

THE EUCHARIST: A MARTYRDOM OF LOVE

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Feast of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque

homily by
REV. THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S.

Director of the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture



at DeSales University

Right now, it's after midnight in Rome, so all is quiet there. But during the day, the State of Vatican City is abuzz with the activities of the XI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. Over 250 people from 118 different nations (including your neighbor, the cardinal archbishop of Philadelphia) are meeting in 23 sessions and 7 working groups to discuss "The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church." These highly trained experts will eventually formulate a series of proposals that will help the Church throughout the world to appreciate more fully this most blessed sacrament.

This evening, here in Philadelphia, there is no worldwide gathering of experts. Just me! But at least you can be consoled by the fact that it won't take three weeks to listen to what I have to say about the Eucharist!

Still, there is one other authority with us this evening. At first glance, her credentials seem to pale by comparison to those at the Synod! She has no degree in theology; in fact, she had only two years of formal education. She lived her life not in one of the world's great metropolises, but in a small town, hidden away from public activity. But she does have a claim to fame and worldwide recognition... her sanctity and her devotion to the Sacred Heart have made her a saint!

What can ST. MARGARET MARY tell us about the Eucharist? If we look to her life and her letters (see *The Letters of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque*, translated by Fr. Clarence A. Herbst, SJ; Tan Books, 1997), I think we will find there a powerful message, one totally in keeping with the Sacred Scriptures we just heard. Let me focus, in this homily, on three elements of that message.

Margaret Mary Alacoque's experience of the Eucharist began at age nine, when she made her first Holy Communion. There and then she knew right away the power of this sacrament. *This Communion*, she writes, *shed such bitterness over all my little pleasures and amusements that I was no longer able to enjoy any of them, although I sought them eagerly.*

Her early experience demonstrates how **the Eucharist relativizes the world**. What I mean is that this sacrament puts into proper perspective the two realms of our existence: the natural and the supernatural, the human and the divine, the worldly and the heavenly. Whereas the natural elements of bread and wine are what we see and taste, by faith we know that this is no longer mere food, but the very real presence of God. Keeping in mind today's gospel dictum – that we should “render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's” – we celebrate the Eucharist as a meal of human fellowship, but also, and primarily, as the memorial of Christ's sacrificial love for each and every one of us. As the saint would later describe it, the love of *This divine Heart ever present there [in the Blessed Sacrament] is all my consolation here below* (letter to Mother Péronne-Rosalie Greyfié, at Semur, July 1684).

That sacrificial love and the consolation it brings characterize the beauty of St. Margaret Mary's life. Her biography recounts a life of enormous suffering, coupled with her “burning eagerness to be buried in an eternal oblivion, forgotten by all creatures” (JAMES J. DOYLE, SJ). Yet, whether the pain she felt appeared in her head or her side or her inmost being, she came to recognize, through her adoration of the blessed sacrament, that *Even the most bitter sufferings are sweet in this adorable Heart, where everything is changed into love* (letter to Mother de Saumaise, at Moulins, around 1680). For St. Margaret Mary, this is no mere pious sentiment. She knew first hand that the Eucharist is a *medicina salutis*, as she explains in another of her letters:

I must tell you, she says, ... that Our Lord, on the feast of Corpus Christi [June 20, 1680], did me the favor of removing all of a sudden the great weakness to which I had been reduced. For after Holy Communion I found myself as strong and healthy as I had been before I had taken to my bed a month earlier (letter to Mother de Saumaise, at Moulins, July 10, 1680).

The transformation that Margaret Mary experienced is what we mean, theologically, when we speak in terms of **“transubstantiation”**. A contemporary theologian, TERENCE NICHOLS, recently proposed a novel way of understanding this sacramental mystery (*Commeanweal*, 7 October 2005). In our liturgical celebration of the Mass, he argues,

The substances of bread and wine after consecration are incorporated into a larger substance, the risen and glorified body of Jesus. Hence ... (t)hey exist no longer in themselves – as natural substances – but have been ingrafted into and exist entirely within another substance, the glorified body of Christ. Therefore, they can be said to be transubstantiated. ... Their natural mode of existence has been entirely taken up into the supernatural reality of the glorified Christ. Therefore they can be said truly to be the body and blood of Christ, and no longer what we normally mean by bread and wine....

The saint whose feast we celebrate today came to know this divine mystery through her own faithful adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. There, too, she brought before the Lord in prayer another great suffering.

Befitting the saint that she is, Margaret Mary suffered a perpetual torment at the hands of others. But that affliction was interior more than external. And the others who are its source are none other than you and me ... and the entire Church, when we fail to appreciate the Eucharist. *It is a martyrdom to me, she writes, to think He is so little loved there (in the Blessed Sacrament), and that there are so many hearts that reject His pure love, forget it, and spurn it* (letter to Mother de Saumaise, at Moulins, 1682). With such a gracious gift readily, and literally, at hand, this apostle of the Sacred Heart agonizes over **how we so often do not recognize the love being offered to us**.

In particular, one experience in 1687 reveals her passion:

I cannot help telling you, she writes, ... the grace I received on Good Friday. Having a great longing to receive Our Lord, with many tears I spoke these words to Him: “Loving Jesus, I want to be consumed in desiring You, and not being able to receive You today, I shall none the less keep on desiring You.” Thereupon He came to console me with His sweet presence, saying to me: “My daughter, your desire has pierced My Heart so deeply that if I had not already

instituted this Sacrament of love, I would do so now to become your food. I take such great pleasure in this longing that, as often as a heart forms this desire for Me, I look upon it lovingly to draw it to Myself.” This vision impressed me so deeply, she adds, that I felt great pain at seeing my Jesus so little desired in this august Sacrament. I found it especially hard to bear when anyone spoke with coldness or indifference about it (letter to Mother de Saumaise, at Dijon, April 1687).

Unfortunately, that coldness or indifference toward the Eucharist is not a phenomenon relegated to the 17th century. As recently as the 1990’s, a Gallup poll revealed that only 30% of American Catholics believe that they are actually receiving the body and blood of Christ when they receive Communion.

Surely that is not the case here this evening, as we gather around this altar to celebrate this special feast. But it behooves us who are here, and the Church as whole, to rekindle a genuine desire for receiving God and His grace in this precious sacrament. As this “Year of the Eucharist” comes to a close, it now becomes our task to renew our own appreciation for the Eucharist. If, as Pope John Paul II remarked, amazement is the attitude toward which the action of the Eucharist should lead us (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, nn. 5-6), then let us be amazed and be grateful. And let us endeavor to share that joy with others, for if each of us can bring back to the Sacrament someone who has wandered away from the Mass, then this holy year will be a continuing success.

It is our joy to celebrate this amazing sacrament with you who are Sisters of the Visitation of Holy Mary. It remains our hope that you will continue to share in the spiritual life and legacy of your sister, St. Margaret Mary. And when you come in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament each day, we ask you to pray for us and for the suffering of the whole Church. Pray that we might never become cold or indifferent toward the gift that we have at hand in the Eucharist. Pray that we might grow in our ability to render to God what is God’s ... and thereby develop hearts full of gratitude for the gift of Himself that he gives to us in the sacred liturgy.

Together, as St. Paul writes in today’s second reading, “We give thanks to God always for all of you.” We “unceasingly call to mind your work of faith and labor of love” as we celebrate the faith and love of St. Margaret Mary Alacoque. We know that through her life and her teaching, the “gospel did not come ...in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.” May the power of her sanctity continue to inspire our own faith convictions, as we say together: ***St. Margaret Mary, pray for us.***

+ May God Be Praised +