



The Eucharist: Disciples and Adorers throughout the Centuries (Mary's Role in our Living a Eucharistic Life)

Sunday, June 19, 2022

The Eucharist, the Priesthood, and Mary the
Mother of Priests

Today we celebrate self-giving. On this Solemnity of Corpus Christi, we honor Jesus' gift of Himself in the Eucharist. On this Fathers' Day we honor our dads, who give of themselves to care for us; by extension we remember our Heavenly Father, who gives us our very being, and priests—our spiritual fathers—who give of themselves for our salvation and sanctification. During this novena we turn to Our Lady, who gives herself to God and gives herself as a mother to us.

God the Father gives us many gifts, including the Eucharist, Our Lady, and the priesthood. These three mysteries all involve someone's total gift of self for the glory of God and the salvation of the world. This evening we will consider the theme of self-giving in the Eucharist, the life of Mary, and the priesthood. We will look first at some saints, then at vocation and virtue, and finally at our response to these great gifts.

Among the saints are many priests devoted to the Eucharist and to Our Lady. For the last 2,000 years God has called men to share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Some of them have shown great appreciation for the Holy Eucharist, our Blessed Mother, or both in their conduct, homilies, or writings. From apostles to Church Fathers, from monks and friars to parish priests to popes, priests have become saints with the help of the Eucharist and Our Lady.

Saint John, apostle and evangelist, had great devotion to the Eucharist and Mary. In the Gospel he describes his eyewitness accounts of Mary's intercession at Cana, of the Last Supper, and of the Crucifixion of Jesus (cf. John 2:1-11; 13-17; 19:25-7). Saint John witnessed the radical self-giving of Jesus in the institution of the Eucharist and also at Calvary, where Jesus gave John and Mary to one another's care. In the Gospel Saint John records Jesus' high priestly prayer at the Last Supper. This prayer describes the mutual abiding of God the Father and God the Son. It expresses Jesus' desire that his disciples enter into that dynamic of self-giving. In his letters Saint John repeatedly reminds Christians of God's self-giving love, exhorting us to love God and one another (cf. 1 Jn 3:1-3; 4:7-21).

Saint Paul the apostle evangelized Christian communities in the early Church, teaching them liturgical prayers and hymns. To the Corinthians he recounted the institution of the Eucharist, which is still a pattern for the priest's prayer at Mass: "The Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'" (cf. 1 Cor. 11:23-26). Saint Paul also wrote to the Philippians, describing the self-giving of Jesus in the Incarnation and Crucifixion. These words were probably used as a liturgical hymn. "Christ Jesus [...] emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness. [...] He humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross" (cf. Phil. 2:5b-8).

In the 100s St. Irenaeus taught about the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist in defense against gnostic heretics. He said that our reception of Holy Communion prepares our bodies for resurrection. He also described Mary as the New Eve, highlighting her faith and obedience (Aquilina 82-8). In the 300s St. Athanasius taught about Jesus' divinity in defense against the heretical priest Arius. St. Athanasius described Jesus as "consubstantial with the Father" and explained that we worship the Incarnate Word of God in the Eucharist. He assisted at the Council of Nicea in 325, which produced part of the Creed we still recite every Sunday (Aquilina 119-25).



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In the late 300s St. Jerome wrote about the perpetual virginity of Mary in response to some false counter-ideas. His thorough explanation contributed a good foundation to further understanding of Our Lady (Aquilina 166-75). Also in the 300s, St. Cyril of Jerusalem affirmed that the bread and wine at Mass truly become the Body and Blood of Christ; that we come to bear Christ in us; and as St. Peter writes in his second letter, we become partakers of the divine nature (cf. 2 Pt. 1:4) (Aquilina 147-51). About 900 years later, St. Cyril's writings influenced St. Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican priest, who wrote Eucharistic hymns (Marthaler, Vol. 14 p. 28). We sang one of these today at Mass as the sequence for Corpus Christi.

A few other religious priests contributed to Marian devotion in the 1200s. Saint Dominic founded the Order of Preachers; he received the rosary from Mary as a means to meditate on the life of Jesus (Marthaler, Vol. 4 p. 828). Saint Simon Stock became superior of the Carmelite Order; he received the brown scapular from Our Lady as an expression of her spiritual protection (Marthaler, Vol. 13 p.134). Blessed Duns Scotus was a Franciscan priest; he became well-known by explaining and defending the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Before then, this mystery was not so clearly articulated (Marthaler, Vol. 4 p.939).

In the 1700s St. Louis de Montfort explained a method of devotion to Mary as a means of more securely giving oneself to Jesus Christ; this consecration is known as "True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary". It is intended to help Christians live their baptismal commitment by avoiding sin with the help of Mary. Saint Louis taught, "This devotion makes us give Jesus and Mary all our thoughts, words, actions, and sufferings and every moment of our lives without exception" (de Montfort, 136).

In the 1800s St. John Vianney, now patron saint of priests, celebrated Mass with a fervor and recollection that inspired those in the congregation (Trochu 322). Also in the 1800s, St. Peter Julian Eymard founded the Blessed Sacrament Fathers, who dedicate their lives to adoring our Eucharistic Lord and preparing people for Holy Communion (Pelletier 64-8).

In the early 1900s Pope St. Pius X highlighted the priesthood, Marian devotion, and the Eucharist in his writings and exhortations. He recommended more frequent Holy Communion, which was uncommon at the time, and lowered the age of first Holy Communion to include children who had reached the age of reason (Marthaler, Vol. 11 p. 390).

Also in the 1900s St. Maximilian Kolbe, a Franciscan priest, started the Militia Immaculata. He hoped to bring about the reign of Jesus in the world through a Marian spiritual army who would be filled with zeal for souls. He recommended, "Let us implore [the Immaculata] to prepare in our soul the most pleasant welcome possible for Jesus in Holy Communion" (Di Piazza 2102).

In the late 1900s Pope St. John Paul II dedicated his pontificate to Mary. Jason Evert wrote a biography entitled "Saint John Paul the Great: His Five Loves". Two of St. John Paul's five greatest loves are the Eucharist and the Blessed Virgin Mary. Evert wrote: "[Pope John Paul] said 'For me, the Mass constitutes the center of my life and my every day.' John Paul didn't merely offer the Mass. He lived it. Like the Eucharist itself, he became an immolation of love—a living sacrifice offered to the Father for the salvation of mankind" (128). In any century, the vocation to priesthood is one of self-giving. Priests find strength for this in the Eucharist and in Mary's companionship.

The vocation of Mary and the vocation of priests have some striking parallels. Her vocation as mother of Jesus, the Eternal High Priest, extends to include more sons: she is also mother of men who share in Jesus' priesthood. Scripture recounts key moments Mary shared with Jesus. Our Lady shows priests how to receive Jesus' total gift of self and how to give themselves fully in response. Mary was present at the first and last moments of Jesus' life on earth—the Annunciation and the Crucifixion (cf. Luke 1:26-38; John 19:16b-37). Mary experienced firsthand Jesus' total self-emptying in becoming man—as an embryo—and again his total self-emptying in dying on a cross. In the liturgy of the Eucharist the priest shares mystically in these mysteries.



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Let's look at some parallels in the vocation of Mary and the vocation of priests. Picture these two scenes side by side: Mary at the Annunciation and a priest at the altar during Mass. At the Annunciation, the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary and she conceived Jesus. During Mass, at the prayer of the priest, the Holy Spirit comes down upon the bread and wine, which are changed into Jesus. The Blessed Virgin Mary obeyed the Father with her "fiat"; God the Son obeyed the Father by descending to earth; and the Incarnation took place. The priest obeys God and the Church by praying the words handed down in the liturgy; God the Son obeys the Father by descending to earth; and transubstantiation takes place. Mary willingly placed her life at the service of God; and Jesus, an eternal Divine Person, came among us so small, so humble, entrusting Himself to human care. A priest willingly places his life at the service of God; and Jesus, an eternal Divine Person, again comes among us so small, so humble, entrusting Himself to human care.

Now picture these two scenes: Mary at the Crucifixion and a priest at the altar during Mass. At Calvary, Mary stood by the Cross of Jesus as He offered Himself to the Eternal Father for the salvation of the world. At the altar, the priest stands mystically at the foot of the cross, as the Eucharistic Jesus offers Himself to the Eternal Father for the salvation of the world. At Calvary, to all outward appearances Jesus was weak and helpless: his omnipotence was made immobile; all his glory was concealed. On the altar, to all outward appearances Jesus is weak and helpless: his omnipotence is made immobile; all his glory is concealed. Mary stood beside Jesus in his humble condition, full of faith; she offered Him to the Heavenly Father and joined her "fiat" with that of Jesus. The priest stands before Jesus in his humble eucharistic condition, full of faith; he offers Jesus to the Heavenly Father and joins his "fiat" with that of Jesus.

These mysteries of the Incarnation, the Crucifixion, and the Eucharist involve self-gift, radical love, and self-emptying that brings forth life. Our Eucharistic Lord and Mary model total self-giving for the priest—and for all of us. The Second Vatican Council teaches that priests "are invited to imitate what they handle [at the altar...]. [W]hen priests unite themselves with the act of Christ the Priest they daily offer themselves completely to God" (Presbyterorum Ordinis n. 13).

Our eucharistic Lord provides priests with a pattern of virtue. Jesus is the perfect image of God the Father, who is always giving (cf. Col. 1:12-15). As Eternal High Priest, Jesus models the qualities that priests need to be good spiritual fathers. In the Eucharist Jesus reveals some qualities of God the Father, such as totality, simplicity, generosity, availability, approachability, gentleness, patience, forbearance, and constancy. These virtues are also discernable in the life of Mary. They offer priests—and all of us—a beautiful invitation. Everything Our Lord is, everything He does, is all about self-giving.

Jesus radiates totality, simplicity, and generosity in the Eucharist. Behind the sacramental veil are a fullness of presence and self-giving, a hidden depth and wealth of treasure. This reveals something of God the Father: eternally He gives Himself fully to the Son; in time He gives his Son totally to us and for us.

Mary also manifests totality, simplicity, and generosity. She has given herself entirely to the Lord. She is abundantly full of grace, and only God can completely understand the capacity of her heart; only God can appreciate the beauty of her soul. Priests are called to totality, simplicity, and generosity as well: they give themselves wholly to Our Lord and his Church. At their ordination Mass, priests lie prostrate on the ground as an expression of total self-giving to God; after the consecration of the new priests' hands, the bishop places a chalice in those hands and says, "Understand what you do, imitate what you celebrate, and conform your life to the mystery of the Lord's cross."

Jesus is available, approachable, and gentle in the Eucharist. He abides in tabernacles all over the world, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. He is always available to anyone who wants to visit Him. Where there are sufficient priests, Jesus is available for Holy Communion daily in the context of Mass and outside of Mass for the sick. He makes Himself so small to allay our fear of approaching Him; there is nothing spectacular or sensational about his eucharistic presence. These qualities reveal something of God the Father, who is infinitely powerful and all-knowing, whose greatness is beyond our comprehension; yet with gentle compassion He conceals his magnitude so we can trustingly approach Him as our Father.



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Mary also shares in these qualities of availability, approachability, and gentleness. In her earthly life she was always available to the Lord, and in heaven she awaits our prayers, ever ready to gently guide and assist us. Priests are called to be available to God and to the Church, approachable and Christlike in their ministry.

Jesus displays tremendous patience, forbearance, and constancy in the Eucharist. Throughout the centuries and in various cultural contexts He has encountered all sorts of human responses: faith and disbelief, attentiveness and indifference, fervor and laxity, reverence and sacrilege. He shows invincible patience in bearing with poor human responses to his eucharistic presence. He gives Himself fully in Holy Communion with inexhaustible graces capable of sanctifying any human heart. These qualities reveal something of God the Father: throughout salvation history God has borne very patiently with his people, never forsaking them because of their inconstancy or sinfulness.

Mary is also patient, forbearing, and constant. In her earthly life she had to deal with challenging people and situations, with hardships and inconveniences. With patience, forbearance, and constancy, our Blessed Mother responded graciously to situations beyond her control. Priests are called to be patient, forbearing, and constant as well, whether they face misunderstanding, persecution, or the crosses in daily life; these virtues will help them graciously accept whatever and whomever God sends them.

We, too, are designed for self-giving. Jesus in the Eucharist, Mary, and priests all model for us a reciprocal self-giving relationship with God the Father. Like them, we have received all we are and all we have from God the Father; every moment our Heavenly Father invites us to respond by giving ourselves wholeheartedly back to Him. Benedictine Father Mark O’Keefe, a seminary rector, writes about this:

“We are created in the image of a God who is love. We are created in the image of a God who is self-giving, who is self-offering, who is self-bestowing. [...] Created in the image of such a God, our perfection is realized in self-giving, in self-bestowing like his. This is our nature—and this is our destiny—to share in the outpouring of love in the very heart of God” (10-11).

Our priests help us give ourselves totally to God, especially in the context of Eucharistic worship and Holy Communion. The Second Vatican Council teaches about the role of the priest:

Through the ministry of priests the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is completed in union with the sacrifice of Christ the only mediator, which in the Eucharist is offered through the priests’ hands in the name of the whole Church in an unbloody and sacramental manner [...]. [P]riests teach the faithful to offer the divine victim to God the Father in the sacrifice of the Mass and with the victim to make an offering of their whole life (Presbyterorum Ordinis n. 2, 5).

In the Liturgy of the Hours for Corpus Christi today, the Church gives us two prayers of intercession related to this theme. At Evening Prayer we pray for priests: “Christ, eternal priest of the Most High, you have commanded your priests to offer your sacraments[;] may they help them to exemplify in their lives the meaning of the sacred mysteries which they celebrate” (603). At Morning Prayer we pray to Jesus for all the faithful: “Priest of the new and eternal covenant, you offered perfect sacrifice to the Father on the altar of the cross[;] teach us to offer ourselves with you” (615).

A priest is one who offers sacrifice. The sacrament of Holy Orders confers the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood on men called by God; these men share in the priesthood of Jesus the High Priest, able to act in the person of Christ the Head. The Second Vatican Council clarifies that all Christians share in the common priesthood of the baptized. We do not act in the same manner as an ordained priest, yet by virtue of our baptism, we are consecrated to God and enabled to offer sacrifice with Jesus (Lumen Gentium, 10). At every Mass the priest celebrant addresses the congregation, saying, “Pray, brethren, that my sacrifice and yours may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father.” Centuries ago, Saint Paul wrote to the early Christians in Rome, saying, “Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (cf. Romans 12:1).



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Pope St. John Paul described the Eucharistic sacrifice as a gift from God to man and from man to God. In honor of his 50th anniversary after priestly ordination, he wrote a reflection called “Gift and Mystery”. In it he said, “In the Eucharist Christ gives back to the Father everything that has come from him. [...] Man needs to honor his Creator by offering to him, in an act of thanksgiving and praise, all that he has received.” (74-75). We do this at Mass, but we can also offer ourselves to God throughout the day.

Let us look to Jesus in the Eucharist and to Mary for help in offering ourselves totally to God the Father with thanksgiving and praise. Let us remember to pray for our priests, that they will faithfully offer the gift of themselves to God and to the Church. Let us be intentional about our self-giving to God and others in the context of our vocations. We can offer ourselves to God at Mass and also throughout the day. As a closing prayer, we will pray the Morning Offering, which can be renewed any time of day:

O Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer you my prayers, works, joys and sufferings of this day, in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world. I offer them for all the intentions of your Sacred Heart: the salvation of souls, reparation for sin, the reunion of all Christians. I offer them for all the intentions of our bishops, of all apostles of prayer, and in particular for those recommended by our Holy Father. Amen.

Mary, Mother of the Eucharist and Mother of Priests, pray for us.



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