

BORN OF THE
EUCCHARIST

Halfway through *Born of the Eucharist: A Spirituality for Priests* an image came clearly to me, a memory, of a *panificio*, an Italian bakery. Just passing by, you are surrounded by the aroma of bread baking. Then, as you walk in, there are big baskets of several kinds of bread, of various shapes and different sizes—round, elongated, flat, and in several shades of tan.

The flavors, consistency, and crusts are multiple, some slightly sweet, others tending to a sour or a more salty palate; some soft, others crunchy. All make my mouth water, yet each of them is that same basic food—bread—beautiful, tasty, and nutritious.

So too is this book, a rich and varied collection of essays of different lengths and approaches. They range from theological and scriptural reflections like those of Cardinals Avery Dulles, S.J., and Albert Vanhoye, S.J., to deep and more experience-based meditations like the beautiful writing by Fr. Gabriel O'Donnell, O.P. In addition, there are *panini*—small breads of one or a few pages—that catch and share a specific aspect of the “bread of life” in the life of the priest.

Msgr. Stephen Rossetti, who also contributes a few deep and personal reflections, is the chief baker, who has compiled a healthy book for the hungry priest. Young men in discernment will likewise experience an increased hunger for the priesthood. Finally, Catholics who seek to learn about the dynamic relationship between the Eucharist and the priest will be nourished, enlightened, and uplifted by reading this book.

Fr. Italo Dell'Oro, C.R.S.

Director, Ministry to Priests
Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston

From the hearts and minds of shepherds—well known and not— here is a lively gathering of eucharistic wisdom that renders priesthood freshly palpable. Clearly, the priests and bishops who come together in this volume to witness to the power of the presence of the Lord in the Eucharist in their lives, draw their strength and joy from this most blessed of sacraments. Born of the Eucharist is a real opportunity for each of us priests to return to the Lord's Table, the source of our vocation, and be renewed in the joy. Msgr. Stephen Rossetti serves his brother priests very well in hosting this gathering.

Rev. Raymond P. Roden, PsyD

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BORN OF THE EUCCHARIST

A SPIRITUALITY *for* PRIESTS

With a Reflection by Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J.

Edited by

STEPHEN J. ROSSETTI

Author of The Joy of Priesthood

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This book is dedicated to
Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J.
August 24, 1918–December 12, 2008
Faithful Jesuit, Master Theologian, Man of the Church,
Dedicated Teacher, Humble Man, Lover of Christ.

Your many students and friends thank you.



At the Last Supper, we were born as priests.

—John Paul II

Holy Thursday Letter, 2004



The more intensely he lives in Christ,
the more authentically he can celebrate the Eucharist.
The Eucharist is at the heart of the priest's spirituality.

—John Paul II

General Audience, June 9, 1993



CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Miracles Before the Eucharist	7
Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan	
Priest and Eucharist: No Higher Calling	11
Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J.	
What I Truly Wanted	27
Rev. Peter Murphy	
A Monastic Yearning for Christ	29
Rev. Kevin Walsh, O.C.S.O.	
Who Is Christ Present in the Eucharist?	31
Rev. Msgr. John J. Strykowski	
A Hunger for the Eucharist.....	43
Rev. Msgr. Stephen J. Rossetti	
Universal Communion.....	45
Cardinal Francis George, O.M.I.	
Eucharist as the Source of Priestly Identity	47
Archbishop Donald W. Wuerl	

Holy Uselessness	61
Rev. Msgr. J. Wilfrid Parent	
The Eucharist Strengthens Us in Difficult Times	63
Most Rev. John B. McCormack	
Communion in a Fractured World.....	65
Rev. Anthony Oelrich	
The Pearl of Great Price.....	67
Rev. David L. Toups	
Absolute Transcendent Mystery	77
Rev. Benedict J. Groeschel, C.F.R.	
Never Far From Home	79
Rev. Timothy A. Butler, U.S.A.F.	
A Few Thoughts on the Eucharist.....	81
Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, S.J.	
The Eucharist: A Call to Priestly Holiness	83
Rev. Msgr. Stephen J. Rossetti	
A Journal Entry	101
Most Rev. Victor B. Galeone	
Disconnected Eucharistic Memories.....	103
Rev. Stephen Wang	
A Surprising Gift of Belief.....	105
Rev. Kevin M. McDonough	
Gathering the Fragments: Making the Connections	107
Rev. Msgr. John Zenz	

Entering the Paschal Mystery	121
Rev. Daniel P. Coughlin	
At Mass with Padre Pio.....	123
Rev. Msgr. Paul A. Lenz	
The Luckiest People on Earth.....	125
Rev. Brendan Daly	
The Eucharist—Heart of the Priest’s Life.....	127
Rev. Gabriel B. O’Donnell, O.P.	
God Waits for Me	141
Rev. Msgr. Stephen J. Rossetti	
A Lover’s Longing for Communion	143
Rev. George E. Stuart	
Thanksgiving for God’s Victory of Love.....	145
Cardinal Albert Vanhoye, S.J.	
What You Receive as a Gift, Give as a Gift.....	155
Rev. Edward J. Arsenault	
Go and Live the Mass!	157
Rev. Msgr. Peter J. Vaghi	
Conclusion	161
Abbreviations.....	165
Contributors.....	167
Notes.....	173



INTRODUCTION

Rev. Msgr. Stephen J. Rossetti

When you read through the eight chapters and twenty-one reflections by these exemplary priests and bishops, you will find many interesting thoughts, ideas, stories, and experiences. While they are engaging and enlightening in themselves, there is a “buried treasure” underneath it all. The treasure lies in the dynamic personal relationship of these fine priests to the Eucharist. The intensity and profundity of this relationship witnesses to us most powerfully.

Down through the centuries, there have been many writings that wax eloquently about the relationship of the Eucharist and the priest. These are important. But it is the lived experience of our priests today that speaks all the more poignantly. In his essay, Cardinal Avery Dulles, reflecting on the priesthood and the Eucharist, wrote, “This is our lofty calling, than which, I think, there can be no higher.” Cardinal Francis George, in his contribution, shared a moment during a papal Mass when he “had a profound experience of the unity in Christ.” Msgr. Paul Lenz wrote about attending a Mass with Padre Pio in which he “felt seized and transported by grace.” Fr. David Toups related an experience on retreat, holding the host in his hands and with tears in his eyes when he knew that, “I was holding

*In a very real way,
the renewal of the
Church is linked
to the renewal of
the priesthood.*
—John Paul II

the pearl of great price, Jesus Christ.” Fr. Gabriel O’Donnell opened his reflections with: “The Eucharist has always been the center of my life.”

While the Second Vatican Council and a plethora of other Church documents rightly speak of the centrality of the Eucharist, we see these truths come alive in the inspiring witnesses of our authors. There seems to emerge from these pages and the various authors, when one listens most deeply, a “single voice” that points to the altar and cries out with John the Baptist, “Look, there is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world!”

The greatest witness to the truths of our faith has always been the living faith of believers. And a great witness to the health, vibrancy, and, in truth, sanctity of our priests and bishops today is their love of the Eucharist, and thus, their love of Christ. When we read the words written from the hearts of these men, it fills us with a great hope.

IDENTITY OF PRIESTHOOD AND EUCHARIST

This univocal witness to the centrality of the Eucharist and to its real presence of Christ strongly affirms the Church’s consistent teaching about the connection of priesthood and Eucharist. The Eucharist is not simply one function of the priest, not merely one task among many that he endeavors to perform with reverence. The connection is deeper and more profound.

*Every great reform
has in some way
been linked to
the rediscovery of
belief in the Lord’s
eucharistic presence
among the people.*
—Sacramentum
Caritatis 6

John Paul II, in his personal letter to priests on Holy Thursday 2004, told his brothers, “The ministerial priesthood . . . is born, lives and works and bears fruit ‘de Eucharistia.’” This is a powerful statement: *we are born of the Eucharist.* It is out of the very essence of the Eucharist that priesthood comes into being. It is no accident that we celebrate both the institution of the Eucharist and the ministerial priesthood on the same night, Holy Thursday. The priesthood and the Eucharist are

interwoven and share a common identity. John Paul II put it succinctly when he said, “There is no priesthood without the Eucharist and no Eucharist without the priesthood.”¹

It is little wonder, then, that the priestly authors of this book each have a profound connection to the Eucharist. These authors have presided at Mass thousands of times. Again and again and again, they have ascended to the altar and offered the Holy Sacrifice. One might think, given a certain secular perspective, that such a repetitious act could become routine, blasé, perhaps even boring. But such is not the case. Clearly, the Eucharist has steadily grown in meaning and centrality in their lives. Each of them continues to plumb, ever more deeply, this wellspring of Christian life. And so should we.

EUCHARISTIC REFORM OF THE PRIESTHOOD

Shortly before his death, John Paul II called for a renewal of the Church and said it was “urgently needed.”² He later added that this renewal must be accompanied by a renewal of the clergy: “In a very real way, the renewal of the Church is linked to the renewal of the priesthood.”³ I believe these words are true for us today and that we are in the midst of a graced time of renewal.

I believe that this call to renewal is not to take a priesthood that has become *bad* and to make it *good* again. Rather, it is to take the *good* priesthood of today and to fill it full of *saints*. There are many signs of life and health in our priesthood today. There are tens of thousands of priests who toil tirelessly and truly heroically each day. They are continuing to show us the ordinary means to faithfulness and, at times, even to sanctity. They will be the key to a renewal of the Church. As St. John Vianney said to his bishop, “If you wish to convert your diocese you must make all your parish priests saints.”⁴

These are not ordinary times; the call for a renewal is especially urgent. Atheism is spreading, particularly in some of the wealthier nations. The Church in these areas is increasingly ignored or persecuted in modern, middle-class ways. In our Internet world with its

hyper-connectivity, I believe that atheism will spread steadily across the globe.

Militantly atheistic spokespersons such as Christopher Hitchens (author of *God Is Not Great*) or Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*) unabashedly and loudly proclaim that there is no God and there is no next life. “Christianity,” as I heard Mr. Hitchens say in a lecture in London, “is evil rubbish.”

Perhaps more dangerous are the increasing millions who nominally profess some Christianity or a belief in God, but who live their lives completely as if there is no God. I have come to recognize that this, too, is really a form of atheism, albeit a functional one. We are, in many of the richest nations of the world, being enveloped by atheism, explicit or functional, but atheism nonetheless. And it will spread.

There is a particular interplay between the Eucharist and the priesthood, an interplay which goes back to the Upper Room: these two sacraments were born together and their destiny is indissolubly linked until the end of the world.

—John Paul II,
Holy Thursday
letter, 2004

It is time for us in the Church to move beyond our tendency toward breast-beating and excessive self-introspection

that, at times, threatens to paralyze us. We ought never to be embarrassed or hesitant about explaining the cause of our hope. We ought to move forward and preach with the confidence that comes from Jesus Christ. Jesus himself spoke with an authority that often amazed his hearers: “the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority” (Mt 7:28–29).

Our renewed spreading of the gospel, the New Evangelization, will necessarily be led by a host of holy priests and bishops filled with the power, authority, and confidence of the eucharistic Christ. As Pope Benedict has said in *Sacramentum Caritatis*, “Every great reform has in some way been linked to the rediscovery of belief in

the Lord's eucharistic presence among his people" (*S Car* 6). It is my hope and prayer that the witness of these authors will enkindle in many a deeper understanding, thirst, and love for Christ in the Eucharist. Empowered by this indwelling Christ, we cannot but proclaim true Hope and true Light to a darkening world.



MIRACLES BEFORE THE EUCHARIST

Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan

On June 24, 2002, I arrived in Milwaukee on the day before the public announcement that I had been appointed as tenth archbishop of Milwaukee. I was a nervous wreck. I had a big job ahead of me, in an archdiocese I knew little about, in the midst of a time of national scandal, to follow a very prominent and long-serving archbishop.

But what made me most apprehensive was the prospect of meeting my predecessor. Archbishop Rembert Weakland had a national, actually international, stature; he had just resigned after acknowledging and apologizing for past sins; and, although I hardly knew him, word on the street was that we came from different “theological backgrounds,” which is a euphemistic way of saying that he was looked upon as a “liberal,” I as a “conservative.”

*Because the loaf
of bread is one,
we, though many,
are one body, for
we all partake of
the one loaf.*

—1 Corinthians
10:17

His gracious hospitality that evening, substantive conversation, candid assessment of the challenges awaiting me, and his assurances of ongoing support, made me feel very welcome, and softened considerably the nervousness I was experiencing. But, what really gave me peace and confidence came early the next morning.

I couldn't sleep, and I was anticipating controversial questions at the press conference. Plus, I was still unsure about how my predecessor and I would get along. By 4:00 a.m. I gave up on sleep. I got out of bed, showered, dressed, grabbed my breviary, and made

If you want the faithful who are entrusted to your care to pray willingly and well, you must give them an example and let them see you praying in church. A priest kneeling devoutly and reverently before the tabernacle, and pouring forth prayers to God with all his heart, is a wonderful example to the Christian people and serves as an inspiration.

—*Sacerdotii Nostri*
Primordia 49

my way, at about 4:45 in the morning, to the little chapel downstairs . . . and there sat Rembert Weakland, with his breviary, before the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle. My fears evaporated. Between the two of us was a difference in age of twenty-five years, in weight of about sixty pounds, a variation of theological outlook probably. But it was suddenly and dramatically evident to me that we were *one* in our faith, our priestly vocation, our apostolic bond, our prayer, and our trust in Jesus, really and truly present in the Most Blessed Sacrament.

I propose to you that this was a *miracle*. Jesus was saying to me, as he had said to his first priests and bishops, his apostles, "Do not be afraid." This miracle occurred before the eucharistic presence of Christ. Miracles often occur before the Eucharist. The Eucharist itself is a miracle.

As rector of the North American College, I had the joy of reading the autobiographies of over three hundred men requesting admission. Never was I unmoved by those personal testimonies. Very often, those promising young men had discerned a vocation to the priesthood while in silent prayer before Jesus in the Eucharist. Many vividly recalled how Jesus, in the Blessed Sacrament, had transformed their fears into trust, their doubts into hope. It's not

that any of them had audibly heard the voice of Christ—I would have reread their “psychologicals” had that been the case! No—but, in the stillness of their souls, conscious of the real presence, they had sensed him whispering, “Come, follow me!”

Each Sunday, I have the joy of celebrating 8:00 a.m. Mass at our cathedral. After Mass once, a woman said, “You do something that really inspires me!” I wanted to kiss her, since compliments are rare these days. My conceited side kicked in as I began to anticipate what she would praise me for: a sterling sermon? A new diocesan initiative? A witty comment to a crabby reporter? “I am so inspired,” she continued, “that I see you before the tabernacle every Sunday before Mass.” I’ll be. . . . Of course, I hardly do that to impress her, or anybody. I do it because I need miracles.



PRIEST AND EUCHARIST:
NO HIGHER CALLING

Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J.*

In these days of diminishing numbers of priestly ordinations and ever-increasing accountability, priests who are engaged in parish work must, I suppose, feel pulled apart by conflicting claims on their time and energies. Theirs is probably more the lot of Martha than of Mary. After all, they are, very likely, managers of a large plant. They have a parish church and no doubt a rectory and possibly a school, a convent, or other buildings to maintain; they have employees who have problems about working conditions, wages, and hours; they have educational programs, such as CCD and RCIA; they have endless rounds of committee meetings, Baptisms, marriage preparations, weddings, sick calls, and funerals. Priests are called upon to hear confessions and to make time for spiritual counseling. They have the Liturgy of the Hours to say daily, and they strive to find time for personal prayer. Priests have to maintain relationships with other priests, with their bishops or religious superiors, with friends and family. And they have to take care of their personal needs, including shopping,

*Priesthood is more
a matter of being
than of doing.*

**This paper, originally given as a Day of Recollection for priests in Dunwoodie, New York, March 9, 2005, was personally given by Cardinal Dulles for this book and has been edited for this use.*

doctor's appointments, and time for relaxation. As an academic, I do not experience all the pressures that are upon them, but I think I understand some of the demands that they must feel.

And yet, as Jesus told the sisters of Lazarus, only one thing is necessary. We all have to find what is truly central in our lives, and let it dictate the priorities. The all-important question for us may be: Who am I as a priest?

PRIESTHOOD AND EUCHARIST ARE PROFOUNDLY INTERCONNECTED

I like to think that priesthood is more a matter of being than of doing. At ordination, the priest receives an indelible mark that makes him different—"ontologically" different, some prefer to say—no matter whether he does anything or not. Even if he performed no priestly ministry, he would still be a priest forever. But, of course, he should not be idle. He is ordained in order to perform a specific service toward the Lord and toward the people of God.

The essence of priestly service has perhaps never been better expressed than by the Letter to the Hebrews, which tells us:

Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. For this reason, he is bound to offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people. And one does not take the honor upon himself, but is called by God, just as Aaron was. (Heb 5:1, 3–4)

The priest is a mediator; he offers sacrifices to God on behalf of himself and the people, and in return he distributes to the people the gifts that come from God. Thus, we may include in the notion of priesthood the vocation to be, in the phrase of St. Paul, "stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1).

To pray, to offer sacrifice, and to distribute to the community the heavenly gifts that God is pleased to bestow: this is our lofty calling, than which, I think, there can be no higher. This mediatory task, both upward and downward, must be the hinge on which our

life turns, the source of our inner peace, and the unifying element that determines the apportionment of our activities.

There were certain priorities in the mediating work of Jesus himself. Conscious that he had come into the world to offer his body in obedience to God (cf. Heb 10:5–10), he hastened with a certain impatience toward the passion at the appointed hour (cf. Jn 12:27). At the Last Supper he declared: “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Lk 22:15). For, at that meal, he anticipated the sacrifice he was to offer on Calvary and distributed its fruits to his faithful disciples, commissioning them to perform the same rite in memory of him.

*The Church is
vivified and held
in unity by this
supreme sacrament.*

The Last Supper was the moment when Jesus instituted the new covenant and commissioned the Twelve to be the principal bearers and ministers of that covenant. He might have instituted the new covenant in some other way, as the covenants with Abraham, Noah, Moses, and David had been instituted. But as a sign of the conviviality that characterizes the heavenly banquet, he opted for the form of a meal. Jesus is the host who both serves his guests and enters into table companionship with them.

The Last Supper is not just one more of the series of suppers that Jesus had been sharing with the disciples and others over the preceding months and years; it is a unique farewell meal in which Jesus bestowed his parting gift, his very self. At this point, he accomplished in actual fact what he had promised to do at Capernaum, when he declared that his flesh was real food and his blood real drink (Jn 6:55), given “for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51). Under the external forms of bread and wine, he offers himself to sustain and nourish the Church in order to make it, in a true sense, his body. The Church is vivified and held in unity by this supreme sacrament.

Celebrated by the Church after the resurrection, the Eucharist “proclaims the death of the Lord until he comes.” The Church continues to do what Jesus did at the Last Supper, but in a

different manner. The Last Supper looked forward to, and enacted in advance, the sacrifice to come; the Eucharist points back to Calvary, and makes it present in new form.

In the ordination ritual, the ordaining prelate gives to the ordinand this charge: “The sacrifice of Christ will be offered sacramentally in an unbloody way through your hands. Understand the meaning of what you do; put into practice what you celebrate. When you recall the mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord, strive to die to sin and to walk in the new life of Christ.”

Every ordained priest participates in the threefold office of Christ. Because Christ was priest, prophet, and king, the Christian priesthood is not only cultic but also prophetic and royal. But because the cultic or sacerdotal function is primary, members of the presbyterate and episcopate are commonly called priests.

It would be possible but tedious to heap up an almost endless series of quotations from the Fathers and Doctors of the Church

*In the eucharistic
sacrifice priests fulfill
their highest office.*

and from popes and councils to the effect that the supreme activity of the ministerial priest is to celebrate the Eucharist. At Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* (Decree on the Life and Ministry of Priests) taught that it is in the eucharistic sacrifice that priests fulfill their highest office (*PO* 13). The same Decree goes on to say that the eucharistic sacrifice is “the center and root of the whole priestly life” (*PO* 14).

Similar statements can be found in several other texts of Vatican II, in the statement *De Sacerdotio Ministeriali* (On the Ministerial Priesthood) issued by the Synod of Bishops in 1971, and in the Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests published by the Congregation for the Clergy in 1994 (48). Pope John Paul II believes the same with all his heart and has many times so declared. In his general audience on May 12, 1993, for example, he said: “I reaffirm with conviction and deep spiritual joy that the presbyter is above all a man of the Eucharist.”⁵ “The Eucharist,” he writes in *Dominicae Cenaе*, “is the *raison d’être* of the priesthood” (*DC* 2). So profoundly interconnected are the two, he states, that “there

can be no Eucharist without the priesthood, just as there can be no priesthood without the Eucharist.”⁶ The Eucharist could not exist without us priests but, without the Eucharist, our existence as priests would be a lifeless shadow.⁷

EUCCHARIST IS THE SACRAMENT OF SACRAMENTS

Theologians explain that the entire sacramental life of the Church revolves about the Eucharist, which is the center toward which all the sacraments converge and from which they radiate like the spokes of a wheel from the hub, like heat from a furnace, or like rays of light from a lamp. St. Thomas somewhere calls the Eucharist the sacrament of sacraments, the source and goal of all sacramental life.

The Eucharist is the very center of parish life.

Baptism and Confirmation bestow a mark or character enabling their recipients to take part as active participants in eucharistic worship and to receive Holy Communion. The sacraments of Penance and the Anointing of the Sick dispose the faithful to receive the sacrament worthily and fruitfully. The primary effect of ordination is to produce ministers capable of offering Holy Mass.

Matrimony is of all the sacraments most difficult to connect with the Eucharist, but I believe that a close connection can be found if we understand it as a covenant of mutual union, founded on the nuptial covenant between Christ and his Church. John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation on the family, *Familiaris Consortio*, writes:

The Eucharist is the very source of Christian marriage. The Eucharistic Sacrifice, in fact, represents Christ's covenant of love with the Church, sealed with his blood on the cross. In this sacrifice of the New and Eternal Covenant, Christian spouses encounter the source from which their own marriage covenant flows, [by which it] is interiorly structured and continuously renewed. (57)

Not all ministry, to be sure, is sacramental. The parish has to have effective programs for education, for spiritual formation, and for evangelization. But all of these programs should be inspired by, and oriented toward, the Eucharist as the very center of parish life. The Sunday Mass, in particular, should be the culmination. It should be offered with dignity and at times with a certain solemnity, marked by beauty of language, music, gesture, and visual setting. It should be an occasion when the parish joyfully experiences its unity as a worshiping community, with the various ministers performing their proper functions, under the presidency of the priest-celebrant.

Pope John Paul II's apostolic letter *Dies Domini*, released on Pentecost Sunday 1998, recalls that the first sabbath commemorated in scripture is that of God himself, who paused after the labor of creation to contemplate the beauty of the world he had made.

Sunday Eucharist is an epiphany of the Church. Each Sunday, Christians pause from the labors of the week to give praise to God for all that he has done, not only the gifts of creation but those of redemption, coming to a climax in Christ's resurrection from the dead and his entrance into his sabbath rest. The eighth day of the week coincides with the first day, expressing the arrival of the new age. It looks forward to the endless day when we and the whole Church will enter into the promised sabbath rest.

The day of the Lord, says the Pope, is also the day of the Church. The Sunday Eucharist is an epiphany of the Church as it gathers round the altar of the Lord in the presence of the bishop or the priest, who represents the bishop. Sunday observance, therefore, is the privileged place in which communion is proclaimed and nurtured, so that the Church may effectively perform her role as the sacrament of unity.

THE PRIEST'S ROLE IN THE EUCHARIST IS INDISPENSABLE

The Mass is made up of a call to worship, a penitential rite, prayers that express the community's needs, hopes, and gratitude,

readings to instruct the faithful, a homily to expound the word of God, an offering of gifts, the Holy Sacrifice, Holy Communion, and the final blessing and dismissal. The priest plays an indispensable role at every stage of this liturgy. He is specially appointed to pray on behalf of the community, to proclaim the word of God, to consecrate the sacred species, and to feed the flock of Christ.

The Eucharist can never be the private worship of an individual or a club. It is always a public act of the Church as such. For this reason, its celebration requires a minister capable of linking the local community to the diocesan bishop and through him to the whole Catholic communion. Ordained by a bishop in the apostolic succession, the priest is also the bond that links the Eucharist vertically in time with what Jesus did for the apostles at the Last Supper. To underline the Catholic and apostolic dimensions of the sacrament, the missal includes commemorations of the local bishop, the Pope, and apostles, and selected saints and martyrs.

In some quarters, confusion and doubts have arisen concerning the role of the ordained priest in the Eucharist. Is it sufficient for him to pronounce the words of consecration, delegating everything else to members of the congregation? The “General Instruction” at the beginning of the Roman Missal takes pains to eliminate any such minimalism. It points out that the priest alone offers the gifts at the altar. He alone recites the Eucharistic Prayer, with the people responding according to the rubrics. Ordinarily, only those who are sacramentally ordained may preach at the Eucharist. They alone may break the consecrated hosts and pour the precious blood into the chalice. And they are the ordinary ministers of Holy Communion, with certain exceptions to be noted later.

Try earnestly to give the congregation something solid that will nourish them spiritually.

The readings from holy scripture and the ensuing homily are important parts of the Mass. The Second Vatican Council declares that “the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy are so closely bound together that they form a single act of worship”

(SC 56). Several times the Council speaks of the two tables—that of the word of God and that of the body of Christ—from which the Church receives the bread of life and hands them on to the faithful (DV 21; cf. SC 51). “For in the sacred books,” says the Council, “the Father who is in heaven meets his children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power in the word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life” (SC 6).

The proclamation of the gospel, which is the high point of the Liturgy of the Word, is reserved by the Church’s tradition to ordained ministers. The homily is ordinarily given by the priest celebrant himself, although it may be assigned on occasion to another priest or to a deacon.

In his apostolic letter on the *Dies Domini*, Pope John Paul II says that now, more than thirty years after the Council, “We need

*Pray earnestly
for the grace to
make this offering
from the heart.*

to assess how well the word of God is being proclaimed. . . . It is the duty of those who exercise the ministry of the word to prepare the reflection on the word of the Lord by prayer and study of the sacred text, so that they may then express its contents faithfully and apply them to people’s concerns and to their daily lives” (DD 40). In the homily, the priest has a precious opportunity to instruct the people, bringing out the relationship of the inspired word to their circumstances, needs, and capacities. In these days when the Church has so little opportunity to mold the ideas and values of the faithful, these few minutes of instruction should not be wasted. We should try earnestly to give the congregation something solid that will nourish them spiritually, correct any unhealthy tendencies, warn the people against serious spiritual dangers, and build up their joy and confidence in their faith. In her seminary training, the Church tries to prepare her priests so that their homilies will strengthen the zeal of the congregants and enrich their understanding of the word of God. The priest must maintain a certain level of

intellectual and spiritual life in order to measure up to the demands of preaching, which can be quite stringent.

In preaching, the priest relies not only on his personal gifts but also on his power of orders and his faculties from the bishop so that he can speak, not simply in his own name, but officially, on behalf of the Church as such. In preaching, the priest shares in the magisterium of the teaching Church, though in a subordinate way, under the Pope and the bishops.

At the Offertory, the priest has the office of presenting to the Lord the gifts of the people, represented by the bread and wine. We who are priests should pray earnestly for the grace to make this offering from the heart, placing ourselves, as it were, on the paten and in the chalice which we lift up to the Lord, together with needs and intentions of all the people whom we serve.

At the consecration, the priest performs his supreme act, in the person of Christ the Lord. The priest is not alone in offering the sacrifice, but the people offer it with him and through his hands, so that his role is primary. He speaks the very words of Christ, in the first person singular, "This is my body. . . . This is my blood." There is no need for dramatics at this point; it is not a matter of play-acting, in which we try to create the illusion that we are Jesus Christ. No, we remain just what we were, but we let the grace of ordination work through us as we speak and act in the very person of Christ. As we proclaim

It must never be forgotten that our reception of Baptism and Confirmation is ordered to the Eucharist. Accordingly, our pastoral practice should reflect a more unitary understanding of the process of Christian initiation The Holy Eucharist, then, brings Christian initiation to completion and represents the centre and goal of all sacramental life.

—*Sacramentum
Caritatis* 17

the death of the Lord, he takes over without any special effort on our part. We simply lend him our voice and our hands, and he performs his ministry through us. Recognizing that our priesthood is simply a participation in that of Christ the High Priest, we let him draw us into his sacrificial action, begging him to configure our minds and hearts more perfectly to his.

The priest has the responsibility to unify the community around the altar, eliminating the individualistic detachment or the factionalism that can sometimes internally divide parishes or separate them from the larger Church. The sign of peace immediately

preceding Holy Communion should not be an empty formality, but an expression of mutual love and reconciliation among the members of the congregation, symbolizing the unity of the universal Church to which they belong.

Holy Communion is a preeminent moment of the liturgical action. The celebrant and concelebrants first receive communion themselves, as is necessary for the sacrifice to reach completion. The priest, as I have said, is the ordinary minister of Holy Communion, although deacons may assist. In the event of real necessity where clergy are lacking, suit-

It is not the power of man which makes what is put before us the body and blood of Christ, but the power of Christ himself who was crucified for us. The priest standing there in the place of Christ says these words but their power and grace are from God. "This is my body," he says, and these words transform what lies before him.

—St. John Chrysostom,
*Homilies on the
Treachery of Judas* 1, 6

able lay persons may be designated as extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion.

The reception of Holy Communion, of course, is a sacred moment in which everyone who partakes, including the priest, should be left to his or her own thoughts. Some might wish to pray

over the words of Jesus, “Behold, I stand at the door and knock” (Rev 3:20). He begs to be admitted into our hearts so that he may transform us with his love. We priests are privileged to feed our people with the Bread of Life, so that they may become, so to speak, a eucharistic people. The specific grace of this sacrament, according to Catholic tradition, is the unity of the Mystical Body, a unity of devotion, peace, and charity.

The missal contains very beautiful prayers before and after Communion, which afford splendid material for our meditation. I especially like the prayer that the priest is to say silently before the ablutions, “What we have received with our lips, O Lord, may we receive with a pure mind, and from being a passing gift may it become for us an everlasting remedy” (from the Latin).

As you may be aware, in 2002 the United States received an indult by way of experiment, permitting extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion to assist in the purification of the sacred vessels in cases of real need. Unless this indult is promptly renewed, it will expire on March 22, 2005.⁸ After that date only priests, deacons, and installed acolytes will be authorized to purify the chalice and paten. These and other liturgical norms should not be dismissed as meticulous rubrics dictated by a legalistic mentality. They are intended to protect the sacredness of the Eucharist and the integrity of the ministerial priesthood, which is intrinsically related to the Eucharist.

The conclusion of the Mass, with the final blessing and the dismissal, should not be simply a way of saying, “Thank God it’s over, now we can go home.” The priest should be conscious of the privilege of bestowing the blessing in the name of the triune God. In saying the *Ite, missa est* the celebrant or the deacon commissions the congregation to bring gospel values into their daily lives, including their home, their neighborhood, their business or profession. They are to be bearers of the message of Christ, evangelizing their particular environment by word and by example (cf. *Mane*

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Nobiscum 24). It seems obvious in our time that the world stands in desperate need of being transformed by the message of the gospel. In the past, we have often failed to give our Catholic people a lively sense of mission. But, especially since Vatican II, the popes have been trying to overcome the complacency or fear or indifference, whatever it may be, that turns the Church so much in upon herself. Our role as priests is to communicate to the laity a greater realization of their responsibility to Christianize the world.

FOSTERING A EUCHARISTIC DEVOTION

A lively faith in the real and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist gives rise to a variety of eucharistic devotions beyond and outside the celebration of Mass. Catholic teaching has constantly defended reverence for the reserved sacrament. In the sixteenth century, the Council of Trent repudiated opinions to the effect that Christ was present only in the distribution of Holy Communion, or that reservation of the host was not legitimate except for purposes of giving Communion to the sick (*DS* 1654, 1657). The Council encouraged the practice of public exposition and processions, insisting that adoration of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist is not idolatrous (*DS* 1656).

*Jesus waits for us
in this sacrament
of love.*

Some people seem to have thought that Vatican II, with its emphasis on active participation in the liturgy and on reception of Holy Communion, implicitly discouraged practices such as eucharistic adoration and Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. But Paul VI in 1965, before the council ended, published an encyclical on the Eucharist in which he asserted that adoration of the Blessed Sacrament had a basis in the writings of Christian antiquity and had risen to great heights in the thirteenth century, when the feast of Corpus Christi was extended to the universal Church. In the concluding section of his encyclical, he taught that the Blessed Sacrament should always be kept in a place of honor in the Church and urged the Christian faithful to make frequent visits to it.