

CHAPTER FIVE

THE DIGNITY OF THE EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION

47. Reading the account of the institution of the Eucharist in the Synoptic Gospels, we are struck by the simplicity and the “solemnity” with which Jesus, on the evening of the Last Supper, instituted this great sacrament. There is an episode which in some way serves as its prelude: the anointing at Bethany. A woman, whom John identifies as Mary the sister of Lazarus, pours a flask of costly ointment over Jesus' head, which provokes from the disciples – and from Judas in particular (cf. Mt 26:8; Mk 14:4; Jn 12:4) – an indignant response, as if this act, in light of the needs of the poor, represented an intolerable “waste”. But Jesus' own reaction is completely different. While in no way detracting from the duty of charity towards the needy, for whom the disciples must always show special care – “the poor you will always have with you” (Mt 26, 11; Mk 14:7; cf. Jn 12:8) – he looks towards his imminent death and burial, and sees this act of anointing as an anticipation of the honour which his body will continue to merit even after his death, indissolubly bound as it is to the mystery of his person.

The account continues, in the Synoptic Gospels, with Jesus' charge to the disciples to prepare carefully the “large upper room” needed for the Passover meal (cf. Mk 14:15; Lk 22:12) and with the narration of the institution of the Eucharist. Reflecting at least in part the Jewish rites of the Passover meal leading up to the singing of the Hallel (cf. Mt 26:30; Mk 14:26), the story presents with sobriety and solemnity, even in the variants of the different traditions, the words spoken by Christ over the bread and wine, which he made into concrete expressions of the handing over of his body and the shedding of his blood. All these details are recorded by the Evangelists in the light of a praxis of the “breaking of the bread” already well-established in the early Church. But certainly from the time of Jesus on, the event of Holy Thursday has shown visible traces of a liturgical “sensitivity” shaped by Old Testament tradition and open to being reshaped in Christian celebrations in a way consonant with the new content of Easter.

48. Like the woman who anointed Jesus in Bethany, the Church has feared no “extravagance”, devoting the best of her resources to expressing her wonder and adoration before the unsurpassable gift of the Eucharist. No less than the first disciples charged with preparing the “large upper room”, she has felt the need, down the centuries and in her encounters with different cultures, to celebrate the Eucharist in a setting worthy of so great a mystery. In the wake of Jesus' own words and actions, and building upon the ritual heritage of Judaism, the Christian liturgy was born. Could there ever be an adequate means of expressing the acceptance of that self-gift which the divine Bridegroom continually makes to his Bride, the Church, by bringing the Sacrifice offered once and for all on the Cross to successive generations of believers and thus becoming nourishment for all the faithful? Though the idea of a “banquet” naturally suggests familiarity, the Church has never yielded to the temptation to trivialize this “intimacy” with her Spouse by forgetting that he is also her Lord and that the “banquet” always remains a sacrificial banquet marked by the blood shed on Golgotha. The Eucharistic Banquet is truly a “sacred” banquet, in which the simplicity of the signs conceals the unfathomable holiness of God: *O sacrum convivium, in quo Christus sumitur!* The bread which is broken on our altars, offered to us as wayfarers along the paths of the world, is *panis angelorum*, the bread of angels, which cannot be approached except with the humility of the centurion in the Gospel: “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof” (Mt 8:8; Lk 7:6).

49. With this heightened sense of mystery, we understand how the faith of the Church in the mystery of the Eucharist has found historical expression not only in the demand for an interior disposition of devotion, but also in outward forms meant to evoke and emphasize the grandeur of the event being celebrated. This led progressively to the development of a particular form of regulating the Eucharistic liturgy, with due respect for the various legitimately constituted ecclesial traditions. On this foundation a rich artistic heritage also developed. Architecture, sculpture, painting and music, moved by the Christian mystery, have found in the Eucharist, both directly and indirectly, a source of great inspiration.

Such was the case, for example, with architecture, which witnessed the transition, once the historical situation made it possible, from the first places of Eucharistic celebration in the *domus* or “homes” of Christian families to the solemn basilicas of the early centuries, to the imposing cathedrals of the Middle Ages, and to the churches, large and small, which gradually sprang up throughout the lands touched by Christianity. The designs of altars and tabernacles

within Church interiors were often not simply motivated by artistic inspiration but also by a clear understanding of the mystery. The same could be said for sacred music, if we but think of the inspired Gregorian melodies and the many, often great, composers who sought to do justice to the liturgical texts of the Mass. Similarly, can we overlook the enormous quantity of artistic production, ranging from fine craftsmanship to authentic works of art, in the area of Church furnishings and vestments used for the celebration of the Eucharist?

It can be said that the Eucharist, while shaping the Church and her spirituality, has also powerfully affected “culture”, and the arts in particular.

50. In this effort to adore the mystery grasped in its ritual and aesthetic dimensions, a certain “competition” has taken place between Christians of the West and the East. How could we not give particular thanks to the Lord for the contributions to Christian art made by the great architectural and artistic works of the Greco-Byzantine tradition and of the whole geographical area marked by Slav culture? In the East, sacred art has preserved a remarkably powerful sense of mystery, which leads artists to see their efforts at creating beauty not simply as an expression of their own talents, but also as a genuine service to the faith. Passing well beyond mere technical skill, they have shown themselves docile and open to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

The architectural and mosaic splendours of the Christian East and West are a patrimony belonging to all believers; they contain a hope, and even a pledge, of the desired fullness of communion in faith and in celebration. This would presuppose and demand, as in Rublëv's famous depiction of the Trinity, a profoundly Eucharistic Church in which the presence of the mystery of Christ in the broken bread is as it were immersed in the ineffable unity of the three divine Persons, making of the Church herself an “icon” of the Trinity.

Within this context of an art aimed at expressing, in all its elements, the meaning of the Eucharist in accordance with the Church's teaching, attention needs to be given to the norms regulating the construction and decor of sacred buildings. As history shows and as I emphasized in my Letter to Artists,¹⁰⁰ the Church has always left ample room for the creativity of artists. But sacred art must be outstanding for its ability to express adequately the mystery grasped in the fullness of the Church's faith and in accordance with the pastoral guidelines appropriately laid down by competent Authority. This holds true both for the figurative arts and for sacred music.

51. The development of sacred art and liturgical discipline which took place in lands of ancient Christian heritage is also taking place on continents where Christianity is younger. This was precisely the approach supported by the Second Vatican Council on the need for sound and proper “inculturation”. In my numerous Pastoral Visits I have seen, throughout the world, the great vitality which the celebration of the Eucharist can have when marked by the forms, styles and sensibilities of different cultures. By adaptation to the changing conditions of time and place, the Eucharist offers sustenance not only to individuals but to entire peoples, and it shapes cultures inspired by Christianity.

It is necessary, however, that this important work of adaptation be carried out with a constant awareness of the ineffable mystery against which every generation is called to measure itself. The “treasure” is too important and precious to risk impoverishment or compromise through forms of experimentation or practices introduced without a careful review on the part of the competent ecclesiastical authorities. Furthermore, the centrality of the Eucharistic mystery demands that any such review must be undertaken in close association with the Holy See. As I wrote in my Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, “such cooperation is essential because the Sacred Liturgy expresses and celebrates the one faith professed by all and, being the heritage of the whole Church, cannot be determined by local Churches in isolation from the universal Church”.¹⁰¹

52. All of this makes clear the great responsibility which belongs to priests in particular for the celebration of the Eucharist. It is their responsibility to preside at the Eucharist in persona Christi and to provide a witness to and a service of communion not only for the community directly taking part in the celebration, but also for the universal Church, which is a part of every Eucharist. It must be lamented that, especially in the years following the post-conciliar liturgical reform, as a result of a misguided sense of creativity and adaptation there have been a number of abuses which have been a source of suffering for many. A certain reaction against “formalism” has led some,

especially in certain regions, to consider the “forms” chosen by the Church's great liturgical tradition and her Magisterium as non-binding and to introduce unauthorized innovations which are often completely inappropriate.

I consider it my duty, therefore to appeal urgently that the liturgical norms for the celebration of the Eucharist be observed with great fidelity. These norms are a concrete expression of the authentically ecclesial nature of the Eucharist; this is their deepest meaning. Liturgy is never anyone's private property, be it of the celebrant or of the community in which the mysteries are celebrated. The Apostle Paul had to address fiery words to the community of Corinth because of grave shortcomings in their celebration of the Eucharist resulting in divisions (schismata) and the emergence of factions (haireseis) (cf. 1 Cor 11:17-34). Our time, too, calls for a renewed awareness and appreciation of liturgical norms as a reflection of, and a witness to, the one universal Church made present in every celebration of the Eucharist. Priests who faithfully celebrate Mass according to the liturgical norms, and communities which conform to those norms, quietly but eloquently demonstrate their love for the Church. Precisely to bring out more clearly this deeper meaning of liturgical norms, I have asked the competent offices of the Roman Curia to prepare a more specific document, including prescriptions of a juridical nature, on this very important subject. No one is permitted to undervalue the mystery entrusted to our hands: it is too great for anyone to feel free to treat it lightly and with disregard for its sacredness and its universality.