

CATHOLIC CALENDAR.

A page devoted to local Catholic interests

May 23, 2003

Vol. 29, No. 10

Lake Charles, La.

Internet Address: <http://lcdioocese.org>

The Eucharist: The Life of the Church

(Second of three parts)

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The numbers that appear in parentheses at the end of various paragraphs in this column correspond to the numbered sections of the full document, "Ecclesia De Eucharistia," ("On the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church"). Those numbers have been included to assist the reader in locating the appropriate sections in the document for further reading. The entire document can be downloaded from the Diocese of Lake Charles web site - www.lcdioocese.org.)

Every year on Holy Thursday Pope John Paul II has written a special letter to the bishops and priests of the Catholic Church all over the world. This year, the 25th of his pontificate, the Holy Father has written a longer and more formal letter and addressed it to the entire Catholic world. It is on the subject of the Holy Eucharist, which was instituted by Christ on Holy Thursday at the Last Supper. The encyclical letter, "Ecclesia De Eucharistia," ("On the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church") is an important summary of Catholic beliefs about the living gift of divine love. The entire document is summed up in its opening sentence. "The church draws her life from the Eucharist."

I urge all priests, deacons, religious education coordinators and catechists to study this document carefully and to share its rich insights with the people they serve. The Holy Father's letter can be obtained from our diocesan web site - www.lcdioocese.org. In this column I wish to share with you some of the letter's key passages.

In part one I noted that Pope John Paul II began by stressing the need for us all to rekindle our sense of profound amazement over the great gift of the Eucharist. He also stressed that the Church draws her life from the "living bread" of the Eucharist and shared his personal amazement at celebrating Mass all over the world. The Holy Father reminded us that it is the risen Christ who is present in the Eucharist and that this presence is an awesome mystery and that because of this real presence, the Eucharist is a 'glimpse of heaven.'

Noting that he has often drawn strength from his time of prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, the Pope invites us to do the same.

"The worship of the Eucharist outside of the Mass is of inestimable value. This worship is strictly linked to the celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice. The presence of Christ under the sa-

cred species reserved after Mass derives from the celebration of the sacrifice and is directed towards communion, both sacramental and spiritual. It is the responsibility of pastors to encourage, also by their personal witness, the practice of eucharistic adoration, and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in particular, as well as prayer of adoration before Christ.

"It is pleasant to spend time with him, to lie close to his breast like the Beloved Disciple and to feel the infinite love present in his heart. In our time Christians must be distinguished above all by the "art of prayer," how can we not feel a renewed need to spend time in spiritual converse, in silent adoration, in heartfelt love before Christ present in the most holy sacrament? How often, dear brothers and sisters, have I experienced this, and drawn from it strength, consolation and support!" (#25)

The Encyclical summarizes the Church's belief about the unique ministry of priests in the Eucharist and answers some ecumenical questions about Protestants and Catholics sharing the Eucharist.

"The faithful join in the offering of the Eucharist by virtue of their royal priesthood, yet it is the ordained priest who, acting in the person of Christ, brings about the eucharistic sacrifice and offers it to God in the name of all the people. For this reason, the Roman Missal prescribes that only the priest should recite the Eucharistic Prayer, while the people participate in faith and in silence. (#28)

"The expression repeatedly employed by the Second Vatican Council, according to which "the ministerial priest, acting in the person of Christ, brings about the eucharistic sacrifice," was already firmly rooted in papal teaching. The phrase "in persona Christi" "means more than offering 'in the name of' or 'in the place of' Christ. 'In persona' means a specific sacramental identification with the eternal high priest who is the author and principal subject of this sacrifice of His, a sacrifice in which, in truth, no one can take His place." The ministry of priests who have received the sacrament of holy orders, in the economy of salvation chosen by Christ, makes clear that the Eucharist which they celebrate is a gift which radically transcends the power of the assembly and is, in any event, essential for validly linking the eucharistic consecration to the sacrifice of the cross and to the Last Supper.

"The assembly gathered together for the celebration of the Eucharist, if it is to be

a truly eucharistic assembly, absolutely requires the presence of an ordained priest as its president. On the other hand, the community is by itself incapable of providing an ordained minister. This minister is a gift which the assembly receives through episcopal succession going back to the apostles. It is the bishop who, through the sacrament of holy orders, makes a new presbyter (priest) by conferring upon him the power to consecrate the Eucharist. Consequently, "the eucharistic mystery cannot be celebrated in any community except by an ordained priest. (#29)



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"The Catholic Church's teaching on the relationship between priestly ministry and the Eucharist and her teaching on the eucharistic sacrifice have both been the subject in recent decades of a fruitful dialogue in the area of ecumenism. We must give thanks to the Blessed Trinity for the significant progress and convergence achieved in this regard, which lead us to hope one day for a full sharing of faith. Nonetheless, the observations of the council concerning the ecclesial communities which arose in the West from the 16th century onwards and are separated from the Catholic Church remain fully pertinent: "The ecclesial communities separated from us lack that fullness of unity with us which should flow from baptism, and we believe that especially, because of the lack of the sacrament of orders they have not preserved the genuine and total reality of the eucharistic mystery. Nevertheless, when they commemorate the Lord's death and resurrection in the holy supper, they profess that it signifies life in communion with Christ and they await his coming in glory.

"The Catholic faithful, therefore, while respecting the religious convictions of Christians of other traditions, must refrain from receiving the communion distributed in their celebrations, so as not to condone an ambiguity about the nature of the Eucharist. This would result in slowing the progress being made towards full visible unity. Similarly, it is unthinkable to substitute for Sunday Mass ecumenical celebrations of the word or services of common prayer with Christians from the aforementioned ecclesial communities, or even

participation in their own liturgical services. Such celebrations and services, however praiseworthy in certain situations, prepare for the goal of full communion, including eucharistic communion, but they cannot replace it.

"The fact that the power of consecrating the Eucharist has been entrusted only to bishops and priests does not represent any kind of belittlement of the rest of the people of God, for in the communion of the one body of Christ which is the church, this gift redounds to the benefit of all." (#30)

His Holiness expresses a great concern for those communities, like our own in the Diocese of Lake Charles, that do not have a sufficient number of priests. He recognizes that a growing number of parishes are not able to experience the celebration of mass every Sunday. This should cause us to strengthen our efforts to nurture vocations to the priesthood.

"The centrality of the Eucharist in the life and ministry of priests is the basis of its centrality in the pastoral promotion of priestly vocations. It is in the Eucharist that prayer for vocations is most closely united to the prayer of Christ the eternal high priest. At the same time the diligence of priests in carrying out their eucharistic ministry, together with the conscious, active and fruitful participation of the faithful in the Eucharist, provides young men with a powerful example and incentive for responding generously to God's call. Often it is the example of a priest's fervent pastoral charity which the Lord uses to sow and to bring to fruition in a young man's heart the seed of a priestly calling. (#31)

"All of this shows how distressing and irregular is the situation of a Christian community which, despite having sufficient numbers and variety of faithful to form a parish, does not have a priest to lead it. Parishes are communities of the baptized who express and affirm their identity above all through the celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice. But this requires the presence of a presbyter, who alone is qualified to offer the Eucharist "in persona Christi." When a community lacks a priest, attempts are rightly made somehow to remedy the situation so that it can continue its Sunday celebrations, and those religious and laity who lead their brothers and sisters in prayer exercise in a praiseworthy way the common priesthood of all the faithful based on the grace of baptism. But such solutions must be considered merely temporary, while the community awaits a priest.

"The sacramental incom-

pleteness of these celebrations should above all inspire the whole community to pray with greater fervor that the Lord will send laborers into his harvest (cf. Mt 9:38). It should also be an incentive to mobilize all the resources needed for an adequate pastoral promotion of vocations, without yielding to the temptation to seek solutions which lower the moral and formative standards demanded of candidates for the priesthood. (#32)

"When, due to the scarcity of priests, nonordained members of the faithful are entrusted with a share in the pastoral care of a parish, they should bear in mind that — as the Second Vatican Council teaches — "no Christian community can be built up unless it has its basis and center in the celebration of the most holy Eucharist." They have a responsibility, therefore, to keep alive in the community a genuine "hunger" for the Eucharist, so that no opportunity for the celebration of Mass will ever be missed." (#33)

The Papal Letter gives serious consideration to the question of 'visible' and 'invisible' unity in the communion of the Church. And in this context the letter recalls the Catholic teaching that those who know that they are in the state of grave sin should not receive the Eucharist without first participating in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

"The celebration of the Eucharist, however, cannot be the starting-point for communion; it presupposes that communion already exists, a communion which it seeks to consolidate and bring to perfection. The sacrament is an expression of this bond of communion both in its *invisible* dimension, which, in Christ and through the working of the Holy Spirit, unites us to the Father and among ourselves, and in its visible dimension, which entails communion in the teaching of the apostles, in the sacraments and in the church's hierarchical order. The profound relationship between the invisible and the visible elements of ecclesial communion is constitutive of the church as the sacrament of salvation. Only in this context can there be a legitimate celebration of the Eucharist and true participation in it. Consequently it is an intrinsic requirement of the Eucharist that it should be celebrated in communion, and specifically maintaining the various bonds of that communion intact. (#35)

"Invisible communion, though by its nature always growing, presupposes the life of grace, by which we become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pt 1:4), and

the practice of the virtues of faith, hope and love. Only in this way do we have true communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Nor is faith sufficient; we must persevere in sanctifying grace and love, remaining within the church "bodily" as well as "in our heart"; what is required, in the words of St. Paul, is 'faith working through love' (Gal 5:6).

"Keeping these invisible bonds intact is a specific moral duty incumbent upon Christians who wish to participate fully in the Eucharist by receiving the body and blood of Christ. The apostle Paul appeals to this duty when he warns: "Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor 11:28). *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* rightly stipulates that "anyone conscious of a grave sin must receive the sacrament of reconciliation before coming to communion." I therefore desire to reaffirm that in the church there remains in force, now and in the future, the rule by which the Council of Trent gave concrete expression to the apostle Paul's stern warning when it affirmed that, in order to receive the Eucharist in a worthy manner, 'one must first confess one's sins, when one is aware of mortal sin.' (#36)

"The two sacraments of the Eucharist and penance are very closely connected. Because the Eucharist makes present the redeeming sacrifice of the cross, perpetuating it sacramentally, it naturally gives rise to a continuous need for conversion, for a personal response to the appeal made by St. Paul to the Christians of Corinth: "We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5:20). If a Christian's conscience is burdened by serious sin, then the path of penance through the sacrament of reconciliation becomes necessary for full participation in the eucharistic sacrifice.

"The judgment of one's state of grace obviously belongs only to the person involved, since it is a question of examining one's conscience. However, in cases of outward conduct which is seriously, clearly and steadfastly contrary to the moral norm, the church, in her pastoral concern for the good order of the community and out of respect for the sacrament, cannot fail to feel directly involved. The Code of Canon Law refers to this situation of a manifest lack of proper moral disposition when it states that those who "obstinately persist in manifest grave sin" are not to be admitted to eucharistic communion." (#37)

(To be continued)

Sixth Sunday of Easter

Jesus said to his disciples, "As the Father loves me, so I also love you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. This is my commandment: love one another as I love you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father. It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit that will remain, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name he may give you. This I command you: love one another." *John 15: 9-17*

AIDS legislation passed

WASHINGTON - Bishop John Ricard, chairman of the Committee on International Policy, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), said congressional approval of the AIDS legislation will help fight the scourge of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria in developing nations, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa.

"Authorization of the \$15 billion called for in President Bush's global health initiative is a major step to-

ward substantially increasing our national commitment to confronting this pandemic, thus offering new hope to millions of people around the world," said Bishop Ricard.

"The Catholic community, with many others, has long worked for this new commitment on global health and debt relief," Bishop Ricard stated. "I hope that Congress will now appropriate the money needed to make this legislation a reality."



Vocation retreat set June 12-14

PINEVILLE - A vocation retreat, jointly sponsored by the Dioceses of Alexandria, Baton Rouge and Lake Charles, will be held June 12-14 at Maryhill Retreat House.

Intended for young men, 16 to 25 years old, who are discerning God's will in their lives, the retreat invites participants to look at their spiritual journey in light of the Lord Jesus' call to a life of personal holiness.

The weekend will help a young man to reflect on and judge how best to respond to God's call to the priesthood.

Bishops and Vocations Directors will be in attendance at the retreat, which will be staffed by seminarians and laity from the sponsoring dioceses.

For more information contact your church pastor or call the Vocation Office at 439-7426, Ext. 17.