

T H E E U C H A R I S T

**SOURCE OF LIFE
FOR CATHOLIC
TEACHERS**



ADDRESS TO THE CATHOLIC TEACHERS ASSOCIATION
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The vocation to which we are all essentially called, says Michael Dwinell (Author of *God-birthing*), is to live our life as an agent of transformation. When we are faithful to this call we stand in the flames of our own fires - a public fire. If we are not faithful to our vocation the fire remains within, hidden away inside where it does consume us and where we thus walk unaccompanied and self-alienated. When we are faithful to our vocation - however, we are accompanied by the one who walks with us in the fire, the one who is in the Eucharist.

In treating with this theme - **Eucharist: *Source of Life for Catholic Teachers*** - I would like to first reflect in a limited way on some of the implications of the Eucharist at the heart of the Church's life and its role at the centre of the Church's liturgical practice. Then I will explore teaching as a vocation and how the two might be linked in enabling the teacher to be an agent of transformation.

The three aspects of the Eucharist I would like to highlight here are the *Eucharist as Thanksgiving, Memorial and Presence*.

- Firstly the word Eucharist means 'thanksgiving' and is a Sacrifice of Praise to the Father for all that God has accomplished in His works of creation, redemption and sanctification. This sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving is possible only through Christ. He unites the faithful to His person, to His praise and His intercession. This means for all of us, that our daily work is to be regarded as a blessing for which we must show gratitude, and which, when blessed by our thanksgiving, becomes even more fruitful. Our daily work becomes more fruitful because in Christ it becomes creative, redemptive and sanctifying.

- As a Memorial of Christ's Passover the Eucharist is also sacrifice. When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she commemorates Christ's Passover and it is made present: the sacrifice Christ offered once for all on the cross remains ever present. As often as the Mass is celebrated the work of our

redemption is carried out. The Eucharist is a sacrifice then because it re-presents i.e., make present the one sacrifice of the Cross, because it is a memorial and because it applies its fruits. The sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Eucharist are one single sacrifice.

The notion of the Eucharist as sacrifice has many implications for us, some of which I would like to explore now. The words of Jesus at the Last Supper “This is My Body given for you” suggest among other things, a real love for His disciples and a desire to stay with them, and by extension all of us. He left His memory in a gesture which shows the sacrificial dimension of His whole life i.e., the compassion, the risking, the reaching out etc... Jesus had lived for them, now He would die for them and for all of us that we also might live and die for on another. This was to be remembered for the benefit of all who would believe in Him and became a life sustaining action for His disciples who subsequently lived under persecution.

Ultimately, the disciples recognized that they must die for the Eucharist to continue. The Eucharist at its roots is a sacrificial meal and all who share in it are challenged to offer themselves for the benefit of others. Without sacrifice there is no Eucharist. Hence Jesus’ question to His disciples in Mark 10: 38, “*can you drink the cup I shall drink, or be baptized in the same bath of pain as I*”? The Eucharist is a commitment on the part of all who participate to sacrifice themselves in return for Jesus’ sacrifice of Himself. Without a willingness to give, there is nothing to share, there is no Church. The act of the Eucharist is an action against selfishness and self-centeredness. If we want to share in Christ’s life we must be prepared to share in his death and His death would necessarily mean giving life and hope to others through Christ. Yes, we must be willing to walk in the fire of our dying and giving, then with Christ we become agents of transformation.

Did it ever occur to you that it is the selfcentered and selfish world which courts pleasure and living life to the fullest that embraces a culture of death? It is the Church where life is centered

on sacrifice and dying to self that promotes a culture of life. It is those who are not afraid to face death that are able to live life to the fullest and appreciate it.

Presence:

- In the Most Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist the Body and Blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.

It is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present. This cannot be apprehended by the senses says St. Thomas Aquinas but only by faith which relies on divine authority. To contemplate Christ, says John-Paul II, involves being able to recognize Him wherever He manifests Himself, in His many forms of presence, but above all in the living sacrament of His Body and Blood. The Church, which includes you and I, draws her life from Christ in the Eucharist; by Him she is fed, and by Him she is enlightened. The Eucharist is both a mystery of faith and a mystery of light. From Christ's actual presence then we are nourished and fed, we are enlightened and renewed, we are strengthened and empowered. The Vatican II document on the Sacred Liturgy teaches that from the Eucharist grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain and the sanctification of men and women in Christ and the glorification of God... , are achieved with maximum effectiveness. As John 6:56 says "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in Him" Christ's presence to us could not be more definitive and profound as in that statement by Jesus. But the Church reminds us that in order for the Eucharist to produce its full effects it is necessary for the faithful to come to it with proper disposition and a willingness to co-operate with heavenly grace.

The effects that the Eucharist should have on a Catholic person because of the above are then significant in their potential and possibilities. Because the Eucharist is the source of life for the Catholic person it is the source of life for the Catholic teacher.

But how is this so in practical terms for the teacher in today's world. How can the Catholic teacher reflect the life of the Eucharist in his/her role as teacher? It is to this we now turn our attention.

Catholic Teachers:

We have already made a direct link between Eucharist and the Catholic person which may be summed up in the following statements

-The Catholic person gives praise In thanksgiving to God in the Eucharist because only there in and with Christ can their life and work become creative, redemptive and sanctifying in the fullest sense!

-The Eucharist is a commitment on the part of all who participate to offer their lives in sacrifice for others as Christ himself has done. If the Catholic person wants to share in Christ's life he/she must be prepared to share in his death.

-The Eucharist means Christ lives in the Catholic person and the person in Christ (John 6:56) because Jesus is truly and actually present in the Eucharist. The Eucharist then is the pre-eminent source of life for the Catholic person.

Now we might ask what is the link between the Catholic person and his/her role or profession as a teacher? This question is framed in a way which suggests that the Catholic person and his or her work could be separated one from another. But can they? If the call of the Eucharist is an act of self-giving? If the call of the Eucharist is an act of self-giving in Christ for the sake of the Kingdom, the other, and the sanctification of the world then this separation is not possible for the Catholic. To be an agent of transformation one must walk with Christ in the public fires of one's work.

The Catholic teacher must therefore experience his/her role or work as a divine call requiring dedication and commitment. He or she must consider the call to teaching as a vocation, not just a job.

The teacher must develop a personal spirituality that witnesses to Christ's presence and action in the world. As one Catholic teacher puts it "when I prepare lessons, charts, write reports or other administrative tasks, that's my work, but when I close the door of the classroom and begin to interact with the students, that's my vocation." If the Eucharist is the source of life for the Catholic teacher then I would like to highlight some implications and make some recommendations follows:

-As a Catholic teacher you stand between God who is truth and the children of God who need to know the truth and experience the freedom which accompanies truth.

-The teacher needs to develop a spirituality of work through which he/she can find meaning there. This spirituality refers to all of the ways in which we both seek and respond to God's presence.

-Spirituality means not only the way teachers pray, but more importantly the way they come to see God through occupational, family and community responsibilities.

-At the heart of a spirituality of work for a teacher is his/her professional conduct. A spirituality of work encompasses a teacher's response to the task at hand when that teacher responds with wholeness, compassion, dedication, knowledge and excellence.

-Competence is both the core virtue in a spirituality of work and the key ingredient to teaching well. This virtue of competence must be surrounded by other virtues like patience, compassion, wisdom, and humanity.

-The real teacher is not packaging answers but is preparing the student to think and act as a person in an unexpected and unknown future.

-The spirituality of a Catholic teacher should be exhibited in their willingness to go above and beyond.

-It is nothing that the teacher says but the attitude that is inside him/her that reveals Christ and witnesses to the transcendent. The teacher must be conscious and aware of the mystery of the child-person in front of him/her and the presence of Christ to them.

-The Catholic teacher needs to overcome two obstacles to all the above, (1) The first obstacle is language. In an environment in which secular language predominates new words that convey a sense of the transcendent need to be spoken. (2) The second obstacle is the condition of work itself. In the hectic environment of noisy (not necessarily audible) classroom, school hall and office where teaching is becoming a business) a space (time) for reflection on the sacred is necessary for both student and teacher.

I would like to refer to Matthew 16:21-27 as a way of summarizing all that has been said here regarding the Eucharist as the source of life for Catholic teachers. When Jesus describes for Peter and the apostles what is to become of him as the sacrificial lamb on Calvary and as the ultimate expression of the Father's love for human kind Peter responds with the words "Heaven preserve you Lord," "this must not happen to you." But Jesus reprimands him because this was who the Son of God was meant to be and what love would demand of him. As a Catholic teacher you too may be tempted to say "this cannot be" or "this is not what I expected," but remember the love that the Eucharist signifies urges you on to be an agent of transformation.



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