Ecclesia Eucharistia

The Catholic Review

Early this month, I joined more than 30 bishops from the Mid-Atlantic and South East on a five-day spiritual retreat at Our Lady of Florida Passionist Retreat House in North Palm Beach.

The opportunity offered various moments for prayer and reflection. It was ably directed by a true spiritual master, Benedictine Father Thomas Achlin of St. Vincent Monastery in Latrobe, Pennsylvania. Such a retreat presents blocks of time for quiet, meditative reading, time I made good use of thanks to a re-reading of Pope John Paul's Encyclical Letter of April, 2003, Ecclesia de Eucharistia, a thought-provoking and prayer-provoking presentation on the Holy Eucharist and Its relationship to the Church.

On occasion I hope to use this column to explore this important letter. The Eucharist is "The source and summit of the Christian Life" as the Second Vatican Council attested, and if there is ample evidence that Catholics are confused or ignorant in regard to its importance, where best to begin a series of thoughts on our faith than here, at the core and center of our belief.

In the first of six surprisingly brief but tightly packed chapters the late Holy Father focuses on the Mass as "The Mystery of Faith," the proclamation called for by the priest immediately after the consecration of the Bread and Wine and made by the faithful present at the Mass.

The defining moment in the history of humanity was the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ whose gift of self for our salvation makes it possible for us to achieve the eternal life with Christ for which every human being instinctively hungers. As Saint Augustine, fourth century bishop and Doctor of the Church, noted, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you, O Lord."

But how does that once-and-for-all saving event two thousand years ago reach through the centuries to touch us today? In the words of the encyclical, "This

sacrifice is so decisive for the salvation of the human race that Jesus Christ offered it and returned to the Father only after he had left us a means of sharing in it as if we had been present there."

Thus, the link which Jesus himself established the night before he died, at the Last Supper, by the very words he used:

"This is my body which is given for you."
"This is my blood which is poured out for you."
And then the significant command to his apostles,
"Do this in memory of me!"

The Risen Son of God, no longer subject to the limits of time and space, has made it possible for every believer to draw near to Calvary not physically but sacramentally. He represents His death and resurrection in an unbloody form in order that every time and place and person can benefit from the touch of that mystery.

In the words of John Henry Cardinal Newman:

"Time and space have no portion in the spiritual kingdom which he has founded; and the rites of his Church are as mysterious spells by which he annuls them both."

Or, in the poetical, mystical words of the encyclical:

"The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth. It is a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey."

A review of this encyclical will offer us much more of a spiritual and quite practical nature in our individual and communal approach to what our Eastern Church brethren call "the Divine Mysteries." It is my hope that this meditation by our saintly Holy Father will enrich us with deeper insights into these Mysteries and a greater love and reverence for the Mass as the Mystery of Faith.

I encourage you to read prayerfully the encyclical which is available on the websites of both the Vatican and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and reflect on the great gift we have in the Eucharist.

To read the complete text of the Holy Father’s encyclical, visit:
https://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html