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MARRIAGE AND THE EUCHARIST

The Word of God and the sacraments are closely associated in the work that Christ pursues in the growth and sanctification of the Church. Of all the sacraments, the Eucharist occupies a special place. It has been said that the Eucharist “makes” the Church. It can also be said that it makes the Christian couple: as Christ’s sacrifice, it is the point of convergence of all its activities; as the body of Christ, it is the source of its life.

“I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread that comes down from heaven, so that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.”.....

“How can this man give us *His* flesh to eat?” So, Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in Me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me, will live because of me.”

GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT JOHN 6: 48-57

MARRIAGE AND THE EUCHARIST

In the spring of 1959, in Rome, during a Mass celebrated at Santa Maria Maggiore, while I was giving communion with other priests to the thousand pilgrim couples from the Teams of Our Lady Movement, who were going up the central aisle in an endless procession, husband and wife side by side, I had the very strong intuition of a close link between the two sacraments of Marriage and the Eucharist, and promised myself to explore the question. This was the distant point of departure for this lecture.

Perhaps I would have still postponed keeping my promise if the wedding rituals being prepared in different countries had not alerted me to the subject again. In them marriage appears closely linked to the Mass, interwoven within the Mass: the entrance procession is a liturgical act, it is the procession of the Mass’ introit; the address to the engaged couple, which so often used to lapse into praise of the families, will henceforth be the homily, the

commentary on the Gospel of the Wedding Mass. As for the exchange of marriage vows, it will take place just before the offertory. Some of these rituals even envisage that the bride and groom, after receiving the Body of Christ, will take communion with his Blood by drinking from the same chalice - this would be very rich in meaning!¹ Thus the rites will emphasise that close relationships that exists between Marriage and the Eucharist. But what indeed are these relationships? This is the subject I am going to deal with. I did not choose it for the pleasure of theological reflection nor to satisfy your intellectual curiosity alone, but because, I am convinced, your married life can gain a lot from it. And here are the different parts of my lecture:

- ✓ What the Eucharist is: Christ's sacrifice.
- ✓ The Christian couple offer up the sacrifice of Christ and are involved in it.
- ✓ The Eucharist is a source of love, it provides each member of the couple with the treasures of Christ's sacrifice.
- ✓ The Eucharist "makes" the couple, completes and vivifies the spouses' union that was caused by the Sacrament of Marriage.
- ✓ The couple lives because of the Eucharist: in it the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection continues.

WHAT IS THE EUCHARIST?

It seems essential to me, before dealing with the relationship between marriage and the Eucharist, to speak to you briefly about the latter. I'll get straight to the point. The Eucharist² is the sacrifice of Christ made present among us. So, we can only talk about it if we have a fair idea about what it is.

The Sacrifice of Christ

Not every death is a sacrifice. But any death can become a sacrifice, depending on the attitude of the person facing it. What then was Christ's inner disposition, He who made a sacrifice of his death, the great sacrifice?

It seems that the answer must be: filial love. Is it not the basis of his life: both of his life within the Trinity, and of his life on earth? Probably yes. But because of the Incarnation, Christ experiences his love within a human nature. The little child of Bethlehem, the young carpenter of Nazareth, the Master who walks the roads of Palestine and teaches the crowds, as He is the eternal Son, He loves the Father with this love which is his for all eternity, but inasmuch as He is man, truly man, He is facing his Father in the attitude of a creature before the Creator. And his attitude is that which suits the creature confronted with God's sovereignty: submission. It is still necessary to clearly see what this submission consists of. It

¹ It is still possible, however, to celebrate marriage outside of Mass.

² I will use the word Mass and the word Eucharist indiscriminately throughout this article, although they are not strictly synonymous.

hardly resembles our human submissions which, be they in our relationships with our superiors, or in our relationship with God, are always more or less imbued with fear, cowardly servility, passive resignation. In Christ, it is the most lucid, the most free, the most energetic self-giving; in it, neither servility nor passivity; it is the joyful and fervent recognition of the Father's sovereign domain over all of creation. During the Passion, this submission in all its purity and force will become obvious.

In Christ's eyes, the death that comes his way is hideous. It is the daughter of sin, the sneering witness of that day when man rebelled against God's sovereignty. Christ, the Immaculate One, cannot help but retch when He sees it approaching. But since this is the Father's will, He accepts it. And thereby it is defeated; I was going to say converted. This witness to man's disobedience becomes the occasion for the most perfect obedience of the Son of Man. Death, the daughter of non-love, by attacking Christ brings forth from him the greatest love.

So, after his first reaction of fear on the Mount of Olives, we see him welcoming death, his death, with gentleness and eagerness. He loves it because it gives him the means to proclaim his Father's sovereignty, to recognise it publicly and concretely through the immolation of his body - this body that comes from a sinful race -; because it provides him with the most eloquent language to convey his love and his unreserved gift to his Father and to humanity.

Christ's death is therefore indeed a sacrifice, fulfilling the definition of sacrifice: a visible offering expressing the unconditional self-gift of a being who recognises God's sovereign domain and infinite love.

But Jesus Christ wants to be united with all of humanity. So, He offers his sacrifice for his brethren, the people of all times and all places. I just said *for*, I should say *on behalf of* all of humanity. This terminology better expresses the reality: namely that not only are we the beneficiaries of this offering but that, on the cross, Christ drew us all into his sacrifice, committed us all. So much so that all we have left to do is to ratify, to make his sacrifice our own, and to enter into it, to engage in it lucidly and freely.

So, at the cross, it is the whole of humanity, through Christ its priest, with Him, in Him, who proclaims and acclaims God's sovereignty.

But let us be careful not to consider Christ's sacrifice by ignoring the Father to whom it is offered and who, if we can put it this way, "reacts" to this striking proof of his Son's love. The Father is leaning over Christ nailed to the cross; in him, more than ever He delights. At the moment when the Son "in a great clamour" asks for forgiveness for his brothers' and sisters' immense sin and rushes with all the momentum of his love into the arms of his Father, the latter pours his infinite love into his Beloved. And on Easter morning the response of the Father's love to the Son's offering of love emerges, dazzling, in the glory of the Risen One.

But since the Son offered himself in the name of all of mankind, it is in all mankind that the Father desires to pour out his love. However, mankind must still be open to his generosity so that the Father can fulfil them. And Mass becomes the encounter between the redeemed children with their Father.

Mass

Mass is Christ's sacrifice made present to mankind so that they offer up this sacrifice and become associated with it. Today's theologians happily speak of the *Paschal Mystery of Christ* or else of *Christ's Passover* to designate in its complete reality this sacrifice I have just presented to you. The word Passover, as you know, means passage. It was the passage through the Red Sea for the Hebrews from Egypt to the Promised Land. For Christ, it was the passage from the earth of sin to the glory of the Father through death and resurrection. This expression of Paschal Mystery is better than the expression "Sacrifice of Christ", which is often misunderstood by the faithful, who only see its painful meaning, because it emphasizes that the Passion and Resurrection are two inseparable realities. And precisely, I would like to show you how the Mass is the actualisation, the updating of the Paschal Mystery, that is to say, the death and resurrection of the Lord.

At Mass, Christ is present in his priest. Through the priest's hands, it is He who takes the bread and the wine, just like at the Last Supper, and who gives thanks to his Father. But this bread and this wine are the visible sign of an invisible reality: his body "given" for mankind, his blood "shed" for them. Do not let this word "sign" pass without giving it its full meaning. A comparison, taken from your own life, will help you. One day you gave a ring to your fiancée, and she undoubtedly considered this gift, not primarily for its commercial value, but rather for its value as a sign: in her eyes this ring was the sign of a heart and of a life offered to her. Likewise, the bread and wine at Mass, just like at the Last Supper, should not be appreciated according to their material value, but according to their value as a sign: they are the sign of a heart, of a life, of the heart and life of the Christ who offers himself to the Father, with a great fervour of love, for the salvation of all mankind.

That the bread and the wine are consecrated one after the other, that they are, on the altar, two distinct, separate realities, this too is a sign, the sign of the separation, on the cross, of Christ's body and blood, that is to say of his death.

While the ring symbolises but does not contain the bridegroom's heart and life, the bread and wine not only represent but contain the Body and Blood of Christ.³ And so you also understand why the Church teaches that at Mass Christ's sacrifice is both symbolised and made truly present; made present so that we offer it and participate in it.

But it is not only the Passion that the Mass makes present to us, it is also the Resurrection. Indeed, in this consecrated bread and wine, it is the Body of Christ today, a glorious Body, overflowing with the immense love of the Father. This is why Mass is not an hour of sadness, but rather is the most joyful rite there is. Think of the Easter High Mass which is, one might say, the typical Mass. What exultation! This is because the Church celebrates the grandiose mystery of the Son's love for his Father and the Father's love for his Son, whom he takes in his arms and introduces, with his resurrected humanity, into his eternal Beatitude.

Thus, at Mass, Christ relives his Paschal Mystery and places it within our reach, inviting us to associate ourselves with it, to insert ourselves into it, to allow ourselves to be

³ Such a sign, which contains what it represents, is what the Church calls an effective sign, a sacrament.

seized by it so that our *“life is henceforth hidden with Christ in God”* according to Saint Paul’s expression (cf. Col 3:3).

You easily grasp therefore that Mass, understood in this way, is not a show that we attend, but an act of Christ in which we participate; in which each of you, but also each of your couples, as such, must participate.

After this essential introduction, we are now able to reflect on the relationship between Marriage and the Eucharist.

The Couple offer up the Eucharist

We must be aware of two mistakes: either that of seeing only each spouse’s individual participation in Christ’s sacrifice, as if this cell of the Church, the couple, did not have to intervene, as such, at Mass; or that of seeing only the couple’s participation, ignoring the part that each spouse, by virtue of their Baptism, must take. Today I will limit myself to the offering of sacrifice by the couple, since the relationship of both Marriage and the Eucharist is at stake.

When, at the beginning of a day or on Sunday after a week of labour and struggles, of love and joy, husband and wife leave the house - perhaps accompanied by your children - and walk together towards the Lord’s home,⁴ what motivates you? Would it be simply to fulfil an obligation? No, of course not. You see the Mass as the highlight of your life, the pole towards which all your activities must converge, the source where your whole existence must be nourished, the essential hour where your couple and God meet. You intend to pay homage to God, to offer Him the filial worship that individuals, but also human communities owe Him, each spouse but also as a couple. And not just any worship but this sacrifice, the unique, perfect sacrifice, offered once and for all, Christ’s.

The Bread and Wine are there on the altar. It is not up to you to transform them into the Body and Blood of Christ; it is up to the priest, or more exactly to Christ through his minister. But the offering of "the host, pure, holy, spotless, of the sacred bread of eternal life, of the chalice of eternal salvation," is indeed yours, members of this great priestly people that is the Church, to present them to God in union with the priest. Listen to Christ telling you, addressing the entire assembly, but also both of you, “You want to celebrate God’s holiness by offering him a sacrifice as all religious people have done since the world has existed; see, I place my sacrifice at your disposal, take it. It is mine, may it become yours, may it become the sacrifice of your little community founded on the Sacrament of Marriage and sanctified by it. Offer it up to Him, husband and wife together, in recognition of the Father’s sovereign majesty and as an expression of your couple’s submission, as praise for his infinite perfections and in order to obtain from his sweet pity the forgiveness of your faults, as thanks to Him for his marvellous gifts and in order to respond with love to his love.”

But understand this. For this sacrifice of Christ to become yours, it is not enough that you offer his Body and his Blood. The gift of the ring does not take the place of the gift of the heart and the life, it implies it. Likewise, the offering of the Body and Blood of Christ requires

⁴ The most important thing is to be morally rather than physically together.

your own inner gift. The gift of each of you, no doubt, but also the gift of your little married community. This gift has multiple aspects which we are going to think about: you have to offer one another to God, to offer each one of you, together, to offer your children, and more broadly all that makes up your existence.

I just said that you have to offer *one another*. By virtue of your Marriage, in a very real and strong sense, you belong to your spouse, just as they belong to you. So, ask them, "Offer me to God, I want to be a host in your hands, just as I offer you to Him, you, another myself, my better self." It is, believe me, a great thing this offering of one another at Mass. It is the affirmation by each person of their desire that the other enters even further into the Lord's intimacy. Such a couple is sheltered from the idolatry that sometimes makes up conjugal love: God is the first loved and first served. And if one day, the Lord was to call one of the spouses back to him, the survivor, through their pain, would know how to remain serene, remembering that this gift of the spouse to God, they have already offered it many times, during all those Masses they attended together.

You still have to offer *each of you*, together, offer your union, and the different levels on which it takes place: a single flesh, a single heart, a single soul. Offer your carnal union both holy and sinful, sanctified by the Christ of your marriage, but often still inhabited by an all too human fever. Offer your own unique heart, this heart which is certainly not immune to old selfishness, but which you aspire for it to belong to God's time. Also offer this union of your souls, established by God at the deepest level of your being, in this centre where divine life exists. This offering of your union, at all these levels, is not a superfluous gift of your couple, but its participation in the sacrifice of Christ. Also, there is no question of going to Mass without having prepared your offering, I mean: verified, purified and renewed your union. Remember the Lord's precept, "*So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift.*" (Mt 5:23-24). How I fully understand this couple of friends, who would never go to Mass, together or individually, without each spouse first having given the other the kiss of peace, "*Pax tecum!*"

But Marriage is made to bear fruit. These fruits, the children, are, in the hands of the spouses, their characteristic offering, the one that the couple alone can present to the sacrifice of Christ. (For married Christians, their decision to have a child ought to be primarily in order to have an offering to present to the Lord.) You may say to me: is it not rather at Baptism that we offer our child to Christ? Yes, in a sense. But baptism, do not forget, is completely oriented towards the Eucharist. Presenting your child at Baptism, taking them to Mass for the first time, leading them to the Holy Table, is one and the same offering. And after the gift of yourselves, that is what you have best to offer at Mass. Just as the bread and wine become the Eucharistic Body of Christ in the hands of the priest, so in your hands the fruit of your love becomes the Mystical Body of Christ, a member of the Mystical Body.

Even before its birth from the mother's womb, the child must be brought to Mass and offered up. For them, it is already a mysterious participation in the Lord's sacrifice.

You have other goods which are also material for offering. I think of your material goods, but also of all the harvest of sorrows and joys - and God knows that the sheaf of

sorrows is often heavier than that of joys. Listen to what Claudel has the priest say as he turns towards “his little flock” just before the Offertory.

*“Truly, O my brothers and my sisters,
Is no one afflicted among you? Is it true, there is no sin and no pain?
No mother who has lost her child? No bankrupt person without it being their fault?
No patient that the doctor has judged and who knows that there is no more hope?
Why then thwart your God with what is his own and his possessions?
Your tears and your faith, your blood with His in the chalice,
This, like the wine and water, is the material of His sacrifice!
This is what redeems the world with Him; this is what He thirsts and hungers for.
These tears, like money thrown into the water, great God, so much suffering in vain!
Have pity on Him who only had thirty-three years to suffer!
Join your Passion to his since you can only die once!”⁵*

All the joys and sufferings, but also all the labours. The same Claudel shows very well the relationship between work and Mass, “*Man was placed by God in the middle of nature to complete it and to offer it to Him: through his work during the week and through prayer on Sunday.*”

I have just said and repeated: offer, offer yourself. Do not deduce from this that at Mass the spouses’ sacrifice and that of the couple is added to the sacrifice of Christ. This is sometimes suggested, if we misunderstand it, by the gesture of the faithful who, in certain churches at the Offertory present bread and wine, fruits of the earth, their working tools... Remember that there is only one sacrifice acceptable to God: Christ’s one. But this sacrifice, refreshed, made present on our altars, calls for mankind’s offerings to be incorporated and assimilated. More precisely, all mankind, all couples since they have been offered by Christ on the Cross, today it is a question of each taking their particular place in this sacrifice. This is why, when I use the word offer, I always want to specify: offering oneself to Christ, yes, but to be offered by him.

The Eucharist, a Source of Love

The Father responds with the outpouring of his love to Christ, who gives Himself on the cross. This is repeated in our favour at every Mass. After we have offered Him the sacrifice of his Son, the Father gives us the Body and Blood of this same risen Son as food, so that divine life may grow in us. Let us read, if you will, and as if it were for the first time, with a heart ready to marvel, Christ’s admirable words about the Eucharist, considered to be a Sacrament, which Saint John relates. They cannot fail to arouse astonishment, admiration, joyful faith and gratitude in us. “*Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me and I live because of the Father, so whoever eats me will live because of me.*” (John 6:56-57)

⁵ PAUL CLAUDEL. — *La Messe là-bas*, Paris, 1919

When one reads this extraordinary page, how can one not sense the exceptional grandeur of the marriage of two Christians? Husband and wife, you who eat the flesh of Christ, who drink his blood, who experience the life of Christ in your soul and in your body, who abide in Him, and He in you, how could you not love each other with a love completely different to that of other people, a resuscitated love? Can you look at each other, share your sorrows and your joys, give yourselves to each other with all your heart and body, help each other along the way, without having the feeling that you are thereby experiencing a very great mystery?

The union between two beings, as you well know, is worth whatever they share together. Now you who obtain the very life of Christ from the Eucharist, well, it is this, this life of Christ, which you must first share together. And this life in you is the joyful knowledge of the Father, an outpouring of filial love. But it is also a creature's love, of all creatures: the Lord's admiration, pity and tenderness are within you. And since it is God's will that you love each other with an essential love, your love for your spouse is the first to be transformed by the grace of the Eucharist, which brings purification, refinement, a newness of life. It leads you to desire for your loved one infinitely more than any other spouses who are tremendously in love can want for each other but are ignorant of Christ's promise, and here I mean the love and joy of God, holiness.

It is not enough to talk about it. Even more radical is the transformation of your love by the action of the Eucharist. For you, God carries out what he had promised through Ezekiel, "*A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.*" (Ez 36:26), Christ's heart of flesh which is "*gentle and humble*" as he told us Himself (Mt 11:29).

Are you going to be afraid of the human components of your marital love? Would this new love risk eliminating human attractions and feelings? Rest assured, it does not replace what, apart from sin, it finds in you; it uses it and makes it divine. It uses all the resources of human love to express itself and communicate itself. Is this not what we see in Christ's own life? How human his divine love is! In it, we find the infinitely nuanced range of all the feelings that can blossom in a human soul.

This new heart is the crucible within you, where all your feelings undergo a sort of restructuring: they are purified there, they draw an entirely new vigour and substance from it; far from being dehumanised, they are, one might say, super-humanised.

Not only the soul, but the body too is transformed through contact with the Body of Christ. The Eucharist completes the consecration of our body, inaugurated by Baptism. And first of all it appeases its lust, it cures it of the carnal fever which so often torments it, it makes it transparent to our sanctified soul. But even better, it makes the body a "member of Christ," a "temple of the Holy Spirit," because "God must also be glorified in our body" (cf. I Cor 6, 15,19,20). To express this action of the Eucharist on the body, Saint Teresa of Avila used an unexpected image, "*Do you think, my daughters, that this most holy food does not also support the bodies and is not a remedy for their ailments? Our adorable Master is not in the*

habit of paying poorly for the stay He makes in the inn of your soul when He receives a warm welcome there.”

Between the husband and wife who possess this Eucharistic vision of the body, we can easily guess that sexual relations themselves will be transformed. It is no longer a “body of death” but a body of holiness that they give to each other to express their love as children of God.

In truth, this conversion of the body – like that of the heart, moreover – takes place over time, taking place gradually. It is not in the blink of an eye that the body loses its opacity, that it becomes docile to the mind. It is therefore necessary that you often reconnect with the glorious flesh of Christ in the Eucharist. You will draw from it the grace to fight against a flesh that is too often still rebellious. The trigger of this struggle must not be hatred but love, the love of your redeemed body which is a question of evangelising, and not of exterminating.

You, who are listening to me, are privileged. But how can we not think of so many other couples where only one of the spouses receives the Body of Christ? Will they despair at not knowing the quality of conjugal love in couples where both spouses take Communion together? Rather, let them understand how important for their spouse this gift is that, body and soul, they give of themselves: it is not in vain that a member of Christ, nourished by the Body of Christ, gives of themselves and unites with a being of good will.

I turn to you here. Not only your married life but also your entire family life must be enriched by your receiving Communion. How interesting it would be to reflect on the influence that the Eucharist exerts on children through their parents, to consider the educational activity of parents as an extension of their Eucharistic life. But that would take us too far. All the same, I would be remiss if I did not draw your attention to the communion of the mother who is expecting a child. How could Christ not bless the one He meets in the “inn” where He stays (to use Saint Teresa’s image).

THE EUCHARIST “MAKES” THE COUPLE

Thanks to the graces it gives each partner in a Marriage, the Eucharist already contributes powerfully to the enrichment of your love between husband and wife and of all your family life; but it does so in an even more direct way by virtue of its unifying power, a power that earns it the name of the “sacrament of unity”.

The Eucharist “makes” the Church

A little girl I once knew said to her mother on the morning of her first communion, “I believe that Jesus will eat my soul.” Her child-like intuition was singularly right; it tallied with Saint Augustine’s words in his “Confessions,” when he attributes the following words to Jesus, *“I am the food of the strong; believe and you will eat me. You will not assimilate me to yourself, like your body’s food, it is you who will be assimilated into Me.”*

We must acknowledge that Christians generally look at it differently. They imagine that the Eucharistic bread is like our earthly bread of which we each receive a piece and go away. We do not take Christ to our individual homes. He refuses to be a party to our

selfishness. The sacrifice that He renews in all places and in all times is in order to unite his disciples in the one Church. Is it not rather baptism, you might say to me, that binds Christians to Christ and, therefore, unites them? This is only partly true. Saint Paul clearly taught the Romans (Rm 6) that the true purpose of Baptism is to make the recipient die to sin by being immersed in the death of Christ so as to live with a new life. It is true that, by this very fact, the baptised person is then united to Christ, but it is the Eucharist that will complete this union. Through the Eucharist, Christ binds himself ever more tightly to those who are baptised and transforms them, little by little, into what He is. By this very fact, having gathered them into Himself, He unites them to one another. In this way, He fulfils the mission the Father has entrusted to Him, *“to gather into one the dispersed children of God”* (Jn 11: 52). The Eucharistic Communion creates the Communion of Saints—that is to say, of Christians—and makes them all into one Mystical Body.

To teach the faithful about their unity in Christ brought about by the Eucharist, the Church Fathers liked to comment on the symbolism of the bread and wine. Just as bread is made from numerous grains of wheat and wine from numerous grapes reduced into one, so the Mystical Body is made of numerous human beings brought into unity thanks to the Eucharistic Body of Christ. Saint Thomas boldly said, the Eucharist “makes” the Church.

Within the Church, within the great community of the faithful, there are intermediate communities: dioceses (or rather, diocesan churches), parishes, monasteries, families... They are wanted by God so that charity is experienced there in a more concrete and more intense way, so that the communion between Christians takes place on a human scale and therefore achieves greater perfection. Today, I do not have to show you the role that the Eucharist plays in these various communities, but only in this cell of the Church made up of the couple.

Indeed, the uniting power of the Eucharist not only brings about the unity of the total community of Christians but also of the intermediate communities. We can therefore be very sure that the Eucharist has a primordial role to play in strengthening the union of those whom God has united through marriage. Not only to sanctify each of the spouses, as we have seen – although this is an indirect way of enriching their union – but to strengthen and sanctify the bond itself which unites them.

Why involve the Eucharist? Is it not the Sacrament of Marriage which unites a man and woman and which contains the graces necessary for the deepening and sanctification of their union? If you are asking yourself this question – and I would understand if you were asking it – the connection between marriage and baptism can enlighten you. The latter makes a vast community of all Christians, but this unity, to be strengthened, to become alive, to grow, to reach its perfection, has an imperative need of the Eucharistic bread: it is not enough to exist, it is also necessary to be nourished to live and to grow. The Sacrament of Marriage for its part unites a man and woman; but as long as it is deprived of the Body of Christ, their union will remain anaemic, without resistance and vitality. On the other hand, if their union resorts to the Eucharist they will find cohesion, young love, dynamic growth, fulfilment and holiness. It will become a community of love, a communion of life.

Therefore, the Eucharist, through its power to unite, “makes” the Church, just as it “makes” the couple. And not only indirectly, through the graces it provides to each spouse, but directly, by completing the union that the Sacrament of Marriage has established.

Let us not stick to a general statement. Let us list the riches and extension of this teaching: the Eucharist strengthens the bond between the couple and Christ - inserts the couple into the Church - communicates charity to it - achieves a living communion between all its members.

Jesus referred to the Eucharist when he said, "*The New Covenant in my blood.*" This covenant between Christ and the Church is renewed and celebrated at every Mass. But it is also the covenant between Christ and individual Church communities, and therefore between Christ and the couple. Furthermore, when a husband and wife receive Communion together, the covenant established between Christ and the couple on their wedding day is "refreshed," reactivated, renewed. Of course, when I speak of receiving Communion together, I am not necessarily referring to Communion side by side, but to a moral union. It is a matter of intention; but the more fulfilled this intention is, the better it obtains this strengthening and renewal of the covenant between Christ and the couple.

To say that the Eucharist tightens the bond and covenant between Christ and the couple is also to say that it inserts the couple more deeply into the Church. This is because we do not find Christ without finding in Him all his brothers and sisters, the whole great community. It is true that, through the Sacrament of Marriage, the couple became a "cell" of the Church, but every time that the couple receives the Eucharist, the bond between the small and the great community becomes closer and the life-giving exchange richer. In the Eucharist, the couple acquires a more deliberate will to be at the service of the Body of Christ and to contribute both to its edification — in both meanings of the word.

United with Christ, embedded in the Church, the couple lives off?? the life that Christ communicates to his Church. And this life is charity. The inexhaustible source of charity is the Eucharist. In a couple fed on the Eucharist, all expressions of love (conjugal love, paternal and maternal love, filial love and fraternal love) become gradually purified, renewed, fortified and sanctified. But charity is not only a gift from God; it is also a human activity. It is not enough to receive this gift; we must also put it into action once we are back at home, each in their proper sphere and all together. We must remember Saint Paul's precepts, "*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus.*" (Ph 2:5). "*Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*" (Eph 5:1-2). "*By love serve one another.*" (Ga 5:13b). "*Let all that you do be done with love.*" (1 Cor 16:14).

An active love between spouses and more broadly between all members of the household, will fulfil their union, their "communion" in Christ. This is not to be confused with good relations or natural intimacy. It is a divine work; it is the ultimate goal that the action of the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity, pursues, within the couple as well as within the Church. At the family level, it is the "communion of saints" for which Christ prayed to his Father when He had just instituted the Eucharist, "*Father! May they may all be one...one as we are one...one in us...perfectly one.*" (Jn 17)

But here too the Eucharist will only produce its full effects with the help of mankind. If it is a *sign* of unity and *grace* of unity, it is also a *requirement* of unity. Communion between spouses, between parents and children, is both given and to be achieved. Husband and wife, learn how to detect the pressure of the Spirit of Christ at work in your union and respond to it: the pressure on your intelligence to bring you to a better knowledge of the

Father and his thoughts: so therefore, together, consult, study, meditate on the Word of God; the pressure on your heart to train you to an ever more intense and purer love of God, to an ever more universal love of mankind: respond to the inner urge, helping one another with adoration, praise, with the thousand forms of love of God and of your neighbour, starting with these closest neighbours, who are your children; finally the pressure on your will: align the wishes of your couple to the divine will and together cooperate in the Lord's works. Be very concerned that your communion in charity reaches and embraces the children, so that the entire family can take into account the words of Saint Paul, "*Because there is one bread, we who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.*" (1 Cor 10:17)

Allow me to suggest to you a prayer to ask God that the Eucharist may "make" your couple, make your unity. It is the admirable post-communion prayer for Easter. Why not say it together when you have just received communion and you are side by side in church? "*Lord, put your spirit of love in us who have just been fed with the Paschal Sacrament; may your love give us all one heart.*"

THE EUCHARIST NOURISHES THE COUPLE

If there is a reason why Christ makes his sacrifice present on the altar, it is so that you might offer it and associate yourselves with it; it is so that each one of you should open yourself to its sanctifying grace and so that, together, you allow Him to make your union closer and more spiritually alive. But to remain at this point that we have reached would be to misunderstand the ultimate effect of the Eucharist. When all is said and done, the reason why Christ makes his sacrifice present on the altar, is so that He might become present and alive *in* you. What you celebrate in church has to be lived out in your daily life.

The act by which Christ offered himself once and for all on Calvary expressed the deepest state of his soul, the essence of his interior life, his joyful, permanent and ever-lasting gift of himself to the Father. The reason why Christ renews this action at Mass, that He invites you to participate in it, is that He wants his sacrifice to penetrate to the physical and spiritual depth of your marriage, so as to create in you too a permanent spiritual state of offering to the Father. Better still, it is so that you let Him relive his sacrifice in your marriage. You see, therefore, that Christ's sacrifice must not remain outside of, but inside you; the offering that you make of his sacrifice must not be a transient action, but a habitual disposition, a life.

I referred to this sacrifice above as the Paschal Mystery, to clearly highlight its double facet of death and resurrection. It is therefore your entire life as a couple that must be marked with the sign of Christ's death and resurrection, which must be "Paschal." To put things in order, let us consider this paschal life within the couple on both levels: inner and outer. And let us talk successively about what I will call "a Paschal mystique" and "a Paschal lifestyle."

A Paschal Mystique

The couple nourished by the Eucharist is as far from euphoria as from drama, as far from hedonism as from puritanism. It hardly resembles the type of couple who are happy to live and who, in the name of so-called optimism, do not believe in evil and imagine

themselves to be already saved, who, not suspecting their deep misery and vulnerability, reject any idea of asceticism, of the fight against evil. Nor does it resemble those morose families whose religion is reduced to an austere and sorrowful morality of Duty, who see evil everywhere in the world and isolate themselves from others to safeguard and cultivate an illusory purity of life. The authentic Christian couple who is nourished by the Eucharist has a mentality of those who are saved. — They are not the ones who deserve Nietzsche's reprimand, "*Better songs would they have to sing, for me to believe in their Saviour: more like saved ones would his disciples have to appear unto me!*" — The Christian couple knows both that salvation is acquired for them, — Christ having definitively triumphed over evil — and that nevertheless they must conquer it.

Through the Eucharist they open themselves to the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, through their efforts they practice dying and resurrecting, in putting to death the old man, the old creation, as Saint Paul says, so that there may arise "the new man," "the new creation." They neglect neither asceticism nor spiritual combat; because they know they are threatened by evil. This evil, of course, does not control the couple, who lives and counts on Christ's grace, but it is hidden in all the shadowy corners, and it is not so easy to exterminate the nests of resistance where it is buried.

Death, death to sin, which introduces "new life," will not be the only consequence of the spouses' initiative. They will experience trials, that will be more or less painful; they will feel its more or less cruel bite in their hearts and in their flesh; but they will not be surprised, these trials will not take them by surprise: not only do they know that "the disciple is not above the master," but they fully intend to cooperate in the redemptive work.

They will like to remember Saint Paul's words to the Colossians "*I am now rejoicing in my sufferings for your sake and in my flesh I am completing what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church.*" (Col 1:24) They know how to rejoice in completing through the sufferings of their body and soul what is lacking in Christ's trials for themselves and for these children to whom they have given life and for whom they wish obtain even more abundant grace. They do not settle for experiencing this Paschal mystique: through education, they strive to pass it on to their children, to initiate them into it.

But undoubtedly the highest point of this Paschal life is the hour when the members of the household meet for family prayer. In ancient families, in Greece or Rome, worship was essentially domestic. Each home had its altar on which libations and sacrifices were offered, where the fire was never let go out: it would have been like the death of the god in the home. The house was neither left, nor entered without acknowledging the altar. Although domestic worship in the Christian home is neither less assiduous nor less fervent, it is not closed in on itself. This worship, where praying together is the highlight, has a source and a centre: the Eucharist. It extends and prepares the latter. It draws all its grandeur and all its effectiveness from it and at the same time it prepares the members of the household to participate in it again. To tell the truth, all activities, the whole life of the couple must become even more perfectly thanksgiving, worship to God. "*So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.*" (I Cor 10:31)

There is no need to fear that sadness will reign in these couples. They overflow with joy, even in their tribulations. Not with a banal joy, but with this joy of Christ, which He

promised to those who love each other as He himself loves us. *“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”* (Jn 15:11)

A Paschal Lifestyle

The inner life shapes the outer life, the soul is reflected on the face: within the couple, the paschal mysticism is converted into a Paschal lifestyle.

Relationships between people cannot fail to reflect the Paschal mysticism alive in each person's heart. The Mass is both the model and the source of a new love. There we learn how to love following Christ's example, *“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.”* (Jn 15:12-13). And through communion, we draw upon this love which men are radically incapable of themselves. It is this love drawn from Christ's very sacrifice, which both introduces death and brings about resurrection in the home. Incompatible with selfishness, it wages an inexpiable battle against it, but it is so that Christ's victory over death may triumph in everything.

It is also in the way the couple welcomes events, happy and painful, that its Paschal mysticism is expressed. It is a Christian way of experiencing joy, as it is a Christian way of reacting to trials. — I think of this couple who lost everything in Africa and arrived in France with their many children, without knowing if they would find shelter and work; those who, unaware of their situation, saw them disembarking, believed, in the face of such serenity, that they were just a happy family coming on holidays.

This mystique is evident in work, leisure, at meals, in a word, in all of everyone's daily lives and behaviour. The surrounding environment itself is marked by it. It is impossible, for households who attend the Eucharist, to accept this more or less pagan lifestyle which reigns even in many so-called Christian families: luxury, waste, comfort, sensuality... In their home, simplicity, austerity, frugality, evangelical poverty are showcased.

Hospitality is esteemed and practiced there and those who are its beneficiaries cannot fail to sense something of the Eucharistic mystery: there is in such a home a sort of mysterious and enveloping “real presence”. And this real presence, like the Host in the tabernacle, radiates its virtue to all those who live around the home.

I would also like to mention another characteristic sign of these homes where the mystery of Christ's Passover is experienced. They refuse to be “settled”. According to the formula of Saint Paul, they are “strangers and travellers” on earth. How could it be otherwise? You know very well that the Hebrews had to eat the Passover lamb, sandals on their feet, belt around their waists, staff in hand, travellers gaining strength before embarking on the long road from Egypt to the Promised Land. So it is for those who eat the Lord's Passover: they are not shunning the earth, far from it, but they are on their way to a better homeland. And the more they nourish themselves with the Eucharist, the more the nostalgia for this other homeland grows within them.

“You will be my people, I will be your God,” Yahweh said to the Hebrews. The dead and resurrected Christ says the same thing to Christian spouses. But, for them as for the

Hebrews walking in the desert, this “God with them” is a God who becomes their guide and constantly leads them forward. Whether they follow him is a different question.



My conclusion will be brief, just one sentence: marriage is Christ’s admirable invention so that the Eucharist can be experienced by both spouses.