



## **The Eucharist: Source and Summit of Christian Spirituality | Mark Brumley**

The Holy Eucharist, Vatican II tells us, is "the source and summit of the Christian life" (*Lumen gentium*, no. 11; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1324). Since the Christian life is essentially a spiritual life, we might say as well that the Eucharist is the "source and summit of Christian spirituality" too.

To the pious Catholic, that proposition may seem obvious enough, even if he does not quite understand why. Intuitively, he knows that the spiritual life means using every means available to grow closer to Christ. And he knows that Christ Himself is present in the Eucharist in the most sublime manner. It makes sense, then, that the Eucharist should be central to the spiritual life of a Catholic.

But what the devout soul knows about the Eucharist intuitively should, where possible, become better known and more deeply experienced through systematic reflection on the Church's Eucharistic doctrine. The better we understand the Eucharist's role in Christian spirituality, the better we will be able to love Christ present in the Eucharist.

What follows is a summary of Catholic teaching on the Eucharist as both the "source" and the "summit" of Christian spirituality. We will consider each of these ideas in turn.

### **What Do We Mean By "Source and Summit"?**

To say the Eucharist is the "source and summit of Christian spirituality" means at least two things. First, that Christian spirituality flows from the Eucharist as its source, the way light streams forth from the sun. And second, that Christian spirituality is supremely realized in and ordered to the Eucharist as its summit or highpoint – that to which all of our actions should ultimately be directed.

Christian spirituality, then, is a two-way street. It leads us from the Eucharist as our starting point out into the world of daily life and it takes us back home to the Eucharist after our sojourn in the world.

These two dimensions of the Eucharist – its being both the "source" and "summit" of Christian spirituality – reveal how the Eucharist, being Christ Himself, brings God and man together in a saving dialogue, a mutually giving and receiving relationship. In short, in a covenant of love. The Eucharist is at once the Father's gift of Himself in Christ to us and, through Christ, our offering of Christ and, with Him, of ourselves – our minds and hearts, our daily lives – to the Father.

As the source of Christian spirituality, the Eucharist revealed that our salvation begins with God, not ourselves. God offers Himself to man in Christ first. At the same time, as the summit of Christian spirituality, the Eucharist is man's supreme, grace-enabled, freely given offering of himself back to God through Jesus Christ, our high priest, by the power of the Holy Spirit. The union or intimate, personal fellowship between God and man realized through God's gift of Himself to man and man's faithful response, we call communion.

Put in the traditional language of the Christian spirituality, we say that this communion with God is brought about by grace and lived out in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Because the sacraments are instruments of grace and means of growth in the theological virtues, we can say that Christian spirituality entails what Pope John Paul II called a "sacramental style of life." [1] It involves using the sacraments to grow in the spiritual life. And because the greatest of sacraments is the Eucharist, Christian spirituality is above all Eucharistic: coming from the Eucharist as its source and directed to it as its summit or zenith.

But precisely how is the Eucharist the source of Christian spirituality? In other words, how precisely is the Eucharist the source of grace and the way we grow in faith, hope and charity? A closer look at the Church's teaching about the Eucharist provides an answer to this question.

### **The Eucharist as the "Source" of Grace**

The Eucharist is the source of grace in a number of ways. First, the Eucharist is Christ Himself, the Author of grace. Other sacraments are actions of Christ, to be sure, but only the Eucharist is Christ Himself, under the "appearances" of bread and wine (CCC, nos. 1324, 1373-1381).

A second way the Eucharist is the source of grace is as the sacramental re-presentation of Christ's saving Sacrifice on the cross. Note it is the sacramental re-presentation of Christ's once for all Sacrifice on the cross, not merely a representation or a ritual re-enactment of it (CCC, nos. 1362-1367).

On Calvary, Christ offered Himself to the Father in the Spirit for our salvation. This happened once for all historically - Christ does not die again at Mass. In the Eucharist, however, this same Sacrifice of Christ, made once for all historically, is present here and now sacramentally, and celebrated on the altar. Why can we say that? Because the same Christ who was both priest who offered and victim who was offered is present here and now. Christ is present in heaven as our high priest and our offering for sin (Heb. 8:1-3; 9:24; 1 John 2:1-2), but He is also on our earthly altars as the Eucharist. In this way, the "work of our redemption is accomplished" through His Eucharistic offering (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 3), and fruits of Christ's unique Sacrifice are applied to us here and now (CCC, no. 1366).

A third way the Eucharist is the source of grace is as the Church's sacrifice. The Eucharist is the Church's sacrifice because it is foremost the Sacrifice of Christ, Bridegroom of the Church, who is "one-flesh" with the Church (Ephesians 5:21-32). [2] In other words, the Eucharist is the Church's offering by virtue of her "spousal" union with Christ.

This sacrifice of the Church is twofold (CCC, no. 1368). First, the Church offers Christ, the spotless victim, to the Father. And second, the Church,

in union with Christ, offers herself to God in the Spirit. To the extent individual members of the Church unite themselves with this offering, they receive the fruits of Christ's Sacrifice and dispose themselves to receive further graces. In this way, the Church is built up in her members as the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Expressed differently, we can say that because the Eucharist is, through Christ, the sacrifice of the Church, in a certain sense, the Church, by the promise of Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, "makes" the Eucharist, although it always remains foremost the work of God. But the Eucharist also "makes" the Church (CCC, no. 1396), continually renewing her communion with God through Christ's Sacrifice in the Spirit and bestowing graces upon her.[3] Thus, the Eucharist can be said to be the source of grace and therefore of Christian spirituality, which is the life of grace, because the Church lives and grows in grace through its celebration of the Eucharist.

A fourth way the Eucharist is the source of grace is as a source of repentance. It is this in at least two ways. First, insofar as the fruitful and reverent reception of the Holy Eucharist requires one to examine himself spiritually before coming to the Eucharistic banquet and, if conscious of grave sin, to receive the sacrament of reconciliation before receiving Holy Communion (CCC, no. 1415). And second, in that meditation upon the Sacrifice of Christ made present in the Eucharist – the supreme Sacrifice of Christ offered to atone for our sins – ought to stir us to greater repentance for sin.

The last point is especially important with respect to the spiritual life. Christian spirituality consists of two aspects, a negative one – repentance from sin and purgation of the attachment to sin – and a positive one – growth in the Christian life of faith, hope and charity. The Eucharist prepares us for the positive dimension of Christian living by helping us undertake the negative aspect – rooting out sin from our lives through repentance and purgation.

### **The Eucharist as the Source of Growth in Faith, Hope and Charity**

In addition to being the "source" of Christian spirituality because it is a "source" of grace, the Eucharist also helps us grow in the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. These virtues are essential to the spiritual life because they "dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity" (CCC, no. 1812). They are called theological because they direct us to God. We might say that they are the three dimensions – the height, width and depth – in which the Christian life is lived.

### **The Source of Faith**

Faith is the virtue by which we entrust ourselves-mind and will-to God, believing what He has revealed because of who He is (CCC, nos. 143, 1814). How is the Eucharist the source of faith? Like all the sacraments (CCC, no. 1123), the Eucharist is a sign which instructs us. It nourishes and strengthens our faith by what it signifies: the wisdom, love and power of God manifested to us by Christ in His Real Presence and in His Sacrifice. In this respect, the Eucharist is the sacramental "sign of the covenant" par excellence, beckoning us to enter into communion with God by accepting in faith God's saving deeds on our behalf – supremely, the death and resurrection of His Son. The Eucharist should move us to deeper faith by reminding us what God has in fact done for us: manifesting His trustworthiness.

But the Eucharist also fosters the virtue of faith insofar as it signifies the one faith of the Catholic Church. This faith is objectively grounded in the official proclamation of the Word of God in the Eucharistic liturgy, and celebrated in the Eucharistic Sacrifice offered by those in Holy Orders who, possessing apostolic succession, in communion with their bishop and the successor of Peter, legitimately exercise apostolic authority.

### **The Source of Hope**

The Eucharist is also the source of hope. "Hope," the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us, "is the theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit" (no. 1817). The basis of this hope is the salvation won by the death and resurrection of Christ and the gift of His Holy Spirit poured out in our hearts (cf. Romans 5:5-11; 8:23-25; Titus 3:6-7), which is sacramentally present in the Eucharist.

As an efficacious sign of Christ's salvation, the Eucharist gives us hope in God for the grace to live in His friendship in this life and to inherit eternal life in heaven. The Eucharist nourishes our hope, at once pointing back to God's salvific deeds, especially Jesus' death and resurrection, which provides the firm ground for our hope; and forward to what we hope for, the coming of the kingdom and eternal life of communion with the Triune God.

### **The Source of Charity**

Finally, the Eucharist is the source of charity. As Pope John Paul II wrote: "Christian life is expressed in the fulfilling of the greatest commandment, that is to say, in the love of God and neighbor, and this love finds its source in the blessed Sacrament, which is commonly called the sacrament of love. The Eucharist signifies this charity, and therefore recalls it, makes it present and at the same time brings it about" (*Dominicae Cenaе*, no. 5).

We have already considered how the Eucharist sacramentally signifies and makes present the love of God manifested in Christ and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and how the Eucharist is Christ Himself, love incarnate. But the Eucharist is also the source of charity in that it may lead us to love God and His Son Jesus in the Spirit. Seeing what God has done for us in Christ, who is present with us in the Eucharist, we should love God in return, and in the Spirit pour out our hearts to Him through the Eucharistic Christ.

Through the Eucharist, then, we enter into a deeper participation in the life of the Triune God, who is charity itself (1 John 4:16). In turn, this deepened love for God leads to a greater love of neighbor for the sake of the love of God, because "whoever loves God must also love his brother" (1 John 4:21). We love others because Christ first loved us.

Furthermore, Christ's Eucharistic offering of Himself "becomes of itself the school of active love for neighbor," as Pope John II has written, [4] by revealing to us "what value each person, our brother or sister, has in God's eyes, if Christ offers Himself equally to each one, under the species of bread and wine."

Finally, as the source of grace, the Eucharist is the "source" of charity insofar as grace is necessary for genuine obedience to God's commandments, without which we cannot truly love God (cf. 1 John 5:3).

### **The Eucharist As The Summit Of Christian Spirituality**

We have seen how the Eucharist is the source of Christian spirituality – how the Eucharist brings about the Christian way of life in us. We consider now how the Eucharist is the summit or highpoint of Christian spirituality or, as St Thomas Aquinas put it, "the consummation of the whole spiritual life." [5] In other words, how Christian living leads up to and culminates in our participation in the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is the summit of the spiritual life in the sense that other aspects of Christian living, including the other sacraments (CCC, no. 1324), [6] are ordered to the Eucharist – to Christ's offering of Himself to the Father in the Spirit for us and to our participation in Christ's offering. In other words, the same profound sacramental link between the Sacrifice of the cross and the Eucharist that makes the Eucharist the source of Christian spirituality also makes it the summit or high point of Christian spirituality.

### **Christ's Sacrifice, Our Sacrifice**

As we have already seen, the Eucharistic Christ not only gives Himself to the Father for us, He is offered to the Father by us in the Spirit, through the indispensable ministry of the sacrificing priest acting in *persona Christi* – in the person of Christ our high priest Himself and through our union with Christ as members of His Church. [7] But, as also mentioned above, it is not only Christ who is offered to the Father in the Eucharist; the Church also offers herself in and through her union with Christ in the Spirit:

In the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ becomes also the sacrifice of the members of his body. The lives of the faithful, their praise, sufferings, prayer and work, are united with those of Christ and with his total offering, and so acquire a new value (CCC, no. 1368).

The self-offering of the Church in the Eucharist is central to the Church's identity as a priestly people. This is, in fact, an important way in which the faithful exercise their baptismal priesthood, offering the sacrifice of themselves in Christ. [8]

Moreover, the Eucharistic offering of the Church is both corporate and objective, and individual and subjective. Corporately and objectively, the Church's offering of herself is constituted by the action of the ministerial priest who, precisely because he acts in *persona Christi capitis* (in the person of Christ the Head of the Church), also acts in *persona Ecclesiae* (in the person of the Church) and in the name of the Church (CCC, nos. 1552-1553). [9] The priest represents the Church before God because he represents Christ who is head and bridegroom of the Church.

At the same time, members of the Church offer themselves individually and subjectively in the Eucharistic liturgy, insofar as they unite themselves by intention and action, with the Eucharistic offering of Christ's Sacrifice. In other words, they make Christ's offering for them as individuals their own offering of themselves through Christ. They surrender their minds and hearts, their very lives, to God through Christ's act of self-surrender

made present on the altar.

We have already considered the Eucharist as the source of the spiritual life, which we noted is a life of grace lived through the theological virtues of faith, hope and charity. Since the Eucharist is also the summit of Christian spirituality, the individual and subjective offering of ourselves in the Eucharist also necessarily entails the basics of Christian spirituality – repentance from sin and death to self, as well as a positive growth in the life of grace and the theological virtues. We look now at these things from the vantage point of the Eucharist as their summit or highpoint, rather than their source.

### **The Need for Repentance**

Since all the various ways we give ourselves to God are directed to the Eucharist, this includes repentance from sin. Consequently, if we would offer ourselves to God through the Eucharist and receive from Him the Bread of Life, we must pass through the door of penance. To enter into communion with the all-holy God through the Eucharist, we must, following the general pattern of the spiritual life, undergo purgation. As Pope Pius XII wrote:

"While we stand before the altar ... it is our duty so to transform our hearts that every trace of sin may be completely blotted out, while whatever promotes supernatural life through Christ, may be zealously fostered and strengthened even to the extent that, in union with the Immaculate Victim, we become a victim acceptable to the Eternal Father" (*Mediator dei*, no. 100).

When Christ came proclaiming the kingdom of God, He preached conversion and faith. "Repent," He said, "and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). Not surprisingly, then, there exists a special link between the Sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist. Pope John Paul II has written of this:

The Eucharist and Penance thus become in a sense two closely connected dimensions of authentic life in accordance with the spirit of the gospel, of truly Christian life. The Christ who calls to the Eucharistic banquet is always the same Christ who exhorts us to penance and repeats his "Repent." Without this constant ever renewed endeavor for conversion, partaking of the Eucharist would lack its full redeeming effectiveness and there would be a loss or at least a weakening of the special readiness to offer God the spiritual sacrifice in which our sharing in the priesthood of Christ is expressed in an essential and universal manner (*Redemptoris hominis*, no. 20).

The Eucharist, then, is the high point of repentance because it is the supreme sacrament of Calvary. All other acts of penance prepare for our participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, our supreme rejection of sin and turning toward Christ and communion with Him.

### **Offering Ourselves in Faith, Hope and Charity**

But Christian spirituality is not simply a life of repentance and purgation; as we have seen, it also includes growth in faith, hope and charity. So, too, our Eucharistic offering, as the summit or highpoint of Christian spirituality, involves the theological virtues. Indeed, acts of faith, hope and charity are specific ways in which we offer ourselves to God in the Eucharist, thereby entering into communion with Him through the highest act

of sacrifice possible.

Faith, as we have seen, is an offering of oneself – the response of man to God's gracious initiative in Christ – in which one freely submits intellect and will to God and His Word (CCC, nos. 143, 1814). In the Eucharist, man submits by faith to the Divine Word by which bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, and indeed to the whole Catholic Faith of which the Eucharist is the greatest sacramental sign because it is Christ Himself. This is at least one of the ways in which we can speak of the Eucharist as the "Mystery of Faith."

Furthermore, in receiving Holy Communion in faith one bows before this mystery which only the person of faith perceives: "Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you shall not have life within you ... For my flesh is true food and my blood true drink" (John 6:53, 55). In this way, a person offers himself to Christ in faith, saying, "Yes, Lord. I believe what you said."

Most importantly, man's act of faith is supremely realized in believing and receiving what God has done for him in Christ on Calvary. And God's saving act in Christ is supremely realized in the Eucharist, which makes Calvary present.

But the faithful's Eucharistic self-offering is also an offering of hope. Again we note that, by the virtue of hope, a believer trusts in God's promised grace in the Eucharist and that "he who has begun a good work ... will bring it to completion."

In hope, the believer acknowledges God's sufficiency and his own insufficiency. Offering oneself to God in the Eucharist is a profound act of hope in that the Eucharist, as Christ Himself, is God's more-than-sufficient provision for our sins. Indeed, it is only because of Christ, who as priest and victim is present in the Eucharist, that we can hope that any offering of ourselves will be acceptable to God. There remains no greater means by which we hope in God than by the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

To unite ourselves to Christ in the Eucharist, then, is to acknowledge our own insufficiency and our reliance on God's goodness to bring us to eternal life with Him. Through the Eucharist, which is "the pledge of future glory" (CCC, nos. 1402-1405, 1419),<sup>[10]</sup> we hope in God to provide us with the grace necessary to be faithful here and now, and to attain eternal life with Him in the age to come. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church has it: "There is no surer pledge or clearer sign of this great hope in the new heavens and the new earth 'in which righteousness dwells' than the Eucharist" (no. 1405).

Perhaps most importantly, the Eucharist is the summit of Christian spirituality because it is the "sacrament of love." Primarily, of course, this means it is the sacrament of God's love for us. At the same time, there is a sense in which the Eucharist, by God's gracious work in us, is the sacrament of our love for God and for our neighbor.

Through charity, man embraces God Himself, who is love. By offering himself to God through his union with Him in the Eucharist, man's love for God reaches a climax: he gives himself to God in the only way possible – through the Father's own Son, Jesus. In this way, God's gracious invitation to communion with human beings is answered through communion with the Eucharistic Christ.

"Greater love has no man than this," the Master taught, "than that he lay down his life for his friends." Through the Eucharist, we join ourselves to Christ and "lay down" our lives in loving union with Jesus' supreme act of obedience to the Father's will. As Christ prayed in Gethsemane that the Father's will be done, so we, in uniting our lives to Christ in the Eucharist, say to the Father, "Thy will be done." As Jesus was obedient "unto death" as an expression of His love for the Father and for us, in the Eucharist we participate in Christ's love of His Father, surrendering ourselves to the Father's will through Jesus, by surrendering our wills "unto death" of ourselves.

But charity is not offered to only God in the Eucharist; love for one another is also expressed and realized therein. Surrendering our wills to God in charity means wanting to please Him – to do what He asks. And what, after the First Great Commandment, does He ask of us? "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." Our Eucharistic Sacrifice, then, must include the sacrifice of ourselves in love of, and service to, our neighbor because, as we saw earlier, whoever loves God must also love his neighbor (1 John 4:21).

Love of neighbor means, among other things, that we offer Jesus' great prayer of love to the Father not only for ourselves but for others – for those visibly united with the Church and for others as well, living or dead. The Christian life of intercession for others is supremely expressed and realized in the Eucharist, the greatest prayer that can be offered and the sacramental re-presentation of that Sacrifice by which all other prayer is effectual.

The Eucharist, then, is supremely the sacrament in which we as members of Christ's body are united in faith, hope and charity. We are united by faith, hope and charity with Christ in the Eucharist. And we are united by faith, hope and charity in Christ through the Eucharist, with one another.

In this way, as members of Christ and one another, we become "one body, one spirit in Christ," sharing imperfectly on earth in the heavenly liturgy and in that communion with God which is the goal of the Christian life. Or to put it another way, the Eucharist is the earthly anticipation of the eschatological Wedding Supper of the Lamb, when Christ and His espoused Church fully experience the "one flesh" reality of their spousal and corporeal union.

## **Conclusion**

Let us summarize what we have considered. The Eucharist is both the "source and summit of Christian spirituality." It is the source of Christian spirituality in that, as Christ Himself and as the sacramental re-presentation of Christ's Sacrifice on the cross, the Eucharist is God's gift of Himself in Christ through the Spirit to us. We, as members of Christ's Church, receive this gift by grace and, through grace, grow in communion with God by turning from sin and increasing in faith, hope and charity, to which the Eucharist, as a sacramental sign, gives rise in us.

At the same time, the Eucharist is the summit of Christian spirituality because, as the greatest sacramental sharing in Christ's Sacrifice, it is the greatest gift of ourselves in Christ, corporately and individually, to the Father by the Spirit. As individual members of Christ's body/bride, the Church, our Eucharistic self-donation includes death to ourselves and repentance from sin, and is made complete through our submission to God in faith, hope and charity, by which we are united to Christ's Eucharistic Sacrifice.

Pondering and making our own these great truths about the Eucharist in the Christian life should illuminate our spiritual path and give us more reasons to love the Eucharist, and in this way, help us to grow closer to God and to each other in Christ. Thus will we know evermore deeply that through the Eucharist we receive from the Father the gift of Himself in His Son and that in the Spirit-inspired, loving response we join ourselves to the Son's gift of Himself back to the Father.

### **Endnotes:**

[1] See *Dominicae Cena*, no. 7.

[2] A succinct statement of Catholic doctrine on this point can be found in the Instruction on the Worship of the Eucharistic Mystery (*Eucharisticum Mysterium*), #3, c., issued May 25, 1967, by the then Sacred Congregation for Rites.

[3] See *Redemptoris Hominis*, no. 5; *Dominicae Cena*, no. 4.

[4] *Dominicae Cena*, no. 6.

[5] *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 73, a. 3

[6] See also *Presbyterium Ordinis*, no. 5.

[7] See *Mediator Dei*, nos. 80-97, Daughters of St. Paul edition.

[8] Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, no. 11.

[9] See also *Inter Insigniores*, part 5.

[10] Cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 47.

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