a Responsorial Psalm, then a reading from one of the letters of the apostles. A baptized member of the assembly always proclaims these readings and psalms, and this is a sign that the very lives of the baptized are meant to be a proclamation of the Scripture and that all bear responsibility for this. That all the rest listen is likewise a sign: that we have been assembled by God to hear God speak.

Each in its own way, the Old Testament reading and the reading from the apostles help us to place in context and to understand theologically the Gospel reading we are about to hear. The Gospel is the center of the Scripture and brings us directly into contact with Jesus Christ through his words and deeds. And the center of the Gospel is the account of his Death and Resurrection. In fact, by reading any one part of the Gospel on a given Sunday, this center is always indicated and implied. Because of this central role of the Gospel, its proclamation is done by an ordained member of the assembly (deacon, priest, or bishop), whose ordination constitutes him as a special sign of Christ's presence in the assembly.

The words of any part of the Scripture recount or reflect on the wondrous deeds of God. The Church believes that when Scripture is proclaimed in the assembly, the very deeds recounted are made present to that assembly. This is rightly believed, because deeds of God do not grow old, wearing out with the passage of time. Once posited, they remain and are rendered present by means of the words that recount them. God's deeds begin with the creation of the world. Then God's action is especially focused in the history of Israel, which prepares the way for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus reveals an unexpected version of the Messiah, hidden but not grasped in the Old Testament; namely, that the Messiah would suffer and then be glorified. Here is the center of what all the words point to (see see Lk 24:13-35). And if we are reflecting in this essay about paying attention, among other things, to the words of the liturgy, then we must at this point in the liturgy pay special attention to the words of Scripture and seek this center to them. Homilies and catechesis (and prayerful reflection!) are meant to help us find this center.

Nonetheless, the Liturgy of the Word is not made up only of words. We should be aware of the deep meaning of the simple ritual gestures we perform. We sit to listen to the first two readings. This is not done simply to give our legs a rest. It is a posture that means to express something. It expresses our readiness to listen to what God will say. We express something more when we stand to sing the Alleluia and to listen to the Gospel. We express respect for this privileged center of God's Word. We express excitement. We rise because

Christ who speaks is risen. And sometimes we surround the reading of the Gospel with symbols: the flame of candles and the smoke of incense to indicate an intense, divine presence here and now in our assembly.

## **The Presentation of the Offerings**

With the presentation of the offerings, the Liturgy of the Eucharist begins. Now the weight of the celebration shifts from words to symbols, even if words are still very much involved and we must continue to pay attention to them. "At the heart of the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and wine that, by the words of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become Christ's Body and Blood" (CCC, no. 1333). It is very important that we understand the symbolic meaning of bread and wine if we are to make progress in penetrating the meaning of the Eucharist. From now until the end, the ritual focus is centered around the bread and wine that are brought by the baptized to the priest, then transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, then handed back as spiritual food to the very people who brought them forward.

Bread and wine are not purely natural symbols as is, say, water in Baptism. They are in fact the product of cooperation between the Creator and human beings. Herein lies their significance. God does not make bread and wine; human beings do. Bread and wine symbolize the immense network of human labor required for the sustenance of our lives (bread) and the enjoyment of our lives together (wine). In the ritual gesture of a procession,

bread and wine are brought from the baptized to the hands of the priest. In effect, this symbolizes the baptized bringing all the world to the hands of Christ and asking that he transform our poor (yet beautiful) efforts at sustenance and life together, that he transform them into his Body and Blood. This he will do.

### The Eucharistic Prayer

“With the Eucharistic Prayer . . . we come to the heart and summit of the celebration” (CCC, no. 1352). There is no end to searching the depths of the mystery of what is accomplished during the course of it. It is impossible to be exhaustive here or anywhere. One useful approach is to be aware of the different parts of this great prayer. The *Catechism* treats five of them (CCC, nos. 1352-1354). We can follow these, adding the particular angles offered in this essay. The Eucharistic Prayer draws together many strands already mentioned.

We spoke of the complementary interaction of priest and assembly. Now this reaches a special intensity. In three vigorous interchanges that precede the preface, Christ, in the person of the priest, takes the assembly’s hearts on high for the action of thanks and praise that he will now enact. In the *Holy Holy Holy*, the assembly sings the song of angels and saints in heaven. With this song, the assembly has in some mysterious sense entered the heavenly sanctuary where Christ continually presents his offering to the Father (see Heb 9:11-14).

Now the people are kneeling and following with attention the words of the priest. They grasp that he is

speaking in the name of them all. In an evocative ritual gesture, he stretches out his hands over the gifts of bread and wine brought by the people. With this gesture and the words that accompany it, we can somehow detect the invisible action of the Spirit that hovers somewhere between the priest’s hands and the gifts. This is called the *epiclesis*. “In the *epiclesis*, the Church asks the Father to send his Holy Spirit . . . on the bread and wine, so that by his power they may become the body and blood of Jesus Christ and so that those who take part in the Eucharist may be one body and one spirit” (CCC, no. 1353).

In the institution narrative, ritual words and gestures by the priest are magnificently combined over the symbolic gifts of bread and wine that the baptized have brought. Bread and wine have their meaning not only as the combination of creation and human labor; they also recall Israel’s Exodus and the Passover meal. At the Last Supper, Jesus uses them to invoke this meaning. With the multiple meanings all floating in the air around him, Jesus takes the bread and wine into his hands and declares them to be signs that indicate the meaning of the death he will endure on the next day. When the priest repeats the same words and gestures of Jesus, the bread and wine are transformed into his Body and Blood; for, as was said above, the deeds of God once posited, do not grow old. They are rendered present again in the telling.

There follows the anamnesis and the offering. “Anamnesis” is a special word that designates this remembering of God’s deeds that renders them present. So, with solemn language, remembering “the Passion, resurrection, and glorious

return of Christ Jesus; [the Church] presents to the Father the offering of his Son which reconciles us with him" (CCC, no. 1354). These might just be so many abstract words were it not for the fact that the words of anamnesis and offering are made with the ritual outstretched arms of the priest at the altar on which lie the Body and Blood of the Lord under the appearance of bread and wine brought by the baptized. Christ's offering is in this way presented by him together with this gathered assembly to the heavenly Father.

Intercessions follow this offering. In the presence of the Lord's Body and Blood, the Church, having entered into the heavenly sanctuary, intercedes through Christ for herself and the whole world. What could the Father refuse when asked in and through the presence of this sacred Body and Blood?

The final ritual gesture and words of this great prayer are magnificent. The priest lifts up the Lord's Body and Blood—transformed from the bread and wine that the baptized have brought—and presents them to God the Father as the perfect offering made to the glory of his name. "Through him, and with him, and in him, to you, O God, almighty Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, is all honor and glory, for ever and ever." In that moment, the Church is doing what Christ did and forever does: she offers his one Body, to which she has been joined, to the Father for the glory of his name and for the salvation of the world. This is our communion in the sacrifice of Christ. This is perfect

praise. We ratify this with our resounding "amen."

## Communion

Many words and rituals surround the reception of Communion. The words of the Our Father magnificently express our closeness to the Father achieved through the sacrifice of his Son, and they ask him for the "daily bread" of the Eucharist. Then we make a sign of peace to one another, showing that our communion with Christ gives us also communion with each other. We form a procession and sing together as we approach the Lord's sacred Body and Blood. We bow before these in adoration before receiving them. Each one of us is united to Christ in an intensely personal way by our reception of his Body and Blood. But, in addition, our reception of this sacred food and drink into our bodies makes of the whole assembly an enormous sign. In effect we take into ourselves—we swallow!—the sacrifice of Christ that was present on the altar. The assembly is made to be "one body and one spirit in Christ."

This is the assembly that is sent out into the world by Christ its head. This is the meaning of the priest's final blessing, which is the sign of the Cross traced over us with the name of the Holy Trinity. Then he says, "Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life." Indeed, through Communion, the assembly and each member in it have been equipped precisely for this moment. Christ's life is in the world through his Church celebrating Eucharist.

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