

**The Church makes the Eucharist
and the Eucharist makes the Church**

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Bishops, Pastors, Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

It is with a mixture of awe and gratitude that I take the floor at this important ecclesial gathering. What indeed can a simple Catholic priest from Milan—whose English pronunciation not particularly refined—contribute to your story of faith in this country? How may I care for and nourish your desire to accompany the growth of a Christian community in Finland, today in the twenty-first century? As always on such occasions, I remember the hundredfold that the Lord promised to his disciples: now, too, I have the wonderful and undeserved grace of discovering new brothers and sisters, and an abundance of houses. So, on his word, I will try to cast the nets and some reflections. I thank you in advance for your attention and even more your friendly and kind presence.

I bring you the greetings and apologies of his Excellency Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, President of the Pontifical Academy for Life. He should have been here on this stage today, but yesterday the Bishops of San Salvador arrived at Rome and with him they opened the last step of the canonization of Martyr Bishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero, killed during the Holy Mass. He heartily thanks you for your invitation and assures us of his prayers.

To begin: A story

How does Sunday Mass build up the Christian community? This subject is vast, and it has been thoroughly discussed and analyzed from many sides. So, rather than presenting an organic synthesis of the different questions, I would like to share with you some ideas that I consider particularly urgent in today's situation. They have to do with the two central points expressed in a statement of my former theology professor: "The Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church."

So, as a good European postmodernist, I will begin by telling you a personal story, that is eloquent because it is so ordinary. I work in a Vatican office, but I live and I serve in a parish in the suburbs of Rome. Every Sunday morning, around 9:35, I come into the churchyard and enjoy seeing the faithful arriving for the 10 a.m. Mass: I greet the elderly who slowly come early to find their

favorite seats; I see a father holding the hand of his little son, who proudly holds in the book that he will color during the celebration; I cross the tense look of a mother; I smile to see the kids in their early teens walking twenty meters from their parents because they are big now; I meet the singers, the musicians, and the altar boys, proud of their service; I welcome, a bit dejected, perennial late-comers (in Rome, there are people who always come late!), and it amuses me to see even those stay at a distance, never coming in yet, surprisingly, present. That's what Sunday Mass does: this is the spectacle that appears week after week! And I am consoled.

The reasons why all these people, who are so different, gather—in fact, now in very small numbers compared to only fifty years ago; at least in the big Italian cities, where the rate is about ten percent of the baptized—, the reasons bring them together to celebrate Mass, to “make the Eucharist”, are very diverse, and sociologists could go mad trying to articulate their analyses. Here, however, I prefer to focus on what the Eucharist does for these people, on what happens to the community gathered for this encounter. I would like to propose three answers to you.

Jesus' Passover is at the Center

Each week, Sunday Mass continuously puts Jesus' Passover back into the center of the life of a community and of all its members. That's all! There is no idea, no system of values, no tradition or ethical ideal. No, the Eucharist, with its memorial dimension, makes us think back, brings us together, focuses on the paschal mystery, a historical fact, that has made history, and that, today, is shaping our history. The Eucharist puts Jesus, in his greatest and most stable act, into the center of a community.

And not only that. The fact that the content of Jesus' Passover, his death and resurrection, is a free and unmerited gift, that we could perhaps never have imagined, tells us that the Eucharist builds the Christian community around an act of gratuitous love, that cannot be bought, earned, or possessed. In an epoch in which the commercial logic pervades not only society but also structures the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and even those of self-perception, the Eucharist stands as a revolutionary event, as a powerful fracture, for what brings us together and unites us is gratuitous love.

In our contemporary Europe, the issues of identity and belonging—perhaps too easily abandoned in recent decades—are becoming fashionable again. The fruitful reception of these tendencies depends on the care for content capable of expressing again a people's identity and forging ties. Sunday Mass reminds us that our identity is that of the sons of God, of men and women who are loved and love in total gratuitousness, and that our membership is generated, preserved, and nurtured

by the cross of Jesus, and not by any act of power or affirmation. Christians are in the world to love and serve it, not to conquer it; we do not accept the structures of evil that traverse history and our hearts; we never collude with them, but, faithful to the Master who has loved us, we love the sinners, we care for their wounds, even to the point of giving our lives for them. I believe that many discourses about the Christian identity, made in Europe today, have little to do with Sunday Mass.

Life's Rhythm

The second thing that the Eucharist does, in the faithful and in the community, is this: it gives a rhythm to time and life with the memory of the Passover of Jesus. Celebrating the Eucharist together every Sunday means allowing the paschal mystery to shape and structure to our time and to our lives, and consequently to give them sense and depth. The time of work and the time of celebration do not alternate, as they often are today, in a frantic search of time for ourselves; but rather they are sewn together, one is poured into the other, and they can give one another meaning. The Christian community gathers around the Eucharist each Sunday in a specific place, where we celebrate the bond between ordinary life and feasts, between life and death, between man and God. And it does this by playing on the dual temporality of memory that opens up the future. This is why it is so sad to see Christian communities locking themselves up in the Sunday practice as if they were besieged in a fort, celebrating with the greatest devotion the glorious past that is forever gone. How pitiful are those Christians who think they change history just by forcefully deploying their own program, without keeping the continuous memory of the only event that brings salvation!

The practice of the weekly Eucharistic celebration shapes our daily lives, grounding them in a story that saves and offers a future full of hope. This is a reflection that I have been developing over time because it does not show its fruits in the short term, and perhaps not even in the medium term. Yet, just think of the strength given to the Christian community by that weekly gathering around the Eucharist in the course of the years, the centuries, and the millennia. For almost two thousand years now, our time in the West has been punctuated by the commemoration of the Lord's day. For my entire life, I have been going—just as we all do—to Holy Mass every Sunday. What a wealth of faces, of words, of gestures! It is a gradual, imperceptible layering of wealth. In the current season, marked by incredible and often unbearable velocity, the Eucharist is working according to the fruitful and structuring logic of the *longue durée* that Fernand Braudel has spoken about.

A Shared Responsibility

Fortunately, sooner or later, depending on the loquacity of the preacher, the Mass ends—and this is a blessing for the community because life is not lived in a Church or in the local parish, despite all the initiatives and activities. The Transfiguration narrative, read every year during Lent in the Roman liturgy, reminds us that each moment of intimacy with the Lord ends with the descent from the mountain, in his company, and the return to one's daily activities. The Eucharist, by offering us the paschal mystery in the form of a proclamation of a new life to be diffused in the world, gives the community a meaning, an objective, and a mission.

Today, many Christian communities are tired and disappointed, because they are entirely engaged in trying—often in vain—to keep up a practice, a tradition, or even a service, forgetting that the task that Jesus himself entrusted to the disciples is to proclaim the Good News of Easter.

The Eucharist founds and builds the Christian community, constantly bringing it back to its specific task, to the mission entrusted to it; the Eucharist frees us from old stuff and nostalgia, and it obliges us to constantly check and purify our projects. The presence of Jesus, explaining the scriptures and revealing himself fully in the breaking of bread, is what—according to the testimony of the two disciples of Emmaus—inflamed their hearts, regenerated a passion, and motivated their return to Jerusalem, the city that has crucified their Master, a place that should not be fled but inhabited, so that the proclamation of the Kingdom may not cease.

I think this offers a purpose on which to spend one's life is particularly pertinent when it comes to the young, who are so full of many things today but lack reasons and ideals for which to use them and for which to live. Why should a young person today actively attend a Christian community, where the social bonds that often constituted Church membership no longer exist? *“Come see the incredible spectacle of a man who dies out of love; spend your whole life telling your friends about him!”* This could not be, in essence, the logic of every youth ministry?

At this point I would try to turn the question around and offer three possible ways in which the Eucharistic celebration could show its ecclesial effectiveness: in fact, the Eucharist makes the Church, if the Church makes the Eucharist. I will use some examples from my experience, leaving up to you to see to what extent they might be useful for revisiting your own experience.

The Way of The Faces

The great risk of a popular church is losing people's faces, names, and stories. We should be troubled by the considerable anonymity that often marks our Eucharistic communities (at least in Italy, especially in the big cities). The biographical data, the precious attention to the uniqueness of every man and every woman that we rightly gained in so many fields of human life can, then, not be ignored in the Church assembly. God calls His children by name; He knows each one individually since the womb. Now, what about us? Can we be gathered for the Lord's Supper without knowing each other's names?

The Finnish poetess Eeva Kinpi writes:

*We should say to one another,
Not, sorry, I bumped into you,
But, thank you, for touching me.*

I believe that the success of many small ecclesial groups—but also of sectarian rifts—comes precisely from the fact that the other is recognized for what he or she is, through the attentive reception of personal stories, and with closeness characterized by true friendship.

Even before the due attention to the ministerial plurality and its manifestation in the liturgy (with efforts made so that everyone has a recognized role to play in the celebration), I think it necessary to preserve and appreciate the precious uniqueness of each person.

The reception before the celebration and the greeting at the end, the possibility of spontaneous prayers of intercession for people and concrete situations, and not just for large general issues, the attention to different charisms in the course of a year, are just some examples of ways to let the true face of the community members appear.

I was recently in Nigeria, and during Sunday Mass I was struck by a gesture after Communion: those who wanted a special blessing, for an anniversary or a difficult situation, lined up in front of the celebrant; they received his blessing, with special individual attention, while the community participated by singing (they're Africans!). Why should we not recall, during Sunday Mass, the birthdays of the week? We, in Italy, really have a need for this kind of thing!

Please, allow me at this point to present a small reflection on the presence of children at Mass: this one of the issues on which I have been working in recent years. Even the youngest, like every other participant, must be personally welcomed in the community that celebrates the Eucharist and, precisely because of their particular condition, they require special attention.

A personal remembrance will serve to illustrate this: When I was a child, several related families used to gather for Christmas dinner. Now, for various reasons, two tables were prepared: one for the adults and the other for the children. When I was about 11-12 years old, I began to tremble because I could no longer endure having to sit at the children's table. Just imagine the Christmas when I was finally admitted at the table of the adults: the food was not great, time went by very slowly, and the conversation totally boring, but I was, at last, big too!

The Eucharist is the banquet for adult disciples; it is for grownups! This, however, does not mean that children are excluded; but they need to be accompanied and gradually introduced into this gesture. I was very impressed by the practice in your parishes of allowing children to receive communion only if they are with their parents until the celebration in adolescence that somehow indicates that they have grown up and can participate by themselves in the Lord's Supper. Dedicating Holy Mass on Sunday's specifically to children is very popular in Italy: on the one hand, it allows a special focus on children in terms of language and direct involvement (in the 1970s, the Italian Bishops' Conference even composed a Rite for Masses with children). Yet, this often breaks the unity of the family that has come together to Holy Mass, and it is even likely to give the impression that Mass is something for children, like other parish activities and catechesis. In Italy, we are living the drama of an initiatory process that is a complete failure, despite the investment exorbitant of human and material resources. We must help the youngest to understand that Holy Mass is the table for the adults, that is the most desirable event for a growing child and not something for children! Having said that, they must be welcomed and receive attention, along with attempts to involve them in some services, through the composition of songs and lyrics adapted for them, but without losing sight of the initiatory aim.

The Way of the Bread

In recent years, despite the many texts written on catechesis for children and my philosophical studies, I have become famous for publishing a few cookbooks devoted to the Bible and to Church history. What started as a joke has actually turned out to be a great opportunity for exploring the

theme of food in the Bible and, in particular, in the Gospel—because Jesus made many gestures and said important words precisely during meals.

The ritualization of the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist certainly has kept in its form the reference to the meal, but, by reducing it to its simplest expression, it has made the meal practically unreal. I do not know what kind of hosts you use, but I would never put such tasteless wafers—these colorless unleavened waffles, that resemble pieces of tissue paper, and that we use as bread for Holy Mass! —on my table at home. Not to mention the problem (because, in my opinion, it really is a problem!) that we Catholics have, now more for practical than theological reasons, of the communion of the faithful with bread alone and not with wine. Our Masses, often are only called “Supper.” Yet, recovering the convivial dimension would give not just a little vitality to the celebration of the rite.

Above all the food, the bread and the wine, express and give concreteness, unsurpassed materiality, ineluctable historicity. The Eucharist—I’m sorry to say this—is *not* the bread of angels, but food for people made of flesh and bones; it recalls the experience of hunger and thirst; it belongs to the sphere of desires and passions (as the dialogue of Jesus with the Samaritan woman and the discourse on the Bread of Life in John 6 teach us). A meal where delicious unleavened bread is broken and good wine shared (How could we be stingy with the wine after Jesus’ miracle at Cana of Galilee?) would, in my view, speak more significantly to people today.

Secondly, the table implies attention and interest for table-fellows. We never welcome a guest who enters our house to a sloppy and messy table, and all of us have a nice set of dinnerware in our kitchen for feast days. The care for the places and signs, their concrete recovery against foolish symbolic reduction, the wise direction that does not weigh down the ritual of the celebration but allows everyone to feel welcome and respected, are valuable tools.

Finally, many things are learned at the table:

1. a person discovers that there is always someone who cares for him or her, and does the cooking several times a day (where does a child discover that the family is *par excellence* the place of stable and reliable emotional relationships?);
2. the table is a place of traditional gestures, language, and flavors that tell stories (in this respect, the narration of God’s work of liberation to Jewish children during the Seder, the Passover meal, is emblematic) and transmit traditions and wisdom;
3. there, a person learns that he or she has a special place and that all sit around the same table, each with his or her own distinctiveness and responsibilities (Is this not the meaning of the different liturgical ministries and of the symbolic references that characterize each one?).

Please, forgive me for speaking at length about the details, but I really do believe that Jesus' decision to connect his memorial to a "gastronomic" gesture offers, today more than ever, no small number of symbolic overtones that can and should be more fully exploited.

The Way of Sunday

If there is a concrete choice that, in my view, offers space for a vital reappropriation of the Eucharistic celebration by the community, it is the one that reintroduces Holy Mass within the overall celebration of the Lord's Day. This is the first area where the tension between celebrated faith and lived faith should be rearticulated.

The forty-nine martyrs of Abitinae, massacred in 303 during the persecution ordered by the Emperor Diocletian, interrogated about their illegal meeting, declared "*sine Dominico non possumus*"— we cannot live without Sunday. This is interesting: they do not say without the *Eucharist*, but without *Sunday*, in other words without gathering together, without sharing that particular space and time in which the memory of the Passover and Eucharist find their proper place.

Holy Mass can really show its strength in the building of the community when it is inserted in a broader time, where fraternal relations grow, where food is sometimes shared, where attention is always given to the poorest, where people are welcomed and we really can learn everyone's name. A time for the community built and modeled after the shape of the Eucharist. This is why, in order to safeguard Sunday's true communitarian quality, I am convinced that it is necessary, at least in Italy, to drastically reduce the number of Sunday Masses and, with some rare exceptions, even the places of worship; this is one of the choices that best shows what it means to conceive the Church in post-Christian times.

Yet, St. Paul reminds us that the experience of the Lord's Day is not just a strategy to improve the quality of community life: in his First letter to the Corinthians, strongly rebuking the community, he goes as far as indicating that their participation in the Eucharist is not a possibility for salvation but a motive of condemnation, alluding precisely to the fact that the community fails to live the fraternal encounter that precedes the celebration coherently with it, for "*one goes hungry while another gets drunk*" (1Cor 11:21). The question of the Lord's Day raises the serious case of the Eucharistic quality of community life, it stands out as the place of verification and of real growth, unmasking the temptation of hypocrisy always inherent in the practice of worship: "*Is this the manner of fasting I would choose, a day to afflict oneself? To bow one's head like a reed, and lie upon sackcloth and ashes? Is this what you call a fast, a day acceptable to the LORD? Is this not, rather,*

the fast that I want: releasing Those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking off every yoke? Is it not sharing your bread with the hungry, Bringing the afflicted and the homeless into your house; Clothing the naked When you see them, and not turning your back on your own flesh?” (Isaiah 58:5–7).

Please forgive me for quoting Isaiah at length, but I think that we should often listen to those words, and certainly during any reflection on the celebrative practice of our communities.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, in his book on community: *Life Together*, adopts St. Paul’s critical stance, but he still maintains the need for a lengthy time of sharing through which the Community must constitute itself in a Eucharistic key: “*Not until the fellowship has been nourished and strengthened with the bread of eternal life does it come together to receive from God earthly bread for this temporal life [...], at a table blessed by his presence, [...] in a celebrative act that calls us to rejoice*” (chapter 2, § 6).

Conclusion

These words, dear brothers and sisters, however, in the end, sadden me. Today, we have gathered to reflect on the Eucharist and how the breaking of bread builds us together as a Christian community; I've experienced your listening and been welcomed by you with affection and attention—and, for this, I again heartily thank you. Yet, today, we cannot celebrate the Eucharist together and this saddens me deeply. Moreover, I think that this shocks not just a few of those who, coming from the outside, approach the Christian experience and discover men and women who call themselves brothers and sisters but non share the same table. How can I, how can we rejoice and be thankful for our friendship, if we cannot then celebrate it in the memory of the Lord’s Passover?

I'm not a great expert on ecumenical questions and don't often participate in the shared initiatives of different Christian confessions, but today your faces, your names, and your friendliness tell me that we cannot wait any longer—we cannot delay doing what we already can all together, and we must work hard so that our communion may soon be full.

Being able to celebrate the Mass, allowing the Eucharist to truly be the place of communion, is not only a theological question: it concerns our friendship.