SACRAMENTUM CARITATIS: FIRST REFLECTIONS

Personal location—in a spiritual, theological, moral, personal, and even physical landscape—makes a difference in what we see, how we perceive, and what we find exciting or disturbing or even missing in a person, an organization, or a document. How the “Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis” of the Holy Father Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons, and the Lay Faithful on the Eucharist as the Source and Summit of the Church’s Life and Mission” impacts me depends upon my personal location in several landscapes—or, to use another metaphor, which set of lenses I put on to read this document. While my reading evoked a variety of feelings, I find myself stretched particularly as priest, ordained celebrant, and liturgist by the call to a “Eucharistic faith capable of enabling the faithful to live what [we] celebrate” (64). Pope Benedict calls us here to “walk the talk” and “talk the walk” of a Eucharist that is foremost a sacramentum caritatis, a sacrament of charity. In a way, one might summarize his call as an affirmation that “what the world needs now is love, God’s love.”

The document begins:

The sacrament of charity, the Holy Eucharist, is the gift that Jesus Christ makes of himself, thus revealing to us God’s infinite love for every man and woman. This wondrous sacrament makes manifest that “greater” love which led him to “lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Jesus did indeed “love them to the end” (John 13:1). In those words the Evangelist introduces Christ’s act of immense humility: Before dying for us on the Cross, he tied a towel around himself and washed the feet of his disciples. In the same way, Jesus continues, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, to love us “to the end,” even to offering us his body and his blood. What amazement must the Apostles have felt in witnessing what the Lord did and said during that Supper! What wonder must the Eucharistic mystery also awaken in our own hearts?

Sacrifice, charity, incarnation, service, meal, and social justice are intimately woven together in these words that remind us that what the world needs now is love, God’s love. Our baptism makes a real difference and calls us “to be members of Christ and thus members of one another (cf. 1 Cor 12:27), we are a reality grounded ontologically in baptism and nourished by the Eucharist, a reality that demands visible expression in the life of our communities” (76). Baptism calls us to make the love of Christ a real presence in our world in concrete and tangible ways. The document clearly names the ordained alter Christus. I wish that it identified the lay faithful in this way as clearly, but the identification is there, nonetheless. All of us are to walk the talk and talk the walk of a Eucharist that is first and foremost sacramentum caritatis, a sacrament of charity.

A trinity of phrases is used at various points throughout the document to identify the Eucharist as a sacrament of charity that the “Church receives, celebrates, and adores . . . in faithful obedience” (8) and a mystery “to be firmly believed, devoutly celebrated, and intensely lived in the Church” (94). “Celebration” is the middle term in both of these descriptions. Celebrating the Eucharist is the source and summit of our faith, whether that celebration is received as a gift, believed as a doctrine, lived in daily life, or enacted in faithful obedience. The upcoming Eucharistic Compendium, promised by the Holy Father, will reflect this threefold description as well, for it will be designed as a useful aid “for a correct understanding, celebration, and adoration of the Sacrament of the Altar” (93, emphasis added).

I believe that making the connection between celebrating the liturgy, adoring the Blessed Sacrament, and living a Eucharistic life is one of the strongest challenges that Benedict names. Quoting Proposition 245 from the Synod of Bishops, he writes:

“All who partake of the Eucharist must commit themselves to peacemaking in our world scarred by violence and war, and today in particular, by terrorism, economic corruption, and sexual exploitation.” Sin and division take many forms. All these problems give rise in turn to others no less troubling and disheartening. We know that there can be no superficial solutions to these issues. Precisely because of the mystery we celebrate, we must denounce situations . . .
contrary to human dignity, since Christ shed his blood for all, and at the same
time affirm the inestimable value of
each individual person (89).

In other words, we must walk the
talk—what the Holy Father calls “living in accordance with the Lord’s Day” (ixtena dominicam viventes)—that is, “reflect in our lives what we celebrate on the Lord’s Day” (72, 95). Justice, celebration of the Eucharist, and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament lead to lives that make the love of Christ visible in our world. While I wish that there were more openness to expressing the ways in which full participation by eating and drinking the Body and Blood of Christ can bring healing to less than perfect situations in people’s lives, still I applaud the reality of the Holy Father’s affirmation that sin and division are things we are challenged to face and respond to from a Eucharistic perspective.

HOW WE CELEBRATE

How we celebrate the Eucharist makes a difference: “While it is true that the whole People of God participates in the Eucharistic liturgy, a correct ars celebrandi necessarily entails a specific responsibility on the part of those who have received the sacrament of holy orders. Bishops, priests, and deacons, each according to his proper rank, must consider the celebration of the liturgy as their principal duty . . .” (39). Ars celebrandi, defined as “the art of proper celebration” (38), has implications for the way we respect the liturgical books, the richness of signs, and liturgical song—which, Pope Benedict reminds us once more, has “a pre-eminent place” in the ars celebrandi (42). Let me summarize some of the implications of this section of the document as I understand them.

1. We need to make clear the “inherent unity of the rite of Mass [both] in catechesis and in the actual manner of celebration. . . . The liturgy of the Word and the Eucharistic liturgy, with the rites of introduction and conclusion, are so closely interconnected that they form but one single act of worship” (44).
2. The liturgy of the Word needs careful preparation and celebration (45).
3. The “quality of homilies needs to be improved” (46), and homilies are to be viewed as “part of the liturgical action . . . meant to foster a deeper understanding of the word of God, so that it can bear fruit in the lives of the faithful. . . . Generic and abstract homilies should be avoided. In particular, [the pope asks] these ministers to preach in such a way that the homily closely relates the proclamation of the word of God to the sacramental celebration and the life of the community. . . . The catechetical and paraenetic aim of the homily should not be forgotten” (46). I know that this presents a real challenge, given the demands on a pastor’s time, however this statement is music to a Dominican’s ears!
4. The presentation of the gifts is not simply perfunctory: “This humble and simple gesture is actually very significant: In the bread and wine that we bring to the altar, all creation is taken up in Christ the Redeemer to be transformed and presented to the Father” (47). I see here a prelude to the wonderful connection between the liturgy and responsibility for the environment and the cosmos that we find in paragraph ninety-two.
5. Quoting the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, Pope Benedict repeats that the Eucharistic Prayer is “the center and summit of the entire celebration” (48). And he reminds us that the entire prayer is important, especially because it expresses the “profound unity between the invocation of the Holy Spirit and the institution narrative” (48). The theology of the Holy Spirit in this section reflects the intimate connection between Trinitarian theology and the Eucharist which the Holy Father names earlier in the document (7–8).
6. Sharing Communion is identified “as a personal encounter with the Lord Jesus in the sacrament” (50), but while personal, this is not a private act. We are reminded that “the precious time of thanksgiving after Communion should not be neglected: besides the singing of an appropriate hymn, it can also be most helpful to remain recollected in silence.” (Note the reminder in the USCCB Introduction to the Order of Mass that: “Liturgical silence is a corporate activity which is shared by all present and in which all support and sustain each other in profound prayerful solidarity. It demands a stillness and prayerful concentration, which the priest celebrant and everyone can help to create” [Introduction, 48]).
7. Finally, we are sent on mission. Benedict notes that the dismissal “Ite, missa est” has come to imply a ‘mission.’ These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church. The People of God might be helped to understand more clearly this essential dimension of the Church’s life, taking the dismissal as a starting-point” (51).

**MY LANDSCAPE**

Another writer, highlighting the important parts of this document, might put more emphasis on rubrical concerns or on Benedict’s comments about the use of Latin and chant or on the connection between each of the sacraments and the Eucharist. I can only write from my current location in my own landscape. I encourage you to read this document from within your landscape and then sit, reflect, and ponder the words of Sacramentum Caritatis and the feelings that arise within you as you do so. No matter one’s location, the connections made here between Eucharist and the rest of life are clear. To paraphrase the document: What the world needs now is . . . God’s love, made visible and concrete for our day and time.

**FASTEST GROWING**

Two recent news items reported on the fastest growing segment of Christianity and the fastest growing segment of Roman Catholic Christianity. According to an article in the March 30, 2007, issue of the *National Catholic Reporter*, the “fastest growing religious movement on the planet is Christian Pentecostalism.” Just a half-century ago, John L. Allen, Jr., reports, Pentecostals were just 6 percent of the Christian population, but “today they’re one-quarter of the total.” Pentecostalism is growing especially rapidly in Africa, which is also the region in which Catholicism is experiencing unprecedented growth. According to a USCCB press release on April 23, 2007, during the past 25 years the number of Catholics in Africa has increased from 55 million to 144 million, and the number of priests has increased by 73 percent. But while Africa is the fastest growing part of the universal Catholic Church, it is also extremely poor. More than 70 percent of Africans live on less that the equivalent of $2.00 per day, and the poverty of its people cripples the ability of the African Catholic Church to raise sufficient funds for pastoral needs.

In his online column for February 1, 2007 (http://ncrcafe.org/node/879), John L. Allen, Jr., reflected further on Catholicism in Africa. He noted that the “phenomenal explosion of Catholicism in Africa . . . has reshaped the demography of the Church in ways that we are only beginning to appreciate.” He also reported:

> Overall, by 2050 Africa will have a total of 342 million Catholics, according to Rogelio Saenz, a professor of sociology at Texas A&M University. That will make Africa the second largest Catholic continent on earth, behind only Latin America, with 646 million. . . . Moreover, the rate of growth in African Catholicism will far outstrip the rest of the world, both because of higher-than-average fertility rates and because of the missionary success of the African Catholic Church. Today, more than half of all adult baptisms in Catholicism are in Africa, considered the best indicator of growth by conversion rather than birth . . . .

Of course, population does not always equate with power, but over time it’s difficult to imagine that the rising Catholic tide in Africa will not translate into an increased voice in global Catholic affairs. In the twenty-first century, when one thinks of Catholicism in the “Third World,” it’s likely to be Africans who come to mind—and above all, the Congolese.

As Kinshasa goes, in other words, so goes the Church.

**WRONG, BUT . . .**

People looking for signs of the Church’s theological direction in recent events might well conclude that the mainstream is the preferred locale for current theology, perhaps even with a slight nudge to the left, since at least one proponent of a very liberal approach to theology has been both censured and commended for his work.

In a document made public on March 14, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith warned that some works by the Jesuit priest-theologian Jon Sobrino of El Salvador contain ideas that are “erroneous or dangerous propositions,” especially in the field of Christology. Still the Vatican did not censure him for this teaching or insist that he be removed from his post. Indeed, an article in *L’Osservatore Romano* on March 24 commended Father Sobrino for “trying to apply the truth of the Gospel to concrete situations of global injustice,” according to a March 27 item from Catholic News Service.

The Vatican—especially Pope Benedict XVI—is very concerned about the influence of cultural and religious pluralism on the content of traditional theology, especially, at the current time, Christology. Particularly in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, theologians are exploring traditional doctrines from new perspectives that the Vatican fears might downplay the truth claims of Christian theology and create a religious relativism.

On the other hand, the Vatican is very worried about the decline in human rights and the growth of poverty especially in those areas where Catholicism is experiencing phenomenal growth, and so it commends bishops and theologians who are able to develop theological platforms that strongly support the Church’s preferential option for the poor.

Perhaps, as theological reflection
moves out of a European and North American context and into the context of Christianity lived in the southern hemisphere and in developing nations, new ways of doctrinal reflection will develop that respond to these new environments and also safeguard the deposit of the faith.

Father Felix Wilfred, a leading Asian theologian in Chennai (formerly Madras), India, proposed just such an approach in response to Father Sobrino’s “notification.” Father Wilfred, who has served on theological advisory boards for the Vatican, the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences, and the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of India, proposed that “the Vatican should engage in dialogue with theologians when there is a conflict in doctrine and should not silence them,” according to a March 23 report by the Union of Catholic Asia News (UCAN) service. Father Wilfred pointed out the problem of dealing with doctrine and theological reflection across cultural divides. Because of just such a divide, he found that the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s notification “symbolizes paternalistic tendencies toward the faith of the people, especially poor people whose faith it wants to defend.”

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