



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

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Eucharist, banquet of communion with God

1. "We have become Christ. For if he is the head we are the members; he and we together are the whole man" (Augustine, *Tractatus in Joh.*, 21, 8). St Augustine's bold words extol the intimate communion that is created between God and man in the mystery of the Church, a communion which, on our journey through history, finds its supreme sign in the Eucharist. The commands, "Take, eat ... Drink of it ..." (Mt 26: 26-27), which Jesus gives his disciples in that room on the upper floor of a house in Jerusalem on the last evening of his earthly life (cf. Mk 14: 15), are rich in meaning. The universal symbolic value of the banquet offered in bread and wine (cf. Is 25: 6) already suggests communion and intimacy. Other more explicit elements extol the Eucharist as a banquet of friendship and covenant with God. For, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* recalls, it is "at the same time, and inseparably, the sacrificial memorial in which the sacrifice of the cross is perpetuated, and the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord's body and blood" (*CCC*, n. 1382).

2. Just as in the Old Testament the movable shrine in the desert was called the "tent of meeting", that is, of the encounter between God and his people and of brethren in faith among themselves, the ancient Christian tradition called the Eucharistic celebration the "synaxis", i.e., "meeting". In it "the Church's inner nature is revealed, a community of those summoned to the synaxis to celebrate the gift of the One who is offering and offered: participating in the Holy Mysteries, they become 'kinsmen' of Christ, anticipating the experience of divinization in the now inseparable bond linking divinity and humanity in Christ" (*Oriente lumen*, n. 10).

If we wish to reflect more deeply on the genuine meaning of this mystery of communion between

God and the faithful, we must return to Jesus' words at the Last Supper. They refer to the biblical category of "covenant", recalled precisely through the connection between Christ's blood and the sacrificial blood poured out on Sinai: "This is my blood of the covenant" (*Mk* 14: 24). Moses had said: "Behold the blood of the covenant" (*Ex* 24: 8). The covenant on Sinai which united Israel to the Lord with a bond of blood, foretold the new covenant which would give rise - to use an expression of the Greek Fathers - to a kinship as it were between Christ and the faithful (cf. Cyril of Alexandria, *In Johannis Evangelium*, XI; John Chrysostom, *In Matthaicum hom.*, LXXXII, 5).

3. It is especially in the Johannine and Pauline theologies that the believer's communion with Christ in the Eucharist is extolled. In his discourse at the synagogue in Capernaum Jesus says explicitly: "I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever" (*Jn* 6: 51). The entire text of this discourse is meant to emphasize the vital communion which is established in faith between Christ, the Bread of life, and whoever eats it. In particular, we find the Greek verb *menein*, "to abide, to dwell", which is typically used in the Fourth Gospel to indicate the mystical intimacy between Christ and the disciple: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (*Jn* 6: 56; cf. 15: 4-9).

4. Then the Greek word for "communion", *koinonia*, is used in the reflection of the First Letter to the Corinthians, where Paul speaks of the sacrificial banquets of idolatry, calling them the "table of demons" (10: 21), while expressing a valid principle for all sacrifices: "Those who eat the sacrifices are partners in the altar" (10: 18). The Apostle applies this principle in a clear and positive way to the Eucharist: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation (*koinonia*) in the body of Christ?... We all partake of the one bread" (10: 16-17). "Sharing in the Eucharist, the sacrament of the New Covenant, is the culmination of our assimilation to Christ, the source of 'eternal life', the source and power of that complete gift of self" (*Veritatis splendor*, n. 21).

5. This communion with Christ thus produces an inner transformation of the believer. St Cyril of Alexandria effectively describes this event, showing its resonance in life and in history: "Christ forms us in his image so that the features of his divine nature will shine in us through sanctification, justice and a good life in conformity with virtue. The beauty of this image shines in us who are in Christ, when we show ourselves to be good people through our deeds" (*Tractatus ad Tiberium Diaconum sociosque*, II, *Responsiones ad Tiberium Diaconum sociosque*, in *In divi Johannis Evangelium*, vol. III, Brussels 1965, p. 590). "By sharing in the sacrifice of the Cross, the Christian partakes of Christ's self-giving love and is equipped and committed to live this same charity in all his thoughts and deeds. In the moral life the Christian's royal service is also made evident and effective" (*Veritatis splendor*, n. 107). This royal service is rooted in Baptism and blossoms in Eucharistic communion. The way of holiness, love and truth is therefore the revelation to the world of our intimacy with God, expressed in the Eucharistic banquet.

Let us express our desire for the divine life offered in Christ in the warm tones of a great

theologian of the Armenian Church, Gregory of Narek (10th century): "It is not for his gifts, but for the Giver that I always long. It is not glory to which I aspire, but the Glorified One whom I desire to embrace.... It is not rest that I seek, but the face of the One who gives rest that I implore. It is not for the wedding feast, but for desire of the Bridegroom that I languish" (*XII Prayer*).

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I warmly welcome the many English-speaking pilgrims and visitors here today. I greet the pilgrims from the Diocese of Copenhagen, led by Bishop Czeslaw Kozon, the American pilgrims from the Archdiocese of Atlanta, led by Archbishop John Donoghue, and the Diocese of Metuchen, with Bishop Vincent Breen. I am happy to welcome the Irish Delegation to the World Mission Congress, led by Bishop John Magee, the members of the General Chapter of the Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing, the members of the Alliance of the Holy Family International, and the delegates to the World Conference on Non-Destructive Testing. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Ireland, Scotland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, the Philippines, Japan, Canada and the United States of America I invoke the abundant blessings of Almighty God.

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