

Meals and Sacrifice in the Magisterium

Abbé Denis LE PIVAIN (France)¹

I shall take as my starting point a text which, whilst not strictly speaking part of the Magisterium, nevertheless expresses the thoughts of Pope John Paul II as a private author. These are a few extracts from his autobiographical book on his vocation, **My Vocation: Gift and Mystery**, a book written on the occasion of his priestly jubilee and which seeks to explain the meaning of his vocation, and thus also the meaning of the priesthood.

The true meaning of Christ's priesthood has always appeared to me with extraordinary eloquence in the litanies we used to recite at the seminary in Krakow, particularly on the eve of priestly ordination. I am referring to *the Litanies of Christ, Priest and Victim*. What profound reflections they stirred within me! In the sacrifice of the Cross, represented and made present in every Eucharist, Christ offers himself for the salvation of the world. The litany invocations survey the various aspects of the mystery. They come back to my mind with the evocative symbolism of the biblical images from which they are woven. I still have them on my lips in Latin, the language in which I recited them during my seminary days, and then many times in the years that followed. (p.93)² These lines aim to shed light on the priesthood of Christ continued through priests, to convey

as its identity, but an identity that is inseparable from the Eucharist:

“During Mass, after transubstantiation, the priest pronounces the words: *Mysterium fidei* – Mystery of faith! These are words that obviously refer to the Eucharist. But, in a certain sense, they also concern the priesthood. There is no Eucharist without the priesthood, just as there is no priesthood without the Eucharist.” (p.91) “Fifty years after my ordination, I can say that every day I find, in this *Mysterium Fidei*, the meaning of my priesthood.” (p.92)

It follows from these statements that, through the Eucharist to which it is ordered, “the priesthood of all priests is part of the mystery of Redemption”. (p.95). For the Eucharist cannot be separated from the sacrifice of the Cross. This link between the Eucharist and the sacrifice of the Cross is summarised as follows: it represents and sacramentally actualises it. This therefore means that the Mass, like the Last Supper before it, has no content of its own other than to bring about, in a particular place and time, the one

¹ Lecture delivered at the 3rd CIEL Colloquium in Versailles, October 1997.

² This is the meaning of the following invocations taken from the litanies:

- “Jesus Christ, who instituted at the Last Supper the memorial of your sacrifice”.
- “Through this same sacrifice renewed daily on the altar, Jesus Christ, deliver us”.

redemptive sacrifice and to unite the faithful to it. The sacramental mode of the Mass's existence refers to a prior reality, which is the Cross, to which all the faithful are invited to commune in order to live from God.

For Pope John Paul II, the Eucharist is therefore inseparable from the sacrifice of the Cross.

Eucharistic communion has a sacrificial dimension

This truth is strongly affirmed in John Paul II's encyclical on Christ the Redeemer, the first in a trilogy comprising the one on the Father's mercy and the one on the Holy Spirit:

“The Eucharist is the most perfect sacrament of union with Christ. But we are united to Christ only through the redemptive act of his sacrifice.” This sacrament “is at once sacrament and sacrifice, sacrament and communion, sacrament and presence. And although it is true that the Eucharist has always been and must continue to be the deepest revelation and the finest celebration of the brotherhood of Christ's disciples and of those who bear witness to him, it cannot be treated merely as an occasion for manifesting this brotherhood.” (R.H.20)

Thus, the Eucharist-communion, the *convivium* or meal, is first and foremost communion with the sacrifice made present. This truth is expounded at length throughout Pope Pius XII's encyclical on the liturgy, **Mediator Dei**, the fiftieth anniversary of which we shall celebrate on 20 November. For Pius XII, the active participation of the faithful—highly recommended by all the popes of this century, and culminating in sacramental communion—is a participation in Christ's sacrifice: to receive the Body of Christ at the holy table is to share in his sacrifice and to actualise the Redemption within us. Therefore, we can only praise the reform that restored the faithful's reception of Communion during the celebration of Mass. And even the recommendation, where possible, to receive Communion with hosts consecrated during the same Mass. As I cannot quote everything, I shall merely outline the main points of Pius XII's reasoning *in Mediator Dei*:

The redemptive sacrifice of the Cross is unique and infinite:

The Apostle to the Gentiles, in proclaiming the superabundant fullness and perfection of the sacrifice of the Cross, declared that Christ, by a single offering, has made all the sanctified perfect for ever (cf. Heb. 10:14). Indeed, the merits of this sacrifice, infinite and immeasurable, know no bounds: they extend to all mankind in every place and every age, because the God-Man is both its Priest and its Victim; because his immolation, like his obedience to the will of the eternal Father, was absolutely perfect, and because he willed to die as Head of the human race.

Its efficacy must extend to all men:

This redemption, however, does not immediately achieve its full effect: Christ must, after having redeemed the world at the most precious price of himself, actually take real possession of the souls of men. Therefore, for their Redemption and salvation—as regards individuals and all the generations that will follow until the end of time—to be realised and accepted by God, it is absolutely necessary that each person individually enter into a vital connection with the sacrifice of the Cross, and thus that the merits flowing from it be transmitted to them. In a certain sense, it may be said that on Calvary Christ established a pool of expiation and salvation, which He filled with His shed blood; but unless men immerse themselves in its waters and wash away the stains of their sins, they can certainly not obtain purification or salvation.

The Eucharist is therefore the continuation of the redemptive sacrifice:

But the cooperation of the faithful is necessary. Therefore, so that every sinner may be cleansed in the blood of the Lamb, Christians must necessarily unite their efforts with those of Christ. For whilst it may be said, in general terms, that Christ has reconciled the whole human race to his Father through his bloody death, he nevertheless willed that, in order to obtain the saving fruits produced by him on the cross, all should be led and brought to his cross, chiefly through the sacraments and through the Eucharistic sacrifice. In this present and personal participation, just as the members take on a greater likeness to their divine Head each day, so too is the life of salvation flowing from the Head communicated to the members, so that we may repeat the words of Saint Paul: ‘It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’ (Gal 2:19-20)

Now, the holy sacrifice of the altar is, as it were, the instrument par excellence through which the merits flowing from the cross of the divine Redeemer are distributed.

Participation of all the faithful in the Eucharistic sacrifice:

“It is therefore necessary, venerable brothers, that all Christians regard it as a primary duty and a supreme honour to participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice, and this not in a passive and careless manner, with their minds on other things, but with an attention and fervour that unite them closely to the High Priest.”

It is clear, as John Paul II affirmed, that communion with Christ, fully realised in the *convivial gathering* at the holy table, is a communion with Christ the Priest and Victim, and, in their own way, for the faithful as well.

Moreover, Christ, in his work, is the head of a body that must follow the same path:

Christ is certainly a priest, but he is a priest for us, not for himself, for he offers prayers and devotional sentiments to the Eternal Father on behalf of the whole human race. Likewise, he is a sacrifice, but for us, since he places himself in the place of the guilty man. The Apostle's words: 'Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus', therefore require all Christians to reproduce, as far as is humanly possible, the sentiments which animated the divine Redeemer when he offered the sacrifice of himself; that is to say, that they should imitate his humble submission of spirit, that they should adore, honour, praise and give thanks to the supreme majesty of God. He further asks that they, in a manner of speaking, take upon themselves the condition of a victim...

However, the fact that Christians participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice does not imply that they also enjoy priestly power. It is absolutely necessary that you make this clear to your faithful".

The faithful themselves participate actively in the sacrifice; they are members of the Church which, in Christ, is both the one offering and the one offered, priest and victim.

The Church as the offering: "participation insofar as they offer it together with the priest.

These truths are of certain faith; the faithful, however, also offer the divine Victim, but in a different way.

This is affirmed by the Church

This has already been very clearly affirmed by some of our predecessors and by the Doctors of the Church. "Not only—so says Innocent III, of blessed memory—do priests offer, but also all the faithful, for what is accomplished in a special way through the ministry of priests is accomplished in a universal way through the prayer of the faithful" (*De sacro altaris Mysterior*, III, 6).

This is expressed by the rites themselves

The rites and prayers of the Eucharistic sacrifice express and manifest no less clearly that the oblation of the victim is made by the priests at the same time as by the people. For not only, after the offering of the bread and wine, does the minister of the sacrifice, turning towards the people, expressly say: "May my sacrifice, which is also yours, find favour with God, the almighty Father", but, moreover, the prayers by which the divine host is offered to God are, for the most part, formulated in the plural, and it is indicated more than once that the people, too, take part in this august sacrifice insofar as they offer it. We find, for example: "We therefore pray to you, Lord, to accept with a gracious heart this offering from your servants and from your whole household..."

We, your servants, together with your holy people, offer to your glorious Majesty that which you yourself have given us and continue to give us, the pure host, the holy host, the immaculate host”.

Offering of bread and wine by the faithful

Sometimes – as was more common in the past – the faithful offer the bread and wine to the ministers of the altar so that they may become the Body and Blood of Christ; the alms they give to the priest are intended to ensure that the divine Victim is offered up for them.

Sacrifice offered by the faithful

To prevent pernicious errors arising in this very important matter, the meaning of the word must be precisely defined. The bloodless immolation, by means of which, after the words of consecration, Christ is made present on the altar as a victim, is performed by the priest alone insofar as he represents the person of Christ, not insofar as he represents the person of the faithful. But by the fact that the priest places the divine victim on the altar, he presents it to God the Father as an offering, for the glory of the Most Holy Trinity and the good of the whole Church. Now, in this oblation, in the strict sense, the faithful take part in their own way and in a twofold manner, not only because they offer the sacrifice through the hands of the priest, but also because they offer it with him, as it were, and this participation ensures that the offering of the people is linked to the liturgical worship itself. That the faithful, through the hands of the priest, offer the sacrifice is clearly evident from the fact that the minister of the altar represents Christ as the head offering on behalf of all his members; this is why the universal Church is rightly said to present, through Christ, the offering of the victim. If the people offer at the same time as the priest, it is not because the members of the Church perform the visible liturgical rite in the same way as the priest himself—which is the sole prerogative of the minister delegated by God for this purpose—but because they unite their intentions of praise, supplication, expiation and thanksgiving with the intentions or mental acts of the priest, and indeed of the High Priest, in order to present them to God the Father within the very external rite of the priest offering the sacrifice. The external rite of the sacrifice, indeed, must necessarily, by its very nature, manifest the inner worship; now, the sacrifice of the New Law signifies the supreme homage by which the principal offerer, who is Christ, and with Him and through Him all His mystical members, render to God the honour and respect due to Him.”

The Church offered. “**Participation insofar as they must offer themselves as victims.** For the oblation, by which in this sacrifice they offer the divine Victim to the heavenly Father, to achieve its full effect, Christians must add something further: they must

sacrifice themselves as victims. This self-sacrifice is not limited merely to the liturgical sacrifice...

By purifying their souls

In the liturgical books, Christians who approach the altar are invited to participate in the ceremonies: “May innocence be honoured upon this altar, pride sacrificed, anger stifled; may lust and all disorder be struck down; may the sacrifice of chastity be offered in place of turtledoves, and the sacrifice of innocence in place of young doves” (consecration of the altar). When we are at the altar, we must therefore transform our soul; all that is sinful within it must be completely stifled, and all that, through Christ, brings forth supernatural life must be vigorously restored and strengthened, so that we may become, together with the immaculate Host, a single victim pleasing to the Eternal Father.

By reproducing the image of Jesus Christ

All the elements of the liturgy thus urge our soul to reproduce within itself, through the mystery of the Cross, the image of our divine Redeemer, in accordance with the words of the Apostle: ‘I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me’ (Gal. 2:19–20). In this way we become a sacrifice with Christ for the greater glory of the Father.

It is therefore towards this ideal that Christians must direct and lift up their souls when they offer the divine Victim in the Eucharistic sacrifice. For, as St Augustine writes, on the Lord’s own table rests our mystery, that is to say, Christ the Lord himself, inasmuch as he is the Head and symbol of that union by which we are the Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:27) and the members of his Body (cf. Eph. 5:30); if Saint Robert Bellarmine teaches, in the spirit of the Doctor of Hippo, that in the sacrifice of the altar is expressed the general sacrifice by which the whole mystical Body of Christ, that is to say, the whole redeemed city, offers itself to God through Christ, the High Priest, nothing could be more fitting or more just than for us all to offer ourselves to the Eternal Father together with our Head, who suffered for us. For in the sacrament of the altar, according to the same Augustine, it is shown to the Church that in the sacrifice she offers, she herself is also offered.

Let the faithful therefore consider to what dignity the sacred bath of Baptism has raised them, and let them not be content merely to participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice with the general intention befitting the members of Christ and the children of the Church, but, in accordance with the spirit of the holy liturgy, freely and intimately united with the High Priest and his minister on earth, they unite themselves to him in a special way at the moment of the consecration of the divine host, and that they offer it with

him when the solemn words are pronounced: “Through Him, with Him, in Him, to You, almighty God the Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, be all honour and glory for ever and ever”, words to which the people respond: “Amen”. And may Christians not forget, together with the crucified Divine Head, to offer themselves and their concerns, their sorrows, their anxieties, their miseries and their needs”.

In conclusion on this point: “To regard the Mass merely as a banquet in which one participates by receiving the Body of Christ, primarily to manifest fraternal communion” (Letter of Holy Thursday 1980, no. 9) is not sufficient. Such a reduction explains, moreover, why all participants often receive Communion without sufficient discernment.

The Holy Mass is a banquet, yes, but a sacrificial banquet, of union with Christ in the sacrifice of the Cross, made present anew.

The Eucharist also has an ecclesial and communal dimension: the *Paschal conviviality*

Union with Christ through the redemptive sacrifice, and union within the Church; it is therefore true that the Eucharist is communion-union, the expression and realisation of the brotherhood of Christ’s disciples. Moreover, in the language of the popes, the Eucharist is called the holy table or the sacred banquet (*convivium*). Thus Benedict XIV, in his encyclical *Certiores effecti*, 13, XI 1742.

Pius XII affirmed: “The august sacrifice of the altar is concluded by communion at the divine meal. However, to ensure the integrity of this sacrifice, it is sufficient for the priest to receive communion” (*Mediator Dei*)

The divine meal is therefore an act of the sacrifice, its conclusion.

There, seated together at the same divine table, participants in the same spiritual banquet, all united in Christ and forming in Him a single family, a single body, you will feel charity kindled within you...” (radio message of 31 October 1948)

This meal is a “powerful sign of the intimate union that God wishes to establish with every human being”. (Address of 12 September 1956)

The Second Vatican Council highlighted the close link between the Eucharist and the life of the Church: “By truly sharing in the Body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are raised to communion with Him and with one another. “Since there is but one bread, we all form one body, for we all partake of this one bread (1 Cor. 10:17)” (L.G. 7)”.

The Last Supper, and therefore the Mass, re-enacts the sacrifice of Calvary in the form of a meal. The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that the Eucharistic sacrifice is entirely directed towards the intimate union of the faithful with Christ (CCC 1384). Moreover, according to theology, the *res et sacramentum* (the real presence of Christ under both species) is both the sign and the cause of the *res tantum* (union with Christ).

Finally, as part of the redemptive sacrifice, this banquet is the prelude to the heavenly banquet, the *mensa caelestis*: “The Lord has left his own a pledge of this hope and a provision for the journey: the sacrament of faith, in which elements of nature, cultivated by man, are transformed into his glorious Body and Blood. It is the meal of fraternal communion, a foretaste of the heavenly banquet.” (G.S. 38) From this we see that, in accordance with the antiphon *O sacrum convivium*, the communal dimension is rooted in and culminates in an essentially theocentric dimension that begins with the redemptive sacrifice and culminates in perfect union with God.

These two aspects of the Eucharist (meal and sacrifice) are therefore not contradictory. The sacrifice is directed towards the union of the faithful with Christ. This union is part of the redemptive sacrifice renewed during every Mass. (cf. Radio Message of Pius XII to the International Eucharistic Congress in Rio. 24 July 1955)

The reason for the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist

The priest, at the altar, truly performs a sacrifice, that of the Cross made sacramentally present.

In that same letter of Holy Thursday, John Paul II states more emphatically: “The Eucharist is above all a sacrifice: a sacrifice of Redemption and, at the same time, a sacrifice of the New Covenant. The celebrant performs the sacrificial act ... making present the one redemptive sacrifice”.

How? “This sacrifice, brought about by the consecration of the sacred species, makes present once more, in a sacramental and bloodless manner, the bloody sacrifice of propitiation which Christ offered to the Father on the Cross for the salvation of the world. For he alone, by offering himself as a victim of propitiation in an act of supreme self-giving and immolation, has reconciled humanity with the Father through his sacrifice alone.” (No. 9). The dual and distinct consecration of the bread and wine makes present in a sacramental manner the sacrifice of the Cross, the sacrifice of salvation.

Elsewhere, the Pope states:

Under these species, he entrusted his sacrifice to the Church, the one and only sacrifice. (Letter JS 97, no. 3) Priests are ministers of this sacrament in which the sacrifice he offered for the Redemption of the world must continue to be renewed and actualised. (Letter JS 85, no. 2)

It follows from these texts that, through ordination, the priest is truly a priest in the sense that his action is, *in persona Christi*, to make the redemptive sacrifice present anew. In this, the Eucharist prolongs Calvary and draws all the faithful to it. The Eucharist is a sacrifice because Redemption is made present through it in all the faithful. It should be noted that the Pope affirms the propitiatory, salvific nature of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

The Council of Trent

The theology expressed at the Council of Trent, and reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council, is contained in two decrees:

The decree on the Eucharist, promulgated during the 13th session, focuses on the Eucharist as a sacrament, in particular transubstantiation, which is not the subject of our discussion. It is stated, however, that Christ willed this sacrament so that it “might be received as spiritual food for souls, nourishing and strengthening those who live by the life of Him who said, ‘Whoever eats me will live through me’” (DS.1638).

This meal here on earth is the prelude to the meal of eternity, where we shall eat “without any veil the bread of angels which we now eat under the sacred veils” (DS.1650).

This sacrament is also that of the sacrifice of the Mass, defined in a decree promulgated at the 22nd session.

The Eucharist is a true, proper and unique sacrifice (*verum, proprium et singulare*). It is no other sacrifice than that of the Cross, which it makes present in a different, bloodless and sacramental manner. It is the same Saviour who is contained and sacramentally immolated on the Eucharistic altar, under the sign of the separation of the species.

Thus, as the Secret of the 9th Sunday after Pentecost will reiterate, “Every time we celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice, the work of our Redemption is accomplished.” The Mass applies the sacrifice of the Cross to every time and place, thereby fulfilling Christ’s words: “When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself.”

A visible sacrifice, the Mass is a propitiatory sacrifice, and “if we approach God with a sincere heart, with upright faith, with fear and reverence, contrite and penitent, we obtain mercy and find grace for timely help”. (DS 1743) Through the Mass, “the saving power of the Cross is applied to the redemption of the sins we commit each day.” (DS 1740)

A sacrifice offered, finally, for the living and the dead.

Tridentine theology does not separate the sacrifice from the Eucharistic table, the latter being the table of the sacrifice to which we are invited. It is the New Passover which takes the place of that of the Hebrews, the pure oblation offered in every place in the name of the Lord, and which the Apostle Saint Paul “clearly designated when he said that those who have defiled themselves by partaking of the table of demons cannot partake of the table of the Lord, meaning, by the word table, the altar”. (DS.1744) Note the identity between the table and the altar.

The meal is therefore that of the Lord's sacrifice, from which, by receiving Communion, we obtain Redemption and the grace of the spiritual life, a pledge of eternity.

This Tridentine theology is perfectly in accord with the words of St Thomas, *Sacrificium per modum cibi*.

The Mass is therefore a real and true sacrifice—oblation and immolation—substantially identical to that of the Cross, which is repeated there in a sacramental manner; it is also a sacrifice of communion through food.

That this doctrine has been interpreted in a physicalist sense, seeking to give the sacrifice of the Mass an identity of its own, distinct from that of the Cross, is beyond doubt, and we have seen a multitude of immolationist theories flourish alongside purely oblationist theories, seeking to give the sacrifice of the Mass an identity that does not refer it to the Cross (the theory of the priest's words as a sword, of the *fractio panis* regarded as an immolation...).

Nevertheless, it remains true that the Eucharistic sacrifice makes the sacrifice of the Cross present in a different but real way, such that in this sacrifice, "the Church immolates Christ through the priests" (DS 1741), through this bloodless immolation which is signified sacramentally and thus made truly present under the separation of the species.

The Council finally emphasised the value of the so-called private Mass, that is to say, one celebrated outside the community. (DS 1747)

The value of every private Mass

This doctrine, unanimously accepted but sometimes misunderstood, was undermined during the pontificate of Pius XII, as certain liturgists tended to conceive of the sacrifice of the Mass solely in a communal dimension, thereby relegating the notion of sacrifice to the background. The emphasis placed on *the Convivium*, to the exclusion of the sacrifice, manifested itself in the rejection of private Masses, in which the communal dimension was no longer visible. This gave the Last Supper, and therefore the Mass, a reality of its own that was limited to the banquet. In this respect, albeit with opposing conclusions, their conception differed not from that of previous centuries, which sought in the Mass a sacrifice other than that of the Cross. Both groups attributed to the *fractio panis* a separable and distinct identity, either as a sacrifice (M. Cano) or as a fraternal meal independent in itself (modernists).

Pope Pius XII responded notably in the encyclical *Mediator Dei*. He intervened at a time when certain abuses in the theology of the Mystical Body were leading to a failure to recognise the value of any celebration lacking a communal character. What was true in the broader sphere of divine worship was also reflected in its very heart, namely the holy Eucharistic sacrifice.

The Pope reiterates the doctrine of the Council of Trent regarding the reality of the sacrifice of the Mass, emphasising that this sacrifice is one and the same as that of Calvary: “The holy sacrifice of the altar is therefore not a mere commemoration of the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ, but a true sacrifice, in the proper sense, in which, through a bloodless immolation, the High Priest does what he did on the Cross, offering himself to the eternal Father as a most pleasing offering.” In this sacrifice, the Priest is the same, Christ offering himself in the Priest, *alter christus*; the victim is the same; the ends are the same, namely:

"1 – the glorification of the Heavenly Father,

2 - thanksgiving, expiation

3 - propitiation and reconciliation

4 - intercession"

Drawing on Pauline theology of Redemption, Pope Pius XII affirms that the Eucharistic sacrifice brings about the work of Redemption through a “vital contact between the souls of all ages and the sacrifice of the Cross”. Thus, “Christ, having redeemed the world at the most precious price of Himself, effectively takes real possession of the souls of men”.

It is the Church that continues to offer and immolate.

On several occasions, Pope Pius XII had to reiterate this teaching and reaffirm the link between the priesthood and the sacrifice, and how every Mass, being the action of Christ, possesses its full value in itself, whether or not it is celebrated in the presence of the faithful.

Address to the Episcopate (2 Nov. 1954)

The proper and principal office of the priest has always been and remains to offer the sacrifice, so that where there is no power to sacrifice properly speaking, there is no true priesthood either.

The doctrinal deviation did not directly undermine the notion of sacrifice but placed the communal element first, to the point of asserting that there is “a certain real power of sacrifice for all those who devoutly assist at the sacrifice of the Mass, even if they are laypeople”.

For these liturgists, “Christ’s command, ‘Do this in memory of me’, is directed to the whole Church of Christians”.

For the Pope, “the celebration of a single Holy Mass attended devoutly by a hundred priests is not equivalent to a hundred Masses celebrated by a hundred priests... There are as many acts of Christ the High Priest as there are priests celebrating”.

For the Mass is the action of Christ.

On the occasion of the International Congress on Liturgical Pastoral Care held in Assisi, Pius XII delivered an important speech on 22 September and reaffirmed once again the value of the private Mass

as a sacrifice and action of Christ the Priest. The Pope emphasised the sacrificial dimension of liturgical worship: “Just as the altar and the sacrifice dominate liturgical worship, so it must be said of the life of Christ that it is entirely governed by the sacrifice of the Cross”.

None of this detracts in any way from the need for the faithful to approach the holy table, but it is important to see how Communion, the *convivium*, is communion with the sacrifice of Christ and of the Church. The communal dimension is therefore true only in this unity with Christ in his sacrifice. The latter cannot be subordinated to collective action. And above all, one cannot reduce the action of the celebrating priest, *the actio Christi*, to that of the faithful who actively associate themselves in this action of Christ, *seipsum sacrificantis et offerantis*.

“The Eucharistic sacrifice is not, strictly speaking, a concelebration” (address of 2 November 1954) and Pius XII refutes those who think that “priests should concelebrate with the people present rather than offer the sacrifice privately in the absence of the people” (*ibid.*)

It is worth noting in passing that, in extremis, the 1983 Code follows the same line of thought when it grants each priest “the freedom to celebrate the Eucharist individually” (can. 902).

The discussion at the Second Vatican Council

As we have seen in the writings of His Holiness John Paul II, the Pope warns against a conception of *the Eucharist-convivium* in a purely horizontal sense, as a fraternal meal. To sever the Eucharist (we are speaking of the Eucharistic celebration) from its sacrificial dimension would be to empty it of its content and distort union with Christ.

The debate came to the fore during the Second Vatican Council, in the discussion on the constitution on the liturgy.

This concerns Chapter 2 and, in particular, the definition of the Mass in No. 47. Before the final text, there were no fewer than four drafts. It was the last one that provoked strong reactions in the General Congregation, particularly from Cardinal B ea. The latter criticised the text for failing to take into account the teaching of the Council of Trent on the sacrificial aspect. Cardinal Brown O.P. supported this by demonstrating, drawing on St Thomas Aquinas, the weakness of the text which sought to draw inspiration from him. “The Eucharist, as St Thomas clearly explains, is the Sacrament and the sacrifice of the suffering Christ and the dying Christ, a doctrine contained in the antiphon ‘*O Sacrum convivium*’”

Here is the text proposed to the Council

Fathers: The Mystery of the Eucharist.

“Our Saviour, at the Last Supper, on the night He was betrayed, commanded His apostles to repeat

this Paschal meal (*convivium*) in memory of Him, until He comes. He thus wished that His victory over death and His triumph might be represented, and that this might be for the Church, His

beloved Bride, the great sacrament of the Faith, the source and model of unity, the sacrifice of praise, the pledge and foreshadowing of the banquet of Heaven.” (ASSCV, Volume II, *Periodus Secunda, Pars II, CG X.III*, p. 283)

The interventions led the conciliar commission on liturgy to amend the preamble to this Chapter 2. The amendment received 2,278 votes out of 2,298 voters (12 against, 1 conditional yes, 7 invalid), representing near-unanimity. It was the amendment that received the most votes in the entire constitution.

The text adopted is as follows:

Our Saviour, at the Last Supper, on the night he was betrayed, instituted the Eucharistic sacrifice of his Body and Blood to perpetuate the sacrifice of the Cross throughout the ages, until he comes, and furthermore to entrust to the Church, his beloved Bride, the memorial of his death and resurrection: sacrament of love, sign of unity, bond of charity, Paschal banquet in which Christ is eaten, the soul is filled with graces, and the pledge of future glory is given to us.

We see in this text that the Eucharistic sacrifice defines the sacrament instituted by Our Lord during the Last Supper, and that the Last Supper—and therefore the Mass—has no reality except in reference to the sacrifice of the Cross, which it is intended to renew throughout the earthly history of mankind until the return of Christ. The notion of a banquet is linked to it, as the culmination of this sacrifice, and in its eschatological, vertical dimension, according to the beautiful antiphon of St Thomas Aquinas.

The Congregation for Rites, in an instruction of 25 May 1967: “This is why the Mass, or Lord’s Supper, is at once and inseparably:

- the sacrifice in which the sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated;
- the memorial of the Lord’s death and resurrection, commanding: ‘Do this in remembrance of Me’;
- the sacred banquet where, through communion with the Lord’s body and blood, the people of God share in the fruits of the Paschal sacrifice, renews the new covenant sealed once and for all by God with mankind in the blood of Christ and in faith and hope, foreshadows and anticipates the eschatological banquet in the Father’s kingdom, proclaiming the Lord’s death ‘until he comes’.

In the Mass, therefore, the sacrifice and the banquet belong to the same mystery in such a way that they are very closely linked to one another.

In the sacrifice of the Mass, the Lord is indeed offered up “when he begins to be sacramentally present in the species of bread and wine as spiritual food for the faithful”. And to this end, Christ has entrusted this sacrifice to the Church so that the faithful may participate in it, both spiritually through faith and charity, and sacramentally through the banquet of Holy Communion.

Participation in the Lord's Supper is always, in fact, communion with Christ offering himself to the Father as a sacrifice for us."

The debate flared up again following the promulgation of the N.O.M. Although Monsignor Bugnini himself stated, during a plenary session of the Commission for Liturgical Reform, that *the *Institutio Generalis** of the N.O.M. was not a dogmatic text, nor did it seek to provide a definition of the Mass, it must nevertheless be acknowledged that Article 7 caused such surprise that it had to be corrected as early as the second edition of the missal. The original text defined the Mass "as a simple assembly" (*synaxis*) and retained only the dimension of the meal to the exclusion of the sacrifice: "The Lord's Supper is the sacred synaxis or gathering of the people of God assembled under the presidency of the priest to celebrate the memorial of the Lord".

Conversely, and this is the faith of the Catholic Church, the second version restored the Tridentine meaning of the Mass: "At Mass or the Lord's Supper, the people of God are summoned and gathered, under the presidency of the priest who represents the person of Christ, to celebrate the memorial of the Lord or the Eucharistic sacrifice... Indeed, in the celebration of the Mass, where the sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated, Christ is truly present..."

Similarly, in no. 48, this parenthetical remark is added regarding the Last Supper: "Christ institutes the sacrifice and the Paschal banquet through which the sacrifice of the Cross is constantly made present..."

In nos. 55 and 60, too, the notion of sacrifice has been added.

In this same 1970 edition, a preamble was added which seeks to link the rite of the Mass to the essential doctrine of the Council of Trent:

thus, in the new missal, the Church's rule of prayer corresponds to her constant rule of faith: this teaches us that, apart from the manner of offering which is different, there is identity between the sacrifice of the Cross and its sacramental renewal at Mass, which Christ the Lord instituted at the Last Supper and which he commanded his apostles to do in remembrance of him; and that, consequently, the Mass is at once a sacrifice of praise, thanksgiving, propitiation and satisfaction.

It is therefore regrettable that such significant changes in the presentation of the rite have had no impact on the rite itself.

Mysterium Fidei

In all these discussions, the Magisterium relied on the identity between the Mass and the sacrifice of the Cross, an identity defined at Trent, the Holy Supper itself referring to the sacrifice of Calvary, "which Christ anticipated in an unbloody manner at the Last Supper" (address of 2 November 1954).

This Tridentine doctrine was summarised in Paul VI's fine encyclical, *Mysterium Fidei*.

In the Eucharistic mystery, the sacrifice of the Cross, consummated once and for all on Calvary, is wonderfully represented; there the sacrifice is constantly made present to our remembrance and its saving power is applied to the remission of the sins committed each day. (No. 23)

And when Saint Paul speaks of the Lord's table, he is indeed referring to the Eucharistic sacrifice in which Christians take part (No. 25), in a communal and ecclesial manner at the banquet.

a sacrifice offered in an unbloody manner, for all the living as well as for the dead, according to the testimony of Cyril of Jerusalem (CCC 23)

During this sacrifice, the whole Church is both the one offering and the one offered, priest and victim united with Christ (28).

Consequently, every Mass is of inestimable value, whatever the particular pastoral need: "The Mass, even when celebrated privately by a priest, is never a private act but is the action of Christ and of the Church, which has learnt to offer itself, in the sacrifice it offers, as a universal sacrifice, applying to the salvation of the whole world the unique and infinite redemptive power of the sacrifice of the Cross. There is no Mass that is not offered for the salvation of the whole world and not merely for the salvation of a few individuals.

Consequently, whilst it is highly desirable that the faithful should participate actively in large numbers at the celebration of Mass, there is no cause for censure, but rather for approval, in the celebration of Mass in private, in accordance with the prescriptions and traditions of the Holy Church, by a priest with a single minister to assist him. For this Mass ensures a great abundance of special graces for the benefit of the priest himself, the faithful, the whole Church, and indeed the whole world—graces which could not be obtained so abundantly through Communion alone." (*Mysterium Fidei* 29–30)

Communion alone, therefore, does not have as great an effect as the sacrifice offered, which applies here on earth the infinite fruits of the sacrifice of the Cross¹. Finally, the Supreme Pontiff insists that the faithful approach the holy table daily to draw strength and purification from it, so that they may live in the unity of the Mystical Body of God, in accordance with the words of Saint Augustine: "Let him who wishes to live cling to the Body, let him live from God and for God".

The Eucharist is a heavenly table which, by purifying us, lifts us up to God and prepares us for eternal life.

This question of the separation of Communion from the sacrifice has become topical again in the context of celebrations without a priest. Faced with a growing tendency among the faithful to regard the sacrifice itself as optional—with Mass becoming nothing more than the preparation of consecrated hosts—reflection in certain French ecclesiastical circles has led to a desire to prohibit

Communion when Mass is not celebrated and to reduce the celebration to the Liturgy of the Word. From this we see that the sacrificial dimension alone gives its full meaning to Eucharistic Communion.

The reconciliation of these concepts of meal and communion, which were in tension at the time of the Council, is harmonised in canon 897 of the 1983 Code:

The most venerable sacrament is the Most Holy Eucharist, in which Christ the Lord himself is present, offered and received, and through which the Church lives and grows continually. The Eucharistic sacrifice, the memorial of the Lord's death and resurrection, in which the sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated throughout the ages, is the summit and source of all worship and of the whole of Christian life, through which the unity of the People of God is signified and realised, and the building up of the Body of Christ is brought to completion. Indeed, the other sacraments and all the Church's works of apostolate are closely linked to the Most Holy Eucharist and are ordered towards it.

Three dimensions therefore define the sacrament of the Eucharist:

Christ is present in it (transubstantiation), is offered in it (real sacrifice); and is received in it (communion)

These three dimensions are inseparable. The sacrifice is realised through the presence of Christ under both species and continues the work of Redemption.

Conclusion

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, after having extensively recalled the doctrine of the Council of Trent on the holy sacrifice (Part II, Section II, Chapter 1, Article 3, V), seems to wish to attempt to unite sacrifice and the Paschal banquet, in order to put an end to the tensions we have just seen.

“The Mass is at once and inseparably the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the Cross is perpetuated and the sacred banquet of communion with the Body and Blood of the Lord. But the Eucharistic celebration is entirely directed towards the intimate union of the faithful with Christ through communion. To receive communion is to receive Christ Himself, who offered Himself for us.”

To isolate the sacrifice from communion would be to misunderstand the novelty of the New Covenant, which does not stop at a ritual, an external sacrifice like those of the Old Testament. The renewal of the New Law in Christ is an inner one, and the external sacrifice itself—that of Christ as well—signifies the inner sacrifice of the soul offering itself to God, the sacrifice of its will, obedient even unto death, which unites itself to the Father.

This inner sacrifice, according to St Thomas, is signified by Communion (III 82, 4).

Christian worship is no longer an ineffective form of worship but renews from within; it unites the faithful to Christ offering himself as a victim who sanctifies by purifying from sin. The sacrifice made present by the presence of the body and blood of Christ separated in the species (*vi verborum*) – *res et sacramentum* – is brought to completion by the *res tantum*, which is the work of Redemption, the union of mankind with Christ.

Thus the Holy Communion of the priest, the sacrificial minister, “is absolutely necessary” and ensures the integrity of the Eucharistic sacrifice (*Mediator Dei*).

The priest receives Holy Communion *in persona Ecclesiae* on behalf of all the members as their head.

To refuse to see that the Eucharistic sacrifice contains within itself the wedding feast of the Lamb—a feast that will be perfected at the heavenly table, *the Mensa Caelestis*—is to fail to recognise that the glorification of God is realised in the sanctification of the Church and that the two are inseparable.

Conversely, to isolate the banquet from the sacrifice is to forget how much the Redemption must always be at work. Yet it is true that in an age when the sense of sin is eroding, the notion of propitiatory sacrifice is fading. It is, however, the constant teaching of the Church that this sacrifice must be offered for the salvation of the living and the dead:

Benedict XIV had already reaffirmed this point:

We must say that it cannot occur to any of the faithful that private Masses in which only the priest receives Communion thereby lose the character of the bloodless, perfect and complete sacrifice instituted by Christ Our Lord, and that they must, consequently, be regarded as illicit.

Pius XII echoes this:

Those who wish to celebrate the holy sacrifice only if the Christian people approach the holy table are thus straying from the path of truth; and they stray even further from it those who, claiming that it is absolutely necessary for the faithful to receive Communion with the priest, dangerously assert that it is not merely a sacrifice, but a sacrifice and a meal of fraternal communion, and make the communal reception of Communion the culmination of the entire ceremony. It must once again be noted that the Eucharistic sacrifice consists essentially in the bloodless immolation of the divine Victim, an immolation which is mystically signified by the separation of the holy species and by their oblation to the eternal Father. (*Mediator Dei*)

The Lord’s altar is therefore also the table. “The altar, around which the Church is gathered in the celebration of the Eucharist, represents the two aspects of one and the same mystery: the altar of sacrifice and the table of the Lord, and this all the more so because the Christian altar is the symbol of Christ Himself, present in the midst of the assembly of His faithful, both as the victim offered for our reconciliation and as the heavenly food which is given to us”. (CCC 1383).

The fundamental reason for this doctrine lies in that dogma of our faith that the Incarnation of the Word is redemptive *propter nostram salutem*, and that to separate the Eucharist-communion, the *convivium*, from the Eucharist-sacrifice amounts to separating the Incarnation of Christ in his union with the faithful from the Redemption which must be effected in that faithful person at this very moment. This is what Leo XIII expresses in his fine encyclical *Mirae Caritatis* of 28 May 1902.

For if God has indeed done all that is above nature, He has related it to the Incarnation of the Word, through which the restoration and salvation of the human race was to be brought about, according to the words of the Apostle: ‘He has purposed... to restore in Christ all things in heaven and on earth’. The Eucharist, according to the testimony of the Holy Fathers, must be regarded as a continuation and extension of the Incarnation; through it the substance of the Incarnate Word is united with every human being, and the supreme sacrifice of Calvary is renewed in a marvellous way, in accordance with the prophecy of Malachi: “In every place a pure offering is sacrificed and presented in my name.”

Thus the Eucharist, being related to the Incarnation of the Word, is essentially redemptive. It unites the faithful to Christ, and the faithful to one another (*convivium*), by immersing them in the death and resurrection of Christ through his sacrifice, in which they share, so that they may live in God.

I would like to conclude with this sentence from John Paul II, quoted at the beginning of this lecture: ‘the priesthood of all priests, and therefore the Eucharist which is closely linked to it, is part of the mystery of Redemption’.”