



Eucharist: A Sacrament to be Adored

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On the occasion of the 750th anniversary of the first celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi, the Holy Father wrote a letter to Bishop Albert Houssiau of Liege, Belgium, successor of Bishop Robert of Thourotte, who in 1246 had established the feast which was later extended to the universal Church by Pope Urban IV. Here is a translation of the Pope's Letter, which was dated 28 May and written in French.

To Bishop Albert Houssiau of Liege, Belgium...

1. In 1246, Robert of Thourotte, your distant predecessor in the see of Liege, instituted in his Diocese the Eucharistic feast now known as *Corpus Christi*, at the request of Juliana of Cornillon, who had already composed an office for *Corpus Christi*, Eve of St. Martin and other women of Liege. A few years later in 1264, Pope Urban IV made this feast of the *Body of Christ* a holy day of obligation for the universal Church, thereby expressing the importance of venerating the Eucharistic Body of our Savior. On the occasion of the 750th anniversary of the institution of this feast, as I join all the pilgrims who will be participating in the jubilee ceremonies and the faithful all over the world who ceaselessly pray before the Blessed Sacrament, I raise a fervent prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord.

2. Jesus is no longer present to men in the same way that he was on the roads of Palestine. After the Resurrection, he appeared in his glorious body to the women and to his disciples. Then he took the Apostles and "led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them... he parted from them... and was carried up into heaven" (Lk. 24:50-51). But in ascending to the Father, Christ did not distance himself from men. He dwells forever in the midst of his brethren and, just as he promised, he accompanies them and guides them with his Spirit. Henceforth, his presence is of another kind. Indeed, "at the Last Supper, after celebrating the Passover with his disciples and when he was about to pass from this world to his Father, Christ instituted this sacrament as the perpetual memorial of his Passion..., the greatest of all his miracles, and he left this sacrament to those whom his absence filled with grief, as an incomparable consolation" (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Office of Corpus Christi*, ST 4). Every time we celebrate the Eucharist in the Church, we recall the death of the Savior, we proclaim his Resurrection as we await his return. Thus no sacrament is greater or more precious than that of the Eucharist; and when we receive Communion, we are incorporated into Christ. Our life is transformed and taken up by the Lord.

3. Outside the Eucharistic celebration, the Church is careful to venerate the Blessed Sacrament, which must be reserved... as the spiritual center of the religious and parish community" (Paul VI, *Mysterium fidei*, n. 68). Contemplation prolongs Communion and enables one to meet Christ,

true God and true man, in a lasting way, to let oneself be seen by him and to experience his presence. When we contemplate him present in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, Christ draws near to us and becomes more intimate to us than we are to ourselves. He grants us a share in his divine life in a transforming union and, in the Spirit, he gives us access to the Father, as he himself said to Philip: "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn. 14:9). Contemplation, which is also a Communion of desire, intimately associates us with Christ, and in a very special way associates those who are prevented from receiving it.

Remaining in silence before the Blessed Sacrament, it is Christ totally and really present whom we discover, whom we adore and with whom we are in contact. However, it is not through the senses that we perceive him and are close to him. Under the appearances of bread and wine, it is faith and love which lead us to recognize the Lord, he who fully communicates to us "the blessings of the Redemption which he accomplished, he, the Master, the Good Shepherd, the Mediator most pleasing to the Father" (Leo XIII, *Mirae caritatis*). As the *Livre de la foi* of the Belgian Bishops recalls, prayer of adoration in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament unites the faithful "with the paschal mystery; it enables them to share in Christ's sacrifice, of which the Eucharist is the 'permanent sacrament'".

4. In honoring the Blessed Sacrament, we also offer a profound thanksgiving to the Father, for in his Son he visited us and redeemed his people. Through the sacrifice of the Cross Jesus gave his life to the world and made us his adoptive children, in his image, establishing a particularly intimate relationship that enables us to call God by the beautiful name of *Father*. As Scripture reminds us, Jesus spent nights in prayer, especially at the moments when he had to make important decisions. In his prayer, by an act of filial trust and in imitation of his Lord and Master, the Christian opens his heart and his hands to receive God's gift and to thank him for his freely offered blessings.

5. It is invaluable to converse with Christ and, leaning against Jesus' breast like his beloved disciple, we can feel the infinite love of his Heart. We learn to know more deeply the One who gave himself totally, in the different mysteries of his divine and human life, so that we may become disciples and in turn enter into this great act of giving, for the glory of God and the salvation of the world. "Following Christ is not an outward imitation, since it touches man at the very depths of his being" (*Veritatis splendor*, n. 21). We are called to learn from him, to let the Spirit act within us and to fulfill the mission entrusted to us. In particular, Christ's love spurs us to work constantly for the unity of his Church, to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth, and to serve men; "we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread" (1 Cor. 10:17): such is the Good News which gladdens man's heart and shows him that he is called to take part in the blessed life with God. The Eucharistic mystery is the source, the center and the summit of the Church's spiritual and charitable activity (cf. *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 6).

Closeness to Christ in silence and contemplation does not distance us from our contemporaries but, on the contrary, makes us attentive and open to human joy and distress and broadens our heart on a global scale. It unites us with our brothers and sisters in humanity and particularly with children, who are the Lord's dearly beloved. Through adoration, the Christian mysteriously contributes to the radical transformation of the world and to the sowing of the Gospel. Anyone who prays to the Savior draws the whole world with him and raises it to God. Those who stand before the Lord are therefore fulfilling an eminent service. They are presenting to Christ all those who do not know him or are far from him: they keep watch in his presence on their behalf.

6. On the occasion of this jubilee, I encourage priests to revive the memory of their priestly ordination, by which Christ called them to take part in a particular way in his one priesthood, especially in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice and in building up his Mystical Body which is the Church. May they remember the words spoken by the Bishop at their ordination liturgy: "Know what you are doing, and imitate the mystery you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord's Cross"! In drawing from the source of the sacred mysteries by faithful and regular periods of contemplation, they will derive spiritual fruit for their personal life and their ministry, and, in turn, they will be able to make the Christian people entrusted to their care capable of understanding the greatness "of their own particular sharing in the priesthood of Christ" (*Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday 1996*, n. 2; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 27 March 1996, p. 3).

7. "When the faithful adore Christ present in the sacrament, they should remember that his presence derives from the sacrifice and is directed towards both sacramental and spiritual communion" (Sacred Congregation of Rites, *Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery*, n. 50). I therefore encourage Christians regularly to visit Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament of the altar, for we are all called to abide in the presence of God, thanks to him who is with us until the end of time. In contemplation, Christians will perceive ever more profoundly that the paschal mystery is at the heart of all Christian life. This practice leads them to join more intensely in the paschal mystery and to make the Eucharistic sacrifice, the perfect gift, the center of their life in accordance with their specific vocation, for it "confers an incomparable dignity upon the Christian people" (Paul VI, *Mysterium fidei*, n. 67); in fact, during the Eucharist, we are welcomed by Christ, we receive his forgiveness, we are nourished by his word and his bread, we are then sent out on mission in the world; thus each one is called to witness to what he has received and to do the same for his brethren. The faithful strengthen their hope by discovering that with Christ suffering and distress can be transfigured, for with him we have already returned from death to life. As a result, when they offer the Lord of history their own life, their work and all creation, their days are illumined by him.

8. I urge priests, religious and lay people to continue and redouble their efforts to teach the younger generations the meaning and value of Eucharistic adoration and devotion. How will young people be able to know the Lord if they are not introduced to the mystery of his presence? Like the young Samuel, by learning the words of the prayer of the heart, they will be closer to the Lord, who will accompany them in their spiritual and human growth, and in the missionary witness which they must give throughout their life. The Eucharistic mystery is in fact the "summit of evangelization" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 28), for it is the most eminent testimony to Christ's Resurrection. All interior life needs silence and intimacy with Christ in order to develop. This gradual familiarity with the Lord will enable certain young people to be involved in serving as acolytes and to taking a more active part in Mass; for young boys, to be near the altar is also a privileged opportunity to hear Christ's call to follow him more radically in the priestly ministry.

9. As I commend you to the intercession of the Mother of God, St. Juliana, and also St. Lambert and St. Hubert, zealous evangelizers of your country, and all the saints of your land, I cordially grant my Apostolic Blessing to you, to all the members of the diocesan community and to the faithful who during the year will take part in the various events of the jubilee.

From the Vatican, 28 May 1996

Joannes Paulus II