

THE MYSTERY OF THE EUCHARIST

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

EWTN Chapel in Irondale, Alabama

2 July 2009

When I was visiting the Shrine of Our Lady of Częstochowa in Poland in 1997, one of the Pauline Fathers in charge of the shrine told me about an interesting incident that had taken place there not long before. A foreigner attending Mass one day in the chapel of the miraculous icon of Our Lady approached the priest distributing Communion and extended his hands to receive the Sacred Host. But it fell out of his hand, and for whatever reason, he didn't bother to pick it up. It was so crowded that those around him hadn't even noticed.

Not far away from where this happened stood a Korean, who had probably not come there out of devotion, but as a tourist because he wasn't Catholic. In fact, he wasn't even a Christian. He couldn't have really known what this Host was, but apparently from the great reverence that others had shown it during the Mass, he must have figured that it was something very special. So, after the Mass had concluded and people began leaving the chapel, oblivious to the fact that a consecrated Host was on the floor, he went to the spot where it now lay broken in pieces. He carefully picked up what fragments he could and placed them carefully in his hand. Then, he went down on his knees and bent over to lick up the remaining crumbs of the Host from the stone floor. After he had done this, he took the fragments to the nearby sacristy where he presented them to the priest and told him what had happened.

Without being aware of it, this pagan, who had never been catechized in the Christian faith, was professing a belief in the Mystery of the Real Presence. Contrast this with the casual manner in which so many Catholics today treat the Eucharist. Contrast this with the fact that about 70% of American Catholics supposedly don't even recognize the Real Presence in the Eucharist. Even worse, contrast this with the scandalous irreverence shown to the Most Blessed Sacrament by some Catholics.

John Paul II once wrote: "The Church has never given in to the temptation of banalizing this 'familiarity' with her Bridegroom, forgetting that He is also her Lord . . . The Eucharistic banquet is a real sacred banquet where underlying the simplicity of signs is God's unfathomable holiness. The bread broken on our altars is the angels' bread, which we can only approach with the centurion's humility."¹ This has always been the mind of the Church, expressed perhaps best in the frequent warning of the Church Fathers about the proper attitude towards the Holy Eucharist: "*Cum amore et timore!*"—"With love and awe!"²

How sublime this mystery and so far beyond the capacity of human reason to understand it, for it isn't until we delve into its depths that we begin to see really how inadequate our mind is to truly grasp this fathomless mystery. It is the great mystery of the Presence of the Creator of the universe among us, Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity, albeit under the humble appearances of bread and wine. Theologians can help us better understand the Eucharist, but in the end, we will never fully comprehend it. And the more we explore it, the greater the Eucharist becomes a mystery to be grasped by faith alone.

The problem is that the modern mind has a hard time accepting and grasping mysteries. And we are handicapped even further because our culture, and therefore our modern mentality, is so deeply influenced by the Enlightenment, which has conditioned us to instinctively think scientifically, suspicious of anything that we can't see or measure. And as a result, this is also the way that many Catholics approach the liturgy, often without even being aware of it.

But if we look at the liturgies of the early Church, we get an entirely different perspective on the mystery of the Mass. Instead of being boring or uninteresting, as so many say today, the liturgy for early Christians evoked a sense of transcendence and awe. For them, mystery was at the root of the liturgy because it expressed otherworldly realities. One could say that "the ancient Church lived in a mystery"³ and that's why Christianity is essentially a mystery religion.

If we look back to the Old Covenant we see that the priests, who served in the Temple, were aware that the rituals, which they performed in the Holy of Holies, took place "outside of time and matter, in the realm of the angels and the heavenly throne."⁴ Once a year, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies in great fear and awe.

The sanctuary of the Old Covenant, however, was nothing more than a foreshadowing of the sanctuary of the New Covenant, this very sanctuary, which is not a different sanctuary but merely a clearer manifestation of the same heavenly reality of which the Old Testament priests were so aware. That's why priests in early Christian times were filled with the same holy fear and awe as they entered the sanctuary for the celebration of the Sacred Mysteries. In the Liturgy of St. James, which originates from the earliest centuries of the Church the priest states, "We have been counted worthy to enter into the place of the tabernacle of Your glory, and to be within the veil, and to behold the Holy of Holies."⁵ And how casually people sometimes now treat this space, waltzing through our sanctuaries as if they in their own living room. If only they knew what really takes place there.

In 988, Prince Vladimir of Kiev sent emissaries to Constantinople. After experiencing the Byzantine liturgy in the cathedral of Hagia Sofia, they informed the prince: "We did not know whether we were in heaven or on earth. Never have we seen such beauty. ... We cannot describe it, but this much we can say: there God dwells among mankind."⁶ Just like the Korean, they instinctively sensed the presence of the divine. This humble chapel in which we are gathered today is far from the magnificence and splendor of Hagia Sofia but God in all His majesty dwells here with His entire heavenly court in a measure no less than He did there.

In their writings, the Fathers of the Church were unambiguous in their understanding that, what happened on the altar during the Eucharistic sacrifice, was something far from ordinary. It was an entry into the liturgy of heaven. From this sanctuary, which is an earthly image of the heavenly liturgy, we enter into and are truly present in the New Jerusalem. This sanctuary is the place where heaven opens up, leading us into the eternal liturgy.⁷ What could be more magnificent? How can Catholics say that they are bored at Mass?

And even among those, who are fully aware of the mystery that takes place on the altar, how many of them think also about the awesome mystery that becomes present around the altar? Vivid and effusive descriptions of the heavenly realities unfolding in the sanctuary are one of the most striking aspects of the ancient liturgical prayers. The Divine Liturgy of St. Mark expressed it in this manner: "Round Thee stand ten thousand times

ten thousand, and thousands of thousands of holy angels and hosts of archangels; and Thy two most honored creatures, the many-eyed cherubim and the six-winged seraphim.”⁸ For, although we cannot see it with our weak mortal eyes, the veil is pulled aside and we find ourselves present at the heavenly liturgy recounted in the Book of Revelation because where Christ is, there also is heaven. And where Christ is, there also are all the hosts of heaven, angels and saints, surrounding Him in endless adoration. For the early Christians, the liturgy had a sense of transcendence and inexpressible awe because it expressed something beyond this world.

Because they were fully aware of this reality, the liturgies of the Eastern Church were permeated with images of the Holy of Holies surrounded by hosts of angels. St. John Chrysostom wrote that the priest “[called] down the Holy Spirit over the Holy Sacrifice, while angels [surrounded] the altar!”⁹ Ancient Christians knew that when they were present at the Sacred Mysteries of the Eucharist, they were, as an early Christian author wrote, in the presence of: “the unutterable One, the incomprehensible One ... before whom all that is high falls down and remains silent ... and beholding whom all creation surrenders in silent adoration.”¹⁰

This is the perspective that we need to reclaim for ourselves. They are realities of which so few Catholics are even conscious these days, and consequently, the reason why so many Catholics find Mass uninteresting. If only they knew what really takes place, perhaps they would think differently. There are those, who feel that beautiful ornate vestments, chalices, sacred music, grand architecture and clouds of incense are just fancy extras. But if the liturgy of heaven is beauty incomprehensible, then we are obliged to surround our liturgies with every kind of beauty. Far from being extravagance, it is merely a means to help us understand what we are really experiencing, although only a dim reflection of the magnificence of the heavenly liturgy. Contemplation of this mystery directed and stimulated the lives of early Christians and it should ours.

We, the Canons Regular of St. John Cantius have traveled many miles to spend time in retreat at that magnificent shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Hanceville. There was nothing spared to adorn it with the best and the most beautiful. And because of its splendor, one knows, just as in Hagia Sofia of Prince Vladimir’s time, that we enter the realm of heaven and that God dwells there among men. We have come here to this shrine at the EWTN stations, no less a part of heaven, to celebrate a votive Mass of the Most Holy Eucharist in thanksgiving for His Presence among us here, on all of our altars and in all of our tabernacles. Let us never forget that sublime mystery of His Presence among us, so intimate, yet so awesome.

When we are in His presence in the Most Blessed Sacrament, let us, as the Fathers of the Church so beautifully wrote, remember that it is He “who sits upon the cherubim, and is glorified by the seraphim, before whom stand thousand thousands, and ten thousand times ten thousand hosts of angels and archangels.” Let us never cease to stand in awe before His majesty. Let us fall to our knees in loving homage before our Blessed Lord in the Eucharist, Creator and Ruler of the universe. Let us not be outdone by the reverence of a pagan. Remember how Christ once said of the Roman Centurion that he had never seen such faith even among the Israelites.

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ *The Mystery of Christian Worship: and other writings*, ed. Burkhard Neunheuser, O.S.B. (The Newman Press: Westminster, Maryland, 1932), 34.

⁴ Baker, Margaret. "The Temple Roots of the Liturgy," (Online resource, Jewish Roots of Eastern Christian Mysticism Project, Marquette University, 2003).

⁵ <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0717.htm>.

⁶ Hahn, Scott, *The Lamb's Supper*, 115.

⁷ Ibid, 71.

⁸ *The Divine Liturgy of the Holy Apostle and Evangelist Mark*.

⁹ Baur, *John Chrysostom*, 183.

¹⁰ From Acts of John 84, 84, 79, in *The Early Christians*, 235.