

EUCHARIST: CHRIST THE BRIDEGROOM'S GESTURE OF SURRENDER

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TENDERNESS AND MERCY ARE THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL. Otherwise, one doesn't understand Jesus Christ, or the tenderness of the Father who sends Him to listen to us, to heal us, to save us."¹ Perhaps you recognize these words as conveying the signature message of our holy father Francis. Yes, we Christians have been urgently entrusted by God with the mission of allowing the flood of tenderness God has already made to flow into us, to flow out further through us into the whole world. How appropriate it is to begin with this theme of tenderness and mercy our reflection on *the Eucharist as the gesture of surrender of Christ the Bridegroom*.

1. *Christ loved us and handed himself over for us*

The experience of divine tenderness should be for us far more than a private emotion of overwhelming security. In God love is not an emotion but the law of his Being, his very identity and substance; and so, too, must such unwavering and substantial love become the law and spontaneous operation of our own being. "Be imitators of God, as beloved children," St. Paul exhorts the Ephesians, "and walk in love, as Christ loved us and *handed himself over* for us as a sacrificial offering to God" (Eph 5:1-2). Paul is here describing *how* it was that God's tender love entered the world historically, and *how* it continues to operate in our lives today. God's love, he says, is the communication of his person and life to us as the result of a particular free act on his part.

Divine love is not a vague and faceless cosmic "energy", automatically diffused throughout the universe like some ethereal gas. The human heart yearns for far more than the reassurance that the world is somehow pervaded by a friendly, benign "force". If the cosmos is full of the beauty and wonder of stupendous processes, this is because it came into being by the work of a Master Artist whose glory it reflects.

Paul's words convey the double truth that God is a personal being motivated by infinite love, and that "our hearts remain restless until they rest in him". Christ's 'handing-over-of-himself' for our sake reveals the specific act of love we must imitate as God's "beloved children" in order to come to

¹ Interview with Ferruccio de Bortoli, *Corriere della Sera*, 5 March 2014.

rest in him. God's self-surrender in love was something he decided to do out of his eternal and infinite *freedom*. There is nothing automatic or compulsory about God's gift of himself, because love can never be the result of constraint or inevitable cycles that recur impersonally. Once God decides to give himself as exhaustively as he does in Christ, he sets the bar very high for us.

God came to us in human flesh to make his self-surrender possible. This self-bestowal occurred at a given moment of historical time. To be Christian is to imitate in our own present time an act of total self-surrender that God accomplished in Christ when he was born in Bethlehem; but it was an act of such magnitude that it has vital repercussions in every succeeding age because, in fact, it is an act of unceasing self-surrender in the present. That is how far the Love God is (1 Jn 4:8,16) made him go: the Uncreated became creaturely; pure Spirit took on flesh; the Infinite accepted limitations; and the Eternal embraced the temporal as his own dwelling-place—all for the sake of being with us and sharing our mortal existence to the full.

A few verses later in this same chapter 5 of Ephesians I have quoted, the plot thickens when Paul writes: "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ loved the church and *handed himself over* for her to sanctify her" (Eph 5:25-27). God's gift of self is not a suspended abstraction; it is the surrender of a lover to his beloved. Christ's deliberate handing-over of himself is a gesture that reveals that God's love for us is not a generic benevolence but rather the specific love driving the heart of a passionately committed *Bridegroom*.

In the Incarnation, Christ comes to encounter us as the *Bridegroom of redeemed Humanity* and of each of our souls. This is his most intimate identity. Think of what being a bridegroom implies by way of desire for union, passionate attachment to the beloved, unceasing labor for her benefit, and fidelity to the point of death. Paul says elsewhere: "The husband does not rule over his own body, but the wife does" (1 Cor 7:4). This principle graphically illustrates how totally wedded spouses should surrender their whole persons to one another. But it also has a strong Eucharistic resonance because it shows how unconditionally the Lord Jesus has entrusted his Real Presence into the hands of the Church, for his Spouse to do with him whatever she deems necessary for the salvation of the world. This includes not only the Eucharistic Sacrifice, but also the Reserved Sacrament for adoration and as viaticum for the sick and dying.

This gesture of handing-over of self, moreover, is not only an action of the incarnate Word himself. It is important to see also that, because the Son does everything out of loving obedience to his Father, the Son gives himself to us as total gift only in absolute coöperation with the Father. Christ makes himself our gift only through the Father's own action of giving him to us. Christ consents to be given as gift. "[God] who did not spare his own Son," Paul tells us, "but *handed him over* for us all, how will he not also make us the free gift of everything else along with him?" (Rom 8:32).

2. *For our sake God made him to be sin who knew no sin*

Up to now we have been comforted by the luminous aspects of the Paschal Mystery. But now we must pursue our meditation into the dark side of the Redemption, because this is a darkness we all carry within us. We must glimpse into the abyss of suffering into which our Lord Jesus was plunged in the hours that led him into the desolation of abandonment by the Father and, ultimately, to a horrendous death. In the days of his Passion, Jesus, obeying the will of the Father, willingly and even joyously (Heb 12:2) entered into what Paul calls “the mystery of iniquity” (2 Thes 2:7). Fully aware of what was involved, and with full consent of heart and will, Jesus *handed himself over into the hands of sinners*, to be treated by them as they pleased.

But who are these “sinners” into whose hands Jesus so willingly hands himself? Ourselves, of course. And yet Jesus sits at our table and eats with us, scandalizing the Pharisees. He surrenders himself into our sinful hands just as literally as the fact that we today receive his Body as bread in our hands and drink his outpoured Blood as wine. ‘When you did not have mercy on one of these, the least of my brothers, you did not have mercy on me’, the all-knowing King says to us at the Last Judgment (*cf.* Mt 25:31-46). How could we forget this painful truth a mere two weeks away from Holy Week? Jesus knew who we were; he knew what we would do with him; and yet he still surrendered himself totally into our hands. If we are ever tempted to view Jesus’ Passion and Death as merely the regrettable failure of an otherwise admirable mission, then we should read the Gospels carefully again. There we would see clearly the dazzling light of an ardent love, a light that blinds our natural logic with the divine truth that precisely *surrendering into the hands of sinners who he knew would kill him WAS the strategy of divine love to redeem the world*. “For our sake [the Father] *made him to be sin who knew no sin*, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). “We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son *while we were [his] enemies*” (Rom 5:10). What an incredible exchange!

Don’t such declarations make us gasp? Consider the depth of the mystery of divine love: On the one hand, God cannot be God without being from all eternity the Father of his only Son, his beloved Jesus Christ. At the very same time, however, God did not love the One by whose sonship he is God more than us, his creatures! Paul’s words above declare this wonderful, terrible truth: *God did not spare his own Son but made him to be sin for our sake*. For us to be liberated from the death of sin, the Father deemed it necessary that his innocent Son should *become sin*, that which is most abhorrent to God! Christ, the All-Holy One, became sin by taking up into his person the full consequence of our sins, namely, death. The very God who would not allow Abraham to kill his beloved son Isaac “did not spare his own Son but *handed him over* for us all”! The all-powerful King exchanged his dignity for that of the condemned slave. The greatest truths are always unbelievable, and that’s precisely why we have to believe them.

The supreme power by which Christ is able to destroy death is not human-styled violence raised to an omnipotent degree. No: *God's only power is the power of love*, which means the power of tenderness and mercy, which means in turn that Christ takes upon himself the corporate sin of all ages and allows it to crush him on the Cross. Only the power of God's infinite love is capable of absorbing all evil in this way: it hurls the raging dragon into the consuming heart of the sun. And God's infinite love was housed within a very human person, Jesus of Nazareth, who bled when wounded and endured horrific anguish when abandoned by those he thought loved him; and so his absorption of the collected sin of the world utterly broke his human frame. In Christ, God still makes himself vulnerable every day as he entrusts himself into our hands. The mystery of iniquity into which Christ descended in the Passion could only be done away with by the courage of an even greater love, a love that descends into the gaping jaws of hell itself to rescue the beloved. Christ consented to "catching sin" as a dog catches rabies, and he died of it. As the saying goes, "Once the dog dies, the rabies dies with him"; and in the Passion, Jesus made himself less than a dog, less than the dogs who licked the ulcers of Lazarus the poor man in Luke (16:21): He was "a man scourged by suffering; people hid their faces from him; he was despised, and we considered him nothing", as Isaiah prophesies (Is 53:3). "When Christ came into our midst to redeem us," says a great theologian, "he descended so low that after that no one would be able to fall *without falling into him*".²

But what does Christ's handing-over of self out of love look like "on the ground", so to speak, that is, at the level of the concrete events of Christ's life toward the end of Jesus' earthly sojourn?

Just before the events of Palm Sunday in Matthew's Gospel, we read of Jesus' third prediction of his Passion to his disciples: "As Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, 'Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man *will be handed over* to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death, *and hand him over* to the Gentiles to be mocked and scourged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day'" (Mt 20:17-19). And in the Gospel of John we witness the first station on the Way of the Cross: "Then [Pilate] *handed him over* to them to be crucified. And carrying the cross himself [Jesus] went out to what is called the Place of the Skull, in Hebrew 'Golgotha'" (Jn 19:16-17).

We note at once how the context of the gruesome events of the Passion violently alters our understanding of the expression 'to hand oneself over'. Until now it has given us comforting feelings of *gratitude* that Christ would so generously give himself to us. It has also conveyed emotions of a deeply reassuring *intimacy*, of a sweet embracing and being embraced by a cherished beloved, of an affective ecstasy beyond all human imagining, and all this because we now possess the Father's most prized treasure as our very own. And these are all immensely consoling truths. Now, however, in the Gospels, the physical events of the Passion make us feel the full shock of what it means for Jesus to

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World*.

descend into the “mystery of iniquity” that will destroy him. His wedding with humanity is going to be a blood-wedding, the wedding feast of “the Lamb slain since the foundation of the world” for the love of his Bride, the Church (Rev 13:8; 19:7).

It has always been a hateful and cowardly injustice to blame the Jews alone for the death of Jesus, because in the drama of the Passion the Jews represented only one portion of guilty humanity. The teachers of the Law, the non-Jews in Jerusalem, the pagan Roman Pilate himself, as well as the Jewish high priests and the clamoring multitude outside the praetorium, all taken together, represent *us*, that is, the totality of human beings of all times and places in our collusion with evil. Let us confess that, at least initially, we do not very gladly receive the gift of Jesus in our hands and pass it on as something precious. Like that self-serving crowd, we receive Jesus, rather, as an object of scorn, as a source of irritation to be done away with, or at best as an object of indifference, and indifference can be just as murderous as hatred. From Annas and Caiaphas and Pilate all the way down to the last serving girl, all of these representatives of sinful humanity are portrayed as *handing Jesus over* to one another blasphemously as their common plaything—for mockery, torture and crucifixion. The players in the Passion reciprocate God’s tender gesture of *handing over* his Son to them, not by joyfully embracing him, but by *betraying* him. And the silent Jesus allows it to happen; he allows himself to be made a thing to be maliciously played with and thrown out in the end. But: “Do you think that I cannot call upon my Father and he will not provide me at this moment with more than twelve legions of angels? But then how would the Scriptures be fulfilled which say that it must come to pass in this way?” (Mt 26:53-54). The Son saves us by obeying the design of his Father. Here lies all the power of his love.

The Greek word for what I have been translating as ‘handing-over’ is *parádoxis*, and it contains a meaningful ambiguity worth pursuing. This one word can be translated not only as ‘to hand over’ or ‘surrender’ but also as ‘to betray’, because a certain kind of handing-over can be a betrayal. A father hands his daughter over to her bridegroom at the altar full of love and hope, but Judas hands Jesus over to his enemies to be rid of him.

3. *The Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread*

But what has all of this to do with the Eucharist? I’m sure you sense it! The great clue to the connection between *handing-over/betrayal* and *Eucharist* is the jarring *coincidence* in Jesus’ life of two antithetical events, an event of utter goodness and an event of utter malice, which nevertheless are fused by the power of Jesus’ action into the single event of Redemption.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus chose to institute the Holy Eucharist precisely on the very evening of his betrayal, only shortly before Judas kissed him in the garden as he handed him over to the forces of destruction? Judas surrendered Jesus into the hands of his enemies immediately after Jesus had handed himself over to Judas at the Last Supper in sacramental communion. And, as the betrayer leaves the cenacle to perform his heinous deed, Jesus' words to him are: "What you are going to do, do quickly." (Jn 13:27,30). This is a *command* by Jesus that seems mysteriously to trigger the drama leading to his own death.

Essential to understanding this mystery of coincidence between Eucharist and betrayal is the paramount text from St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (chapter 11), which memorializes the Last Supper and its permanent centrality to all Christian existence. Please pay particular attention in this narrative to the *gestures* performed by Jesus to accompany his words:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in memory of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in memory of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.³

This text portrays marvelously Jesus' intentions and actions on the threshold of the Passion, "on the night he was handed over". By describing so objectively the significant words and gestures of Jesus at the end of this momentous meal, Paul is in fact revealing to us—if we know how to "read" the signs—the depth of God's creativity in Christ in the face of the Son's imminent suffering and death. Paul, who was not present at the Last Supper, stresses that he is *handing on* to the Corinthians what had been *handed on* to him by the Apostles. The solemn care, furthermore, with which Paul frames his account means he is conscious that what he is giving us here as his most precious legacy is of supreme importance to the life of the Church, because Christ himself decreed that it should be so. What Paul is here *handing on* is what he himself had *received*: namely, the celebration of the Eucharist by the Church as containing and communicating sacramentally the Death and Resurrection of Jesus under the material signs of bread, wine, words and gestures.

In his text Paul uses the very same word, *parádosis*, to refer to his *handing-on* of the celebration of the Eucharist that we have seen him use to refer to the Son's own *handing-down* to humanity by the Father, and that the Gospel also uses to refer to the *betrayal* of the Son by Judas and all sin-

³ Ἐγὼ γὰρ παρέλαβον ἀπὸ τοῦ κυρίου, ὃ καὶ παρέδωκα ὑμῖν, ὅτι ὁ κύριος Ἰησοῦς ἐν τῇ νυκτὶ ἣ παρεδίδοτο ἔλαβεν ἄρτον ²⁴ καὶ εὐχαριστήσας ἔκλασεν καὶ εἶπεν· τοῦτό μου ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα τὸ ὑπὲρ ὑμῶν· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. ²⁵ ὡσαύτως καὶ τὸ ποτήριον μετὰ τὸ δειπνῆσαι λέγων· τοῦτο τὸ ποτήριον ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη ἐστὶν ἐν τῷ ἐμῷ αἵματι· τοῦτο ποιεῖτε, ὡσάκις ἐὰν πίνητε, εἰς τὴν ἐμὴν ἀνάμνησιν. ²⁶ ὡσάκις γὰρ ἐὰν ἐσθίητε τὸν ἄρτον τοῦτον καὶ τὸ ποτήριον πίνητε, τὸν θάνατον τοῦ κυρίου καταγγέλλετε ἄχρι οὗ ἔλθῃ. (1 Cor 11:23-26)

ners. The Latin equivalent of *parádoxis* is *traditio*, and so we see here that the Eucharist is the core and source of *our living tradition* as Christians, our most precious heritage. The gesture of surrender contained in the Eucharist, then, communicates not two but *three interrelated meanings*: (1) the eternal divine action of Father and Son, (2) the temporal human action of betrayal at the time of the Passion, and (3) the sacramental divine-and-human action of the Church. All three are *parádoxis*, *traditio*, ‘handing-over’, and they are inseparable from one another.

The great act of thanksgiving that is the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is, in fact, the obedient execution by the Church of Christ’s command: “Do this in memory of me”. The familiar words we daily hear the priest pronounce at the altar as he bends over for the consecration are really an ecclesial synthesis of the words of Paul in First Corinthians and of the narratives of the Institution that we find in the Synoptic Gospels:

For on the night he was betrayed [and entered willingly into his Passion], he himself took bread, and, giving you thanks, he said the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples, saying: TAKE THIS, ALL OF YOU, AND EAT OF IT, FOR THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH WILL BE GIVEN UP FOR YOU. In a similar way, when supper was ended, he took the chalice, and, giving you thanks, he said the blessing, and gave the chalice to his disciples, saying: TAKE THIS, ALL OF YOU, AND DRINK FROM IT, FOR THIS IS THE CHALICE OF MY BLOOD, THE BLOOD OF THE NEW AND ETERNAL COVENANT, WHICH WILL BE Poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins. DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME.⁴

The most striking aspect of Jesus’ actions in this text of the Mass is what can be called Jesus’ *creative anticipation* of his death. We begin in the past historical tense, which remembers that Jesus *took* bread and *broke* it. But then we suddenly jump to the present tense of our own life, and we see and hear Jesus directly *handing the bread over* to his disciples and commanding them to eat of it right here and now. And the meaning Jesus himself gives these gestures and actions is: “for this is my Body, which *will be given up* for you”, in the future tense. In other words, here Christ sacramentally institutes in the present an action that overtakes in time the destructive historical action of his murder that hasn’t yet occurred, while at the same time giving to it a startling redemptive meaning. Thus, the interior significance and effects of the future action of betrayal are radically changed by divine intervention *before the betrayal occurs*. The malice of man is overtaken by the goodness of God. Love swallows up hatred, even though the lover dies of its poisoning. A hate-filled enemy—including both his evil intentions and his murderous deed—is embraced as brother and friend.

In the Sacrament, Jesus’ death becomes the source of our life because the power of his love anticipates the mangling of his body and the shedding of his blood, and it transforms their vital

⁴ The introductory sentence is from EP 3, while the clause in brackets is from EP 2. The rest of the text is common to all Eucharistic Prayers.

meaning and effect: from an act of violent hatred it is transformed into the execution of a sacrifice and the preparation of its victim as food. The separate consecration of the bread and the wine manifests the character of the act as a *sacrifice* since, according to Leviticus, all the blood of the victim had to be drained off before its body could be consumed (7:2). At a moment when one would expect the victim to be overwhelmed with fear, such anticipation is instead a forceful and deliberate initiative by the One in whom the universe was first created and which the humiliated Word is now re-creating through his Passion. Jesus *takes* bread, pronounces a thanksgiving that *changes* it substantially into his Body, *breaks it* and *distributes* it for eating; *takes* wine, *blesses* it and transforms it into his Blood, and then *pours it out* to be drunk. This is Jesus' way of guaranteeing that the Substance of his being will not fall on the Cross into a bottomless abyss as a result of human violence, but rather that that sacred Substance will be made available to all as a source of new life and joy: "This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again" (Jn 10:17-18). This power and choice of Jesus to *lay down his life* contains the whole secret of his love.

At the very moment when he is going to allow himself to be *handed over* to the forces of darkness, Jesus shows himself to be more than ever *the sovereign Lord of creation and of history*: of creation, because he takes the elements of bread and wine and re-creates them, transforming them into his Body and Blood; of history, because he takes the impending evil deed of his betrayal and transforms it already before it occurs into the best possible occasion for him to surrender his person to us, his betrayers, out of love, as the Bridegroom of the Church, with the total fidelity, dedication and passionate love that befits a royal bridegroom.

4. *Do this in memory of me!*

Paul's narrative of the Institution of the Eucharist has vital implications, and not only at the most obvious level for our liturgical and sacramental life. His account, but above all our Eucharistic practice, should also leave a deep mark on our individual life of faith, in which we struggle with doubts and temptations of many kinds, and on our moral life, in which we strive to live by the commandment "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13:34). The other command "Do this in memory of me!" that concludes the solemn words of institution refers not only to the *liturgical* celebration of the Eucharist. It also refers—and with special urgency, if we are to believe Pope Francis—to the fact that our everyday life as Christians ought to be the *existential* celebration of the Real Presence of Christ in our ordinary interaction with the world.

"*Do this in memory of me!*" Love doesn't forget; love remembers; and the memory of Jesus in us throbs with the power of his Word and the promise of his Resurrection. How beautiful that Christ asks us to do to others out of love what he has first done to us by telling us to do it in his

memory—as if he were saying: ‘Just remember me and love will come easily!’ Truly, it is *the quality of our interaction with others*—at home, in the workplace, in the street where we encounter the homeless—that will confirm the authenticity and heartfelt devotion of the liturgical Mystery celebrated in the church. Or do we simply *forget Christ and his gift of self to us* when we leave the church? Is the Mass nothing but a ritual fantasy that confirms my self-complacency?

‘Do not forget what I have done for you,’ Jesus says to us incessantly. When we are overwhelmed by sorrows of any kind, or are perhaps suffering the pangs of a devouring guilt that can tempt us to despair; when it seems that our life has reached a dead-end either through the treachery of others or through our own grave errors: then our only salvation is to believe with all our might in the power of Christ’s *creative anticipation*, that is, in the sovereign ability Christ demonstrated at the Last Supper and on the Cross to take an evil deed that will lead to his own crucifixion and providentially transform it into an event of Resurrection. Christ’s unconditional handing-over of himself to us in advance of anything we might do ought to give us the certainty that *no sin we commit can defeat the Mercy of God*, and that *no wound that is inflicted by others on us can surpass the power to heal of the divine Physician*. Indeed, Christ “has foresuffered all”.⁵ Let us not stubbornly clutch our sufferings to our chest like greedy paupers; Christ’s tender deed of creative anticipation on the Cross has made it so that *all my sufferings already belong, in advance, more to him than to me*.

“Love one another *as I have loved you*”, Jesus commanded us (Jn 13:34). As Christians we are not free to love any way we wish, half-heartedly or when convenient. We must strive to love as we have been loved, which is with all the tenderness of God’s whole Heart. “The measure of love,” says St. Bernard, “is to love without measure.” We cause something like a short-circuit in the cosmic circulation of love, which is supposed to flow on through us, if, after receiving Christ from the Father, we do not imitate God’s gesture and instead make his outpoured love stop abruptly with ourselves.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lays down this teaching: “If you bring your gift to the altar, and there recall that your brother has anything against you, leave your gift there at the altar, go first and be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Mt 5:23-24). This means that anger and resentment between brothers clogs up the free circulation of love, not only between the two brothers at odds but also within the worshipping community and between all believers and God. Eucharist cannot be offered by one who hates. Mercy is the power of self-giving; it is meant to flow ever onward; the more of it we give, the more we receive. Whoever receives mercy must give mercy, or else he will choke on it. God gives me his mercy so abundantly that I always will have more than enough for myself and all I encounter. Like the miraculous loaves, mercy becomes multiplied in the giving.

⁵ T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, “The Fire Sermon”, with reference to the Greek prophet Tiresias, whom many critics consider a Christ-figure in this poem.

The Gospel everywhere urges us to allow the irresistible tenderness of Christ to invade our person and take over our every thought, feeling and action. Realistically, however, none of us can by nature be as selfless as Christ, the Good Samaritan who has only to glance at a wounded or needy person to shudder with mercy. The problem is not so much that of willfully imposing on ourselves a strict consistency between faith and action; it is more a matter of allowing the power of the Christ, who has given himself to me with love, to have its full effect in my person, rather like a pregnant mother-to-be who allows the child to grow in her womb and simply nourishes it by offering it her whole being and doing nothing to harm it.

This is not our work, but the work of God in us. Christ in us is never a mere static object that we dispose of; he is the Subject acting in my soul, the risen Lord who lives in me and strengthens me, the true Protagonist of my life and personal history.⁶

In summary, then: It was his unbounded divine compassion as response to human betrayal that moved Jesus to institute the Holy Eucharist. *The Eucharist is a sacred work of total transformation which the Church performs in obedience to and imitation of her Lord.* It effects a transformation of time, of matter, of the meaning of emotions and experiences, and of the human person. In it we see Jesus transform, not only bread and wine into his Body and Blood, but also his own human weakness and defeat and death into divine tenderness and mercy. He makes one supreme moment in time flood any other moment that remembers his action—all by the power of the Holy Spirit that indwells Jesus. This pattern of transformation through the power of mercy should, in turn, rule our whole life as Christians.

⁶ I am very grateful to my friend Fr. William Nelson, a priest in Japan, who, on reading this passage, commented as follows. Here the heart of a pastor is truly speaking, giving the best possible evidence for the indispensable nature of the Eucharist in human life: “Here I think about the people I have been with today—three very small congregations in very small towns in Shikoku. Some immigrants, some workers, some very old, some children, some baptized and some not..., no one socially or economically very important, no one with much higher education, but all of them thirsty for a soul-satisfying, joy-bringing, overflowing love. These people (and I don’t suppose they are all that different from people anywhere else) are, for the most part, trying to do what they can to be happy, and are, for the most part, very tired and frustrated. How they, how we, welcome the good news of love poured out, of love and rest! Do you remember the old spiritual? *There is a balm in Gilead, / to make the wounded whole, / there is a balm in Gilead, to heal the sin-sick soul.* This is what I think as a pastor, as a father, as a brother. There is a balm, a fountain, love poured out and bread broken and wine served. What more could we ask for?”

The act of eating the Body of Christ and drinking the Blood of Christ with faith generates a dynamic process that *forms Christ in us*,⁷ and this transformation within us is profoundly linked to the Blessed Virgin's own conception of the Son of God in her womb. We conceive Christ in the womb of our faith by the power of the same Holy Spirit that overshadowed Mary at the Annunciation (Lk 1:35), the same Holy Spirit whose fire effects at Mass, through the epiclesis, the transformation of the elements into the Body and Blood of Christ. Christ's incandescent, indeed radioactive, Presence in the Blessed Sacrament is no inert object for mere distant veneration. Christ wants to pervade my whole person so that I become his Real Presence in the world. Christ wants to be born into the world, wants to be *handed over* by me to others, through my deeds of love, until his love becomes the vital law and spontaneous impulse of my own being.

Dear brothers and sisters: "Let us rejoice and exult and give God the glory, for the marriage feast of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready" for him (Rev 19:7).

⁷ "My children, for whom I am again in labor until Christ be formed in you!" (Gal 4:19).