

5th Sunday (A)

5th February 2023

‘Pope Benedict’s teaching, III: *Sacramentum Caritatis*’

Is 58: *Then will your light shine like the dawn. claimed to have was of Christ crucified.*

1Cor 2: *the only knowledge I*

Mt 5:13–16: *You are the Light of the world*

“In my speeches and sermons that I gave, there were none of the arguments that belong to philosophy; only a demonstration of the power of the Spirit. And I did this so that your faith should not depend on human philosophy but on the power of God.”

So says St Paul in the 2nd reading. St Paul was a perfectly good philosopher, and yet he knew that human reasoning only gets you so far, whilst the power of God — His *revelation* out of love, His *gifts* out of sheer generosity — gets us a lot further, in fact is surprising and so much beyond what our rational arguments might have led us to.

Pope Benedict also was an eminent philosopher, a rational, systematic thinker, but pre-eminently a Catholic theologian, and knew how the data of *faith* build up the knowledge that we need for life. Above all the *Holy Eucharist* is a gift, a sacrament, that we could not have dreamt up, only God could. In our journey through the papal teaching of Pope Benedict XVI in these early weeks

of the year, our next stop is his wonderful work on the Eucharist, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, “the Sacrament of Charity.” This papal document isn’t an ‘Encyclical Letter’ like we’ve considered the past couple of weeks — it’s a ‘post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation,’ which means it’s a systematic pulling-together of the discussions and proposals of the worldwide Synod of Bishops which meets every few years to study a topic of particular importance to the global Church. The Synod on the Eucharist of Oct 2005 was written up by Pope Benedict by Feb 2007. It’s quite a bit longer than the works we’ve previously considered, but luckily (for you!) I’ve chosen not to try and tackle it all. Of the three parts — ‘A Mystery to be Believed’ (theology), ‘A Mystery to be Celebrated’ (liturgy), and ‘A Mystery to be Lived’ (mission) — I intend to concentrate on the latter, the living-out of the Eucharist we believe and celebrate, with a few preliminaries from the middle section on the celebration. But, first, maybe the opening words. The opening words of any work are always telling; they set the scene and should get us listening. I think that they do:

1. The sacrament of charity, the Holy Eucharist, is the gift that Jesus Christ makes of Himself, thus revealing to us God's infinite love for every man and woman. This wondrous sacrament makes manifest that "greater" love which led Him to "lay down his life for his friends." Jesus did indeed love them "to the end." In those words the Evangelist introduces Christ's act of immense humility: before dying for us on the Cross, He tied a towel around himself and washed the feet of His disciples. In the same way, Jesus continues, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, to love us "to the end," even to offering us His body and His blood. What amazement must the Apostles have felt in witnessing what the Lord did and said during that Supper! What wonder must the Eucharistic mystery also awaken in our own hearts!

II / nn. 52–56 *Actuosa participatio*

Jumping now to about half-way through the document, we find Pope Benedict spending a good deal of time on how we participate fruitfully in the Mass. It's been a continual reminder ever since the Second Vatican Council — in many Church documents on the Eucharist — that we are not here to be passive spectators, but that we are to be fully engaged in the mystery being celebrated: *actuosa participatio* was the phrase used by the Council, which doesn't so much mean "active" participation in the sense of lots of individual activity (that would have been *activa participatio*), but a fully engaged participation, i.e.

knowing what is happening, being attentive to it, consciously and prayerfully. Here's what Pope Benedict says, as he re-iterates the Vatican-II teaching:

It should be made clear that the word "participation" does not refer to mere external activity during the celebration. In fact, the active participation called for by the Council must be understood in more substantial terms, on the basis of a greater awareness of the mystery being celebrated and its relationship to daily life. The conciliar Constitution ... encouraged the faithful to take part in the Eucharistic liturgy not "as strangers or silent spectators," but as participants "in the sacred action, conscious of what they are doing, actively and devoutly."... [They] "should be instructed by God's word, and nourished at the table of the Lord's Body. They should give thanks to God. Offering the immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, they should learn to make an offering of themselves." (n. 52)

And then he goes on to unpack this teaching more, this idea of our "self-offering," as he reminds us of some key features of how at Mass we can be better aware of the sacred mysteries, and more fruitful participants. He mentions, for example: "the spirit of constant conversion ... [not] approaching it superficially, without an examination of [one's] life ...; recollection and silence for at least a few moments before the beginning of the liturgy,

...; fasting and, when necessary, sacramental confession.
... [and an] effort to participate actively in the life of the Church as a whole, including a missionary commitment to bring Christ's love into the life of society” (n. 55). Lots of important practical points there! (e.g., arriving on time!)
And then, regarding Holy Communion, he says,

“Clearly, full participation in the Eucharist takes place when the faithful approach the altar in person to receive communion. Yet true as this is, care must be taken lest they conclude that the mere fact of their being present in church during the liturgy gives them a right or even an obligation to approach the table of the Eucharist” (n. 55).

Whilst not becoming over-scrupulous, then, we most certainly should take time to examine our life regularly in respect of the receiving of Holy Communion: how long is it since my last confession? / is there anything on my conscience that ought to be confessed before I receive the sacred body of my divine Lord Jesus in Communion next?

II / nn. 64–65. Interior participation

He stresses again the importance of ‘interior participation’:

The faithful [should] be helped to make their interior dispositions correspond to their gestures and words. Otherwise, however carefully planned and executed our liturgies may be, they would risk falling into a certain

ritualism. Hence the need to provide an education in Eucharistic faith capable of enabling the faithful to live personally what they celebrate. (n. 64)

How does that come about? Well, in fact, “the best catechesis on the Eucharist is the Eucharist, celebrated well.” If we are celebrating the Mass properly, then in fact it will speak volumes; Christ, whose pre-eminent presence in the world is here in the Mass, will be manifest in the way we, His people, pray it. Others will come to understand the truly beautiful mystery of Jesus in the Mass, when they see us celebrating it ... won’t they? Pope Benedict draws particular attention to *reverence*. His words are very powerful, as he advocates

an increased sense of the mystery of God present among us ... expressed in concrete outward signs of reverence for the Eucharist. ... I am thinking in general of the importance of gestures and posture, such as kneeling during the central moments of the Eucharistic Prayer. ... Everyone should be able to experience and express the awareness that at each celebration we stand before the infinite majesty of God, who comes to us in the lowliness of the sacramental signs. (n. 65)

III / nn. 70–79, 83. Eucharistic ‘form’ of Christian life

The third section of *Sacramentum Caritatis* allows Pope Benedict to reflect on how the Eucharist should shape our

whole life; it should also take us ‘out of church’ as it were, and into the world on mission. As Catholics, in fact, we should see the Mass as determining everything that we are; the Mass defines how we live our lives. For a start, how we “live in accordance with the Lord’s Day” is very important: Sunday, “this holy day ... is defined by something more than the simple suspension of one’s usual daily rhythm. Sunday is the day when Christians rediscover the Eucharistic form which their lives are meant to have” (n. 72). Two things flow from this keeping of Sunday as “the primordial holy day” — one is the *faithful attendance at Sunday Mass* every single week, an obligation of infinite value, and an expression of our deep love for Jesus’s sacrifice; and the other is the *rest from work* that we are also duty-bound to observe. This latter observance is worth thinking about. How do you keep Sunday? Do you drift back to studies after Sunday lunch? Or do you try to keep Sunday special? When I was at school, long ago, my parents forbade me to do homework on Sundays, so as to preserve our family day; and I carried

that practice over into my university life. Whilst that was counter-cultural to many students, as most of them used Saturday for recreation, and then Sunday it was back to work, I didn’t do that; and nor should you. I was lucky that I had a Catholic chaplaincy where many friends thought as I did that Sunday was *the Lord’s Day*. So, you too: make Sunday truly sanctified for Jesus, and for others, for leisure; and refrain from work as much as possible.

III / nn. 84–87. A Mystery to be Proclaimed

Finally, in this brief excursion through Pope Benedict’s many profound words on the Eucharist — which this homily can scarcely do justice to — we turn to his indications on ‘The Eucharist and Mission.’

“There is nothing more beautiful than to know [Jesus] and to speak to others of our friendship with Him.” These words are all the more significant if we think of the mystery of the Eucharist. The love that we celebrate in the sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all. 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.” ... The institution of the Eucharist ... anticipates the very heart of Jesus’s mission ... At the Last Supper, Jesus entrusts to His disciples

the sacrament which makes present His self-sacrifice for the salvation of us all, in obedience to the Father's will. 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. (n. 84)

We can, and must live this out, first of all by the way we welcome others to Mass here at Newman House, and indeed, in a consistent way, to any and every activity — liturgy, talk, dinner, social. We need to have what Pope Benedict calls a “Eucharistic consistency” (n. 83), i.e. living what we celebrate. The Mass is the great ‘welcome’ to us of Jesus’s holy presence; and we need to extend this mystery of loving presence to our brothers and sisters — Catholics, non-Catholics, non-Christians, anyone who comes here. For it is *here* — both ‘here’ in our welcome and therefore ‘here’ as we lead them gently to Jesus’s Eucharistic welcome — that we can together find the Lord, the Saviour of all. As Pope Benedict puts it:

The more ardent the love for the Eucharist in the hearts of the Christian people, the more clearly will they recognize the goal of all mission: *to bring Christ to others*. Not just a theory or a way of life inspired by Christ, but the gift of His very person. Anyone who has not shared the truth of love with his brothers and sisters has not yet given enough.(n.86)