The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Christian Life

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VENICE –

“The Word and the Bread, during the Mass, become one, like in the Last Supper, when all Jesus’ words, all the signs he had made, were condensed into the gesture of breaking bread and offering the chalice in anticipation of the sacrifice of the Cross,” Pope Francis said during a catechesis at a General Audience at the Vatican. The gesture Jesus makes during the Last Supper is “the extreme giving of thanks to the Father for His love and for His mercy.”

The term Eucharist encompasses all of this gesture, Pope Francis explains. “Which is a gesture of God and man, a gesture of Jesus Christ, true God and true Man.”

Continuing he added that it “must always be clear that the Eucharist is not something that we do; it is not our commemoration of what Jesus said and did. No. It is an act of Christ! It is a gift from Christ, Who is made present and gathers us around Him, to nourish us with His Word and His life. This means that the mission and the very identity of the Church spring from this, from the Eucharist … Through the Eucharist, Christ wishes to enter into our existence and the permeate it with His grace, so that in every Christian community there is coherence between liturgy and life.”

Each time the Sacrament is celebrated, it a sharing in “the mystery of Christ’s passion, death and resurrection. The Eucharist is the peak of the action of God’s salvation: the Lord Jesus, making himself into bread, broken for us, indeed pours over us all His mercy and His love, thereby renewing our hearts, our existence and our way of relating with Him and with our brothers.”

Throughout May approximately 3,360 boys and girls throughout the Diocese of Venice will receive the Sacrament of the Eucharist for the first time. At one such Mass, Father Dan Smith, Administrator of Our Lady of the Angels Parish in Lakewood Ranch, explained the idea of the miracle of the Eucharist to First Communicants. It is through a miracle Jesus turned mere bread into the Body of Christ. “This is why your priest will say: ‘The Body of Christ’ when giving you the Eucharist each time.”

At the Last Supper, Jesus turned bread into His Body to make sure everyone knows He is there for you all of the time, Father Smith continued. “Jesus gave Himself over to us… take advantage of the gift Jesus has made available for us at the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains that the Mass is a sacrifice in the sense that when it takes place, Jesus Christ, through the celebrating Bishop or priest, makes present sacramentally His saving sacrificial death on the Cross by which he redeemed us from our sins. The Eucharistic sacrifice is the memorial of Christ’s redeeming death.

Through participation in the Eucharist, we also participate in the Paschal Mystery of Christ, that is, in his dying and rising, which is made present for us in the Eucharistic sacrifice, the Catechism states. This participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ reaches its consummation when one receives His Body and Blood in Holy Communion. Christ’s victory and triumph over death is then made present in the lives of those who participate in the Eucharist.

Holy Communion increases our union with Christ. “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.” (Jn:6:56) Holy Communion also preserves, increases, and renews the life of grace received at Baptism.

Pope Francis noted that the Sacrament should inspire forgiveness and an encounter not only with Christ but with others.

“In the Eucharist, Christ renews the gift of Himself that He made on the Cross. His entire life is an act of the fullest sharing of Himself for love. This is why He loved to stay with the disciples and with those He met. For Him, this meant sharing their yearnings, their problems, that which stirred their soul and their life. Now, when we participate in the Holy Mass, we find ourselves with many people.”

The grace of being forgiven and willing to forgive is also a crucial aspect of the Sacrament, Pope Francis said. “In reality, those who celebrate the Eucharist do not do so because they believe themselves to be better, or wish to appear better than others, but because they are aware that they are always in need of being accepted and regenerated in God's mercy, made flesh in Jesus Christ.”

The Holy Father concluded his catechesis on the Eucharist by encouraging the faithful to “live the Eucharist with a spirit of faith and prayer, of forgiveness, of care for the needs of many of our brothers and sisters, in the certainty that the Lord will grant that which he has promised – eternal life.”