



**THE SALESIAN CENTER**  
FOR FAITH AND CULTURE

## AN AMERICAN EUCHARIST ?

*Sermon for the "Day of the Eucharist"  
at Our Lady of Perpetual Help (Bethlehem, PA)  
15 May 2005*

Today, in this Year of the Eucharist, we celebrate the great solemnity of **Pentecost**, in which the Church has its origins. We should be amazed at how this all started, with that first community of apostles and disciples gathered in the upper room, there to be visited, as it were, by the Spirit of God in the form of flying tongues of flame. But the oddity of it all is not in that image. What was truly astounding was the result: simple men of Galilee spoke of the marvelous acts of God, and what they said was understood by the numerous foreigners who heard them speak. The Spirit made it possible for one language to be translated into the cultures of many.

That phenomenon suggests that the **Church**, from its outset, is all about marvels! Its task is not to be a political bureaucracy or a social agency, despite the many ways it has influenced the world for good. No, the Church, properly speaking, is about speaking, about proclaiming what is holy. Its job is to translate, as it were, the dynamic and continuing presence of God into the contemporary cultures of our world.

Now if, as **POPE JOHN PAUL II** proclaimed, the Church is the Church of the Eucharist (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*), then we must ask how the Eucharist speaks. What language does it use today, that we might understand? Like the many gathered in Jerusalem, what do we hear in the words of the Eucharist, especially when our language is American?

Let me suggest five ways in which we might speak of an "American Eucharist." Not that this sacrament is exclusively ours, by any means. But I believe that a renewed appreciation of the Eucharist holds an essential key for our faith in this American culture in which we live. This may not be as amazing as the proclamation at that first Pentecost, but it may just have the potential to make us marvel again at the power of the Spirit in our midst.

(1) In our American culture, we live in a world of **business**, and business uses the language of the marketplace. Business speaks about cost/benefit analysis and profit margins, and we regularly hear about the almighty bottom line.

The bottom line for the Eucharist is the price that Jesus pays. This is his “body, given up for” us. This is his “blood, shed for” us. The cost is staggering. The benefit is eternal. But, in a world where exchange rules the market, what is even more unusual is that the Eucharist is free! We pay nothing for it. We owe nothing as a result of it. In other words, *the Eucharist is, first and foremost, a gift.*

What the Eucharist says to us is that our existence will become truly meaningful to the extent that we cultivate the “giftedness” of our lives, and become “thankful” for the gifts that we have, and the gift that each of us is. In sharing that gift, and those gifts, we become the Church, an assembly of relationships rooted in loving concern for the others in our lives and in our world.

(2) In our American society, we also dwell in a culture of **law**, and law uses the language of liability. Our courts speak about evidence and proof of guilt; we hear that certainty must be beyond a reasonable doubt. And thus do we regulate our relationships with a sense of justice as equity and fairness.

The Eucharist, however, is not fair! Or, I should say, it is not fair that we get to receive it! Nevertheless, *in and through the Eucharist, Jesus establishes with us a “new and eternal covenant,”* a binding agreement, lasting forever, in which God will be God for us, God with us, as Jesus promises, until the end of the ages.

And what is our part in this eternal plea bargain? As St. Francis de Sales once said, we are simply to be who we are, and be that well. It matters not what job or career or vocation one has. In every walk of life, we can and should be holy, we can and should be witnesses to the presence of God at work in our lives. That’s why it is so important to celebrate the Eucharist frequently. In the liturgy each week, the Church does what the Church is – persons united with God – so that in our worldly routines the presence of God might permeate all that we are and all that we do.

(3) In our American lifestyle, **science** plays an ever increasing role, and science uses the language of discovery. Science tells us of the truths of nature all around us. We hear about the myriad ways in which our bodies, our organisms, our resources, and our universe function.

The Eucharist also has a demonstrable function. After all, it is real food (though not much, I admit!). As food, it animates us, it sustains us, it energizes us. And its function is to transform us, to change us into all that we can be, and all that God has called us to be. This is why Jesus tells us to *“do this in memory of” Him*.

But what is the “this” that we do? Hopefully, we become more and more like Him in his act of self-giving. Again to quote the thought of St. Francis de Sales, if by means of Holy Communion we become very gentle (since gentleness is the virtue proper to this Sacrament), then we will make progress in becoming the assembly of love that the Church is meant to be.

(4) Our American culture is governed, it seems, by the **media**, and the media uses the language of image. We hear about the “spin” put on news stories, we learn to speak (and think) in “sound bites,” and we do so enjoy special effects.

The Eucharist, of course, is a special effect unto itself. The “spin” we theologians put on it is the theory of transubstantiation. The “sound bites” we use are the words of consecration, words that by their directness and repetition have become ingrained in us. Ultimately, though, *the Eucharist remains a “mystery of faith.”*

To us, the language of mystery makes it sound like something made-up or fanciful, something concocted that cannot be known for certain. Yet it is ultimately in mystery that we find meaning, for we all know that the deeper realities of life transcend the ordinary and the obvious. To appreciate that sense of mystery is to cultivate the realm of the Spirit; it is, in simple terms, to engage the power of prayer. And through our Eucharistic union in prayer, through our shared mysteries of faith, the Church brings the element of the supernatural into our lives, thereby making them anything but ordinary.

(5) Finally, and this is my favorite, we Americans are enthralled by the world of **sports**, which uses the language of competition. No doubt you’ve heard the old saying “it doesn’t matter if you win or lose; it’s how you play the game.” Nonsense! It does matter. That’s why we try to win in everything we do ... in the games we play, in the promotions we seek, in the wars we wage, in life itself. We all want to be successful; we’d all prefer to be #1. That’s our American way.

And this is where the Eucharist speaks most distinctively to us. If we really want to win, we have to lose. Like the grain of wheat of which Jesus speaks, if we wish to live, we have to die. That’s what He did, and it is humanity’s greatest success. His death may have appeared, at first, to be a significant loss. But in his sacrifice on the Cross, He

has won for us our eternal redemption. *The Eucharist is that sacrifice*, played out again for us each and every time we celebrate Mass.

The American dream may be for us to acquire all that we can ... of possessions, of power, of status. But the way to true happiness, we believe, lies in this paradox: to consider and treat other people as more important to me than I am to myself. Admittedly, this goes against our natural inclination. Yet, as Jesus demonstrated for us on the cross, and as He continues to make present to us in the Eucharist, obedience to the will of God, not our own will, is the ticket to eternal life. Adhering to sacrifice as a way of life gives us a supernatural success that can never be taken away.

There are other American languages, to be sure. But whatever words we speak, the language of our culture reflects and also influences our way of thinking and living. It is a language that values marketplace profit, social equity, technological mastery, visual entertainment, and successful conquest.

To this American culture our faith can and must speak. And for our faith to flourish, the Eucharist remains paramount. It is at once a divine Giver and Gift. It establishes our covenant with God. It provides strength in our gentleness. It awakens us to the mystery of our being. And it empowers us to sacrifice our selves so that we might live for others and forever.

With thanksgiving to God for the life and work of Pope John Paul II who brought us this **Year of the Eucharist**, and in the living hope that he will soon be raised to the altar of sainthood, let us go now in prayer before the Eucharist, that Most Blessed Sacrament of the Church that makes this day of Pentecost a never ending feast.

+ May God Be Blessed +

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