

“THIS IS MY BODY, WHICH IS GIVEN FOR YOU”¹

1. **A Eucharistic “hour”** – The ecclesial process – The question – Our Eucharist – Pastoral practice.
2. **An invitation to contemplation** – “Do this in memory of me” – “My body is given... my blood is shed” – “Take and eat” – “I in you and you in me”.
3. **The call to celebration** – “I have received from the Lord” – “You are the body of Christ” – “We proclaim your death”.
4. **A call to conversion** – Don Bosco, man of the Eucharist – An original pedagogy – The Eucharist and ‘da mihi animas’ – A journey in our communities – The educative process with young people.
5. **Conclusion** – A “eucharistic” year

Rome, 25 March 2000
Annunciation of the Lord

Within the Jubilee, as has been gradually made evident during the three years of preparation and is now being fulfilled, the mystery of the Eucharist occupies a central position. The Holy Father had already announced in the Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* that “the Year 2000 will be intensely eucharistic”,² and on many other occasions he emphasized his intention of making the Eucharist the heart of the celebration of the Jubilee.

This is in line with a constant fact in the history of the Christian community: the Eucharist has always been the most expressive moment of its faith and life. According to the beautiful expression of St Thomas, the Church finds in the Eucharist “the perfect embodiment of the spiritual life and the aim of all the sacraments”.³

Faith in the initiative of the Risen Christ, which unites us, speaks to us and offers us communion in his Body and Blood, gives to the Jubilee its deepest meaning. Through the eucharistic presence of Christ in our midst, the memory of the Incarnation is not just the commemoration of a past event, but rather an encounter with a salvation which reaches us today and opens us to the future with confidence.

The International Eucharistic Congress, which will be celebrated in Rome in the month of June, is intended to be a grateful expression of faith in the real presence of Christ in human history and an opening up of the Christian community to his complete self-giving.

And so for us too the personal and communal renewal of the Jubilee, which is also spiritual and apostolic, includes the convinced and joyful rediscovery of the riches the Eucharist offers us and of the responsibilities to which it calls us, in the knowledge that according to the constant teaching of the Church, around this mystery is built the whole of Christian life.

¹ 1 Cor 11,24; cf. also Lk 22,19 and parallels

² JOHN PAUL II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 55

³ “*Eucharistia vero est quasi consummatio spiritualis vitae et omnium sacramentorum finis*” (Summa Th. 3, 73, 3)

The sacramental process of preparation for this year (Baptism, Confirmation, Reconciliation) brings us to the Eucharist as to a vantage point from which to contemplate the mystery of the Trinity in the life of the world and of our own existence.⁴

1. A EUCHARISTIC “HOUR”

We who are members of the Salesian Family do not lack guidelines, texts, examples, traditions and artistic representations which recall the importance of the Eucharist in our spirituality, our community life and our educative and pastoral practice.

But there has been a development in reflection and ecclesial praxis which is still in progress. To rediscover the eucharistic mystery and its significance in our life and pastoral work, we must all be aware in the first place of the process followed by the Church, in recent years, of placing it on the foundation of the cultural development which characterizes the various contexts in which we work.

In this framework we can penetrate more deeply into our eucharistic experience, find there an expression more relevant to the questions to which it gives rise, and accept with greater generosity the grace which accompanies it.

1.1 The ecclesial process

Also as regards the Eucharist, the necessary starting-point is the Second Vatican Council. It has provided us with ample guidelines, especially by proposing the courageous liturgical reform of which we are today enjoying the benefits.

The most significant fact emerging from the Council is the relaunching of the celebration aspect of the faith, the liturgy, as the *fons et culmen* of the Christian life.

The Council, in fact, has taken on a renewed awareness of the centrality of liturgical and sacramental experience. The reform of rites was not intended to be a simple adjustment of words and gestures to changed historical conditions; it was

⁴ These introductory suggestions on the Eucharist as being at the centre of the Jubilee help us to see from the outset the Eucharist itself – and hence this circular Letter – in its place among the stages of our jubilee pilgrimage, according to what was proposed in AGC 369 (p.48 ff.).

With the feast of Don Bosco, in fact, we have *begun together our salesian jubilee pilgrimage* which we shall conclude with a community celebration at provincial and local level around the feast of the Immaculate Conception.

In the first stage of this pilgrimage, which coincides with the Lenten period, we want to look more deeply at our attitude to *Reconciliation and conversion*. The letter I have already sent you: *He has reconciled us to himself and has given us the ministry of Reconciliation* (AGC 369), can serve as a stimulus in this connection.

The *second stage of our pilgrimage* will extend through the Easter period into the months of May and June, and has the Eucharist as its point of reference, coinciding with the immediate preparation for and celebration of the International Eucharistic Congress to be held in Rome at the end of June. This Letter: *This is my body which is given for you*, takes its place in particular in the perspective of the personal and communal spiritual and apostolic development of this stage of the Jubilee, and is intended to foster the “convinced and joyful rediscovery of the riches the Eucharist offers us and of the responsibilities to which it calls us”.

I invite Provincials and Rectors especially to encourage during the period referred to *personal reflection and dialogue, together with a community examination of the points I have suggested*. The lines of application I have put forward at nn.4.4 and 4.5 can be easily taken up in fraternal discussions on the occasion of a retreat or community meeting.

something much deeper, like a renewal of the ecclesial attitude and mentality which finds in celebration the most genuine and efficaciously visible expression of the Christian faith.

And so the new Roman Missal highlights the communal character of the eucharistic celebration. The whole assembly becomes involved, not only in choral form but also through a distribution of ministries.

Hence also the privileged position given to the Word of God, to foster listening and interior assimilation. The language is closer to contemporary sensitivities and greater opportunity is given for adaptation and for healthy liturgical creativity.

The advantages of the gradual, and not always easy, assimilation of this mentality are plain for all to see and meet with widespread agreement. At the same time they have given rise to new doctrinal and pastoral questions.

In many places the search is still on: theological reflection seeks to provide new syntheses and perspectives which, while losing nothing of the Church's tradition, allow for the expression of the truth of the Eucharist in our cultural categories and in conformity with the new and deeper studies in the New Testament, while pastoral praxis takes into consideration the numerous problems raised for believers by modern life.

Moreover in connection with the Eucharist the Church is living through a period of great change, in which side by side are to be found great possibilities and dangerous confusion, significant innovations and short-lived initiatives.

This awakens our conscience as pastors and educators who, while attending to the needs of the young and of Christian communities, must be able to indicate the *fractio panis* with the abundance of motives and explanations that ecclesial reflection offers, without giving way to fleeting fashions and unconfirmed opinions.

1.2 The question

The ecclesial process has been marked by a cultural transformation which has made its influence felt in connection with the celebration of the sacraments in general and of the Eucharist in particular.

One can speak of the development of spontaneity of expression and of the purely formal value given to rites regulated by norms and customs, of which the underlying significance is easily forgotten. We are in fact at a critical moment as regards historical memory.

Some collective modes of expression which may impress us (discotheques, rock events, etc.) are only self-regarding: in other words they do not pretend to have any meaning for anyone beyond those taking part. They are marked by a strong individualism even in a large crowd, because they lead to personal self-satisfaction and ensnare by their many striking qualities. At the same time they express a need for personal involvement, for direct experience and for emotional expression.

But these are not the most disturbing kinds of phenomena, even though it be not without importance to analyze them because of the influence they exert, especially on young people. There are others which are much more serious. Nowadays, for example, we cannot speak of the Eucharist without having in mind the phenomenon of non-practising believers, for whom an encounter with the Lord is considered separable, and is in fact separated, from the sacramental experience.

While the Council put to itself the question: "how to celebrate the sacraments?", we have to take note that in the post-conciliar period the question for many Christians has become: "why celebrate the sacraments?"

One could provide a wealth of examples, and they concern all the sacraments: if I am already repentant, why do I have to go to confession? If we love each other, why do we have to get married in church? And as regards the Eucharist: if the Lord is always with me, why do I have to go to Mass?

Such questions have their effect on the particular ways the sacraments are celebrated, dictated always by individualism and spontaneity: why personal confession of our sins to a priest and personal absolution? Why the Sunday participation in the Eucharist? And so on.

They are questions which frequently recur, especially among young people, and which denote a defective formation to the significance of the sacramental experience and also the widespread weakening of the perception of the value which symbolic and ritual behaviour has for man and an exaggerated emphasis on spontaneity.

As pastors and educators we cannot undervalue the incidence of these phenomena, which lead to considering the celebration of the Eucharist to be an act without meaning for life, conditioned by a ritualistic rigidity which would constitute an obstacle to the expression of one's personal religious way of living.

On the other hand, attempts to reply to these questions have often been revealed as weak, and in certain cases have assumed forms which compromised the identity of the sacrament, with the risk of reducing it to a fraternal meeting, a moment of sharing at a purely horizontal level, to an item in the program of some wider celebration considered more important.

The complexity of these phenomena must be kept in mind, so that our experience of the Eucharist be not disjointed from life, and that our pastoral work should not neglect to deal with these questions which are decisive on an educative level.

1.3 Our Eucharist

On the basis of what we have set out so far in summary fashion, we can now try to examine our own eucharistic life, looking for positive elements for further development and with a willingness to recognize problematic aspects in which our process calls for correction.

The liturgical renewal has had positive effects also amongst us. Among the more promising aspects of our fraternal life there is, in fact, the daily eucharistic concelebration which, as our Constitutions put it, “expresses the triple unity of sacrifice, priesthood and community, a community whose members are all at the service of the same mission”.⁵

Around the altar, in the joyful celebration of the eucharistic mystery, our communities are reborn every day from the heart of Christ which makes us sharers in his charity, gives us the ability to accept and love each other. and sends us as signs and witnesses of his love for children and young people, who are the ones to whom our mission is directed. This becomes more evident on the weekly community-day when it is usually possible to celebrate more calmly and with greater participation.

Some elements for reflection can stem from our manner of celebrating. Instances are not lacking of celebrations that are worthy and joyful, filled with the mystery being celebrated and by the fellowship with Christ which seeks expression. But unfortunately it is by no means rare to find cases in which something is lacking in the quality of the celebration, sometimes due to haste but more often to a lack of concern about the attitudes which predispose and accompany the celebration, to an undervaluing the symbolic gestures and language of the celebration itself.

To some extent this may be a reaction to a past in which some actions appeared to be only “ceremonies”, which added solemnity to the sacrament. Today however the Church, while calling for a serious change in mentality, warns us against giving way to forms of secularization which end in trivializing, for poorly motivated reasons, elements of great importance.

Other aspects of our experience of the Eucharist make us reflect, and call for practical choices which are not always easy to make and must be prompted by wisdom and flexibility. I am thinking of the generous service we often provide in numerous chaplaincies. It expresses the pastoral charity of our communities towards the people of God, and in particular to the communities of women religious who could not otherwise enjoy priestly ministry. Service of this kind, however, cannot entirely remove the community’s need to find frequent occasions for a community concelebration which is the source of our life as brothers in the Spirit.

More pressing remarks need to be made regarding the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, which constitutes for the whole Church the central sign of the Lord’s day and the heart of the Christian week.

The ‘secularized’ Sunday is considered a day of relaxation to be enjoyed individually. It suggests the idea of an individual, segregated from the human community and even from his own family under the pretext of relaxation or rest from the stress of work and ordinary relationships. This is a mentality which can make its way even among people like us who are dedicated to educative work during the week. If this were to be so, it would be in itself a grave symptom: a Sunday without community and without the Eucharist!

⁵ C 88

But more frequently, and thanks be to God for it, the situation is different. Generally we give generously of ourselves in ministry. More than a few communities foster some expression or occasion which recalls that the Sunday Eucharist is the pivot about which our consecrated life rotates. Many have arranged a period of eucharistic adoration in the evening, with beneficial effects on their community life.

This brings us to another point which needs looking into: the implications of the Lord's eucharistic presence in our House. Almost everywhere chapels are arranged with taste and dignity and provide an environment conducive to prayer, but there has been a falling off in the personal and communal encounter with the Lord. The significance and value of some time spent before the Eucharist have been occasionally questioned on the basis of opinions concerning the eucharistic presence and devotion which have no foundation in the Church's teaching, or because it is said that our union with God is already realized through our work.

For us this used to find a simple and efficacious expression in our "visits". It may be useful in this connection to listen to the warning of one of the most outstanding theologians of our time, Karl Rahner: "Anyone who doubts the value of a visit to the Blessed Sacrament should ask himself whether his objections to such a devotion are not in reality the protest of the workaholic against the forceful reminder to place himself occasionally before God with all his being, recollected and relaxed, in a calm and tranquil atmosphere and maintaining a reinvigorating and purifying silence in which the Lord speaks".⁶

1.4 Pastoral practice

Educative and pastoral situations vary so widely that it would be wrong to make a single general evaluation of them.

All in all, we may say that there is great generosity and spirit of sacrifice in presiding at eucharistic celebration. Many of our priest-confreeres, especially on Sundays, devote themselves assiduously to the service of the People of God. Everywhere they are concerned to make their words and actions intelligible to the people and with lawful creativity to lead both young and old into the spirit of the celebration.

In our oratories and youth centres, and in our schools in general, we find difficulties of various kinds in teaching the eucharistic mystery. Even in traditionally Christian settings it is not always easy to make its value understood, because of a lack of support and witness on the part of families, through insufficient catechesis or earlier negative experiences by the young people themselves.

This could create a lack of confidence in proclaiming the truth. With the desire to avoid the least appearance of imposition or excess, there are those who limit celebrations to a few big occasions, thus running the risk of distorting the meaning of the sacrament from within, and making it appear as a ritual accompaniment for solemnizing certain yearly events. In some places there are

⁶ K. RAHNER, *Educazione alla pietà eucaristica*, in ID, *Missione e grazia. Saggi di teologia pastorale*. Ed. Paoline, Rome 1964, p. 291-340, 316

those who think that the youngsters are not prepared either catechetically or spiritually to understand the significance of the Eucharist, forgetting that for them it is not only the “*culmen*” of their lives but also, if properly prepared, the “*fons*” as well.

From some parts you hear as the reason given for less frequent celebration of the Eucharist the need to maintain a certain relationship between the celebrations in our youthful environments and those which involve all the Christian community on a wider scale. It is true that the young people should not be isolated from a broader ecclesial experience, but they should be led into gradually as pedagogy dictates, and with due attention to the stages of growth in which our tradition is so rich.

It must be said that in many educative projects the problem has been solved successfully with a variety of opportunities for celebration: some are offered to the whole community, others to certain groups, while still others are open for free participation both within and outside normal school and oratory hours.

The most negative aspect, which seems to emerge here and there, is the pretext of a so-called lay aspect of educational activity which would not allow for eucharistic celebrations, whereas it is well known that every Christian community, and hence also an educative community, finds in the Eucharist its highest expression.

We know that the lively participation of children and young people in the celebration awakens in them great spiritual resources. Many confreres and lay people spend their time, knowledge, imagination and energies in seeking ways which foster such participation.

Our charism is such that we carry within us, written in our hearts, a way of preaching, of acting, of a certain kind of liturgical music, and of an all-round style to the Eucharist which make the young feel themselves at home. All of this is a great richness and a treasure which with humility and discretion we can offer to the whole Church.

But the risk of misunderstandings and distortions is not just hypothetical. The creativity, which the liturgical norms allow, is something quite different from a completely arbitrary approach, with the introduction of actions which savour of the spectacular, brought in from situations extraneous to the meaning of the Eucharist, and which at the time draw attention not to God but to ourselves and our gestures.

On the other hand every rite develops according to norms and a certain order. This preserves and transmits the highest spiritual values, like the knowledge that what we are doing is an action not invented by ourselves but received as a gift of love, the sense of being in communion with other brothers, near and far, who are celebrating in its essentials the same faith, i.e. it is God himself who works through all of us, as well as doing much besides.

These are things which can be experienced even by children. They often amaze us by their intuitive grasp of liturgical symbols: it goes far beyond our expectations, provided the one guiding the celebration is truly a man of prayer.

A final element for our reflection, from a pastoral standpoint, touches more closely on the figure of the salesian priest as a minister of the Eucharist. The reluctance of secularized cultures to accept the indispensable mediation of the Church and the value of sacramental occasions, causes even for priests a certain difficulty in recognizing the celebration of the Eucharist as an eminent part of their ministry. This hesitation is certainly augmented also by the reaction to a certain outdated theology, which considered the sacramental task (*munus sanctificandi*) almost as the one and only setting for the exercise of the ministry.

Salesian tradition, thanks to the broad array of educational activity in which it involves us, has always maintained the need to broaden this perspective. But while we renew our awareness that the sacraments are not the priest's only task, we must not forget that they remain his greatest, most specific and most fruitful task.

Problematic indeed would be the figure of a priest who did not feel his highest responsibility to be that of serving the community through presiding at the Eucharist, from which the life of the Church is born and develops, or who, when he cannot celebrate for and with the assembled community, does not perform the offering of Christ in communion with the Church and in its name.

These elements for examination, which are no more than examples, lead us to think that we must insert ourselves into the living current of the Church's reflection with regard to the Eucharist, to acquire a deeper understanding of the meaning of its celebration. Hence the following steps which I would like to make with you in this meditation.

2. AN INVITATION TO CONTEMPLATION

Contemplation is the attitude most fitting for the eucharistic mystery. Here we have a gift that comes to us from on high. Outside the faith it can have no plausibility. To understand it we must give ear to Christ, meditate at length on his word and feel the scandal which his announcement causes, now as yesterday, in the hearts of his disciples.

We too, like the disciples at Capernaum,⁷ want to note the paradox of Jesus' offering, and be amazed at the radical nature of what he says, which confounds our human logic with the superabundance of his divine love.

To understand clearly the meaning of the Eucharist is a task which is renewed for every generation of believers: a task which is fascinating, which is entrusted to reflection and prayer, to silence and love, to commitment for our fellow men and to contemplation. But it is also a decisive task, because what is at stake is our acceptance of the true Jesus, born of a woman and who suffered under Pontius Pilate, against every temptation to visualize images of our Lord or representations of his presence which are at variance with the truth of the Gospel.

2.1 "Do this in memory of me".⁸

⁷ cf. Jn 6

⁸ Lk 22,19; cf. also 1 Cor 11,24

The fundamental reference for understanding the Eucharist is the Lord's Last Supper. There it began and of that it is the memorial. I think it unnecessary to explain that in liturgical language 'memorial' and 'memory' do not mean a subjective calling to mind, a remembrance in thought, but rather an actualization and prolongation which makes the celebrated event perpetually present, and yet always new.

A continual re-meditation on this event in the life of Jesus, on the basis of the gospel text, is indispensable, and I shall not delay on recommending it to you. Every time you read the New Testament you will find emerging new and unexpected meanings.

In a certain sense the Last Supper sums up the whole of Jesus' life, and is the key to the interpretation of his imminent death. For this very reason the gospel texts give it particular emphasis.

Without going into a detailed analysis of the individual extracts, we need only recall that John the Evangelist places in the context of the Supper⁹ the most lofty expression of Jesus' teaching (the farewell discourse), the most intense moment of his dialogue with the Father (the priestly prayer), and the deepest expression of his love for the Twelve (the washing of the feet).

The Supper appears as a long prepared event, ardently desired by Jesus,¹⁰ and anticipated in various ways at significant moments in his life: the proclamation of the Kingdom while eating with sinners,¹¹ the multiplication of the loaves,¹² the parable of the guests invited to the wedding,¹³ the discussion about the living Bread,¹⁴ and so on.

In the texts about the Supper, and more specifically in the words of institution, there is a vast interplay of themes, which range from the saving experience of the ancient Passover to the banquet of Wisdom,¹⁵ from the prophetic theme of the redeeming death of the Servant of Jahvè to the texts referring to the Covenant of Sinai and to the New Covenant.

The Supper is not just *one* of the events in the life of Jesus, but is in reality *the* decisive event for grasping the meaning of his mission and the interpretation which he himself gives of his life and death.

What Jesus does during the Supper is the crowning point of a long story. It is the "new" contract between God and humanity, which realizes what had been

⁹ cf. Jn 13-17

¹⁰ Lk 22,15

¹¹ Mk 2,15-17 and parallels; Lk 7,36-50

¹² Mk 6,34-44 and parallels

¹³ Mt 22,1-14

¹⁴ cf. Jn 6

¹⁵ cf. Prov 9,1-5; Sir 24,18-21

promised in all the previous ones. It is a ritual anticipation and symbolic interpretation of his own death. It is a last will and testament for his Church.

Aware of the passion awaiting him, he does not flee in face of the violent reaction humanity opposes to the preaching of the Kingdom, but accepts it and transforms it from within by a superabundance of love. In this way he consummates the gift of himself, giving himself up to set us free, in the docile acceptance of the saving will of the Father, which the Spirit presents to him as an invitation and loving command.

It is the offering of his life as a gift of the Father for the human race that Jesus anticipates and enshrines in the Eucharistic. The ancient rite is filled with an unheard of innovation, because the Lamb who washes away our sins and restores us to God is the Son who has become Man, consubstantial with the Father and a sharer in our humanity.

We shall never sufficiently meditate on and adore the mystery of love enclosed in this event, the sheer extent of which overwhelms us and its freely given nature leaves us totally bewildered. It marks the beginning of the Christian sacramental order of things, which has as its content Christ's salvific Paschal mystery, and offers to men of every place and time communion in his love.

2.2 “My body is given... my blood is shed”.¹⁶

The preceding reflections have already helped us to grasp the connection between the Eucharist and the paschal mystery of Christ.

One of the key words in recounting this mystery, and hence for a Christian understanding of the Eucharist, is “sacrifice”. For the average man of the present day this seems a throwback to the past, a useless encumbrance not only in daily life where the practice is the pursuit of ease and comfort, but also in his relationship with God. We do not consider sacrificing ourselves worthwhile unless it be with a view to a greater advantage, and so we do not understand why we should sacrifice something for God, and still less why we should attribute such an attitude to him.

But apart from the word itself, the reality of the sacrifice cannot go unremarked without distorting the sense and meaning of the Eucharist. And so the tendency to play down the proclamation of this truth in preaching and catechesis, through recourse to other categories which are insufficient by themselves to express the intention of Christ as it appears at the Last Supper and in the awareness of the primitive Church, causes concern.

To speak of the eucharistic sacrifice means linking ourselves on the one hand with an attitude present in all religions, and on the other grasping the innovation of Christ.

In his life on earth, Jesus displays an opposition to and total rejection of a certain concept of sacrifice, but on the other hand he interprets the supreme moment of his mission when he says that he is offering his Body “in sacrifice” for us.

¹⁶ cf. Lk 22, 19-20

The sacrificial concept which Jesus rejects is one which tries to make the offering to God an attempt by man to win favours for himself, the protection and even the privileges of the divinity, on the basis of his own works which he presents to God as a title of merit.

There are many grounds on which this kind of attitude is misconceived: it implies that God does not love everyone gratuitously and freely, but deals with mankind on the basis of calculated interest; it fosters a relationship with God which is not centred on trusting attachment to his person, but on the juridical implementation of formalities; it sees man concerned not about being converted and entering the Kingdom, but about God responding to his immediate desires.

When participation in the Eucharist is understood more as a precept to be fulfilled than a Grace to be accepted; when we go to Mass for the gifts which God has waiting for us rather than for the Gift which is God himself, we are driven to the conclusion that even though the external forms seem Christian, the reality is far from being so.

The idea of sacrifice manifested by Jesus is, in fact, quite different and even opposed to this notion. He speaks of sacrifice in connection with his death, understood not as a defeat but as the supreme fulfilment of his mission. The death of Jesus on the cross unmasks every representation of God which projects onto the Father our own paltry shabbiness and our instincts for possession and getting our own back.

The sacrifice offered once and for all on the cross, and made present in every Eucharist, is that in which God himself sacrifices himself for mankind by virtue of an act of charity without either limits or conditions. Jesus sacrifices himself for us in the sense that he gives us his life in a gratuitous action which has no other purpose than that of expressing the love of his Father, of whom in his total oblation he is the perfect image.

And so when we celebrate the eucharistic sacrifice we participate in the mystery of the Cross through which Christ has freed us from our fears of God which are the consequence of our sins, and opens us to a joyful meeting with God who asks of us nothing in exchange for his love, except that we be willing to be loved by him. This is why the name given to this sacrament is "Eucharist", i.e. the "giving of thanks" to God who so freely loves us.

Fidelity to God's love means realistically that we shall be called upon many times to face obstacles and clash with the crucifying opposition of our sins and of those of others. This too forms part of our participation in the eucharistic sacrifice, but it will not lead us to understand this as fulfilling a religious obligation so that God will grant us some favour, nor to understand the offering of ourselves in union with Jesus as a price imposed by God for granting us some grace.

If we want our participation in the Eucharist to be fruitful and motivated by faith, we must correct any distorted ideas and proclaim, like St Paul, the good news that stems from Christ's Cross, of which every Eucharist is the memorial

For us in particular, meditation on the eucharistic sacrifice constitutes an excellent occasion for renewing our apostolic dedication as a participation in the attitude of Jesus the Good Shepherd, who saves mankind through the gift of himself. It is in the Eucharist, in fact, that our pastoral charity finds its dynamism and fruitfulness: we participate daily in the sacrifice of Christ to learn from him to give our life every day, moved by his own Spirit of love.

2.3 “Take and eat”.¹⁷

The “table”, the “shared meal” or “banquet” have a long theological and liturgical tradition based on the memorial of the Last Supper. We shall always need to be careful not to centre its meaning on ourselves, as though it were mainly a friendly meeting of Christians, but to refer it rather to the gift of food for the life which the Father gives us in Christ.

The Eucharist in fact is the grace, the invitation and the occasion of our communion with the Risen Christ and with the Father: “You have prepared a banquet for me... my cup is overflowing”.¹⁸

The whole pedagogical process of the celebration leads to this culmination through repentance, praise, listening to the Word, faith and our humble offering. Christ not only fulfils a sacrifice of love but makes us participants in it and sharers in his banquet.

In all his earthly life Jesus presents himself as the life in which we must share, the water with which to slake our thirst, the Bread on which to be fed, the Wisdom at whose table we are to sit, the vine in which we are to be engrafted. The banquet fills the Gospel and the Good Shepherd leads his sheep to “fresh and green pastures and restful waters”.¹⁹ These are all references to a mysterious communion.

As in the discourse about Bread, in John’s Gospel, in the eucharistic celebration too receiving the Word and eating the Body are in a line of continuous ascent. Both are a gift of the Father and communion with Christ.

The Risen Saviour, through the mediation of the Church and the invisible but none the less real action of the Spirit, is given to us in each Eucharist in the first place as Word. Not only, nor principally, has he spoken wise words, but he *is* the total and definitive Word of God for man with all the reverberances this can also have at the level of human significance. In our eucharistic celebration, declares the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, “Christ himself is present among the faithful through his Word”.²⁰

Eucharistic communion is possible for man only if his welcoming acceptance of the Word and faith have led him to open the gates to love.

¹⁷ Mt 26,26

¹⁸ Ps 22 (23)

¹⁹ cf. *ibid.*

²⁰ cf. General Instruction on the Roman Missal, n.33; cf. also n.35, and earlier SC 7

It is important not to lose sight of the fact that “He explains the Scriptures to us (...) especially when he gathers us together for the Sacred Supper”.²¹ Our Constitutions favour this perspective which links the Word with participation in the sacrifice: “The hearing of the Word finds its privileged place in the celebration of the Eucharist”.²² With greater emphasis on the apostolic meaning, those of the FMA declare: “Nourishing ourselves at the table of his Word and his Body, we become like him ‘bread’ for our brothers”.²³

This is one of the aspects we frequently overlook in our celebrations: the manner of reading, the attitude of listening, proper church fittings and ornaments, with suitable emphasis on these points should make all this more evident.

It is the daily moment which is most efficacious for ongoing formation, especially if – as is clear from the close link it has with the Eucharist – we make it not an object of learned intellectual cogitation or study but open ourselves to welcome Christ and communion with him. We do not read the pages of the Bible looking for information about things we do not know, but to hear in and through them the living voice of God who here and now speaks to us, to enlighten us and sustain us in the particular period of history in which we live.

An equally strong motive for emphasizing this aspect is the importance attaching to the ministry of the Word for us as educators and pastors. Never do we grasp the significance of this so well, especially as regards the life of the people of God, as in the eucharistic context.

2.4 “I in you and you in me”.²⁴

The Eucharist, the celebration of the offering of Christ to the Father for humanity brings about the most intense form of his presence among us. That of the Eucharist, precisely through *antonomasia*,²⁵ is called the “real presence”.

The Eucharist proclaims that the Paschal mystery has fulfilled the purpose of the Incarnation of the Son of God, or in other words God’s intention to make with man the deepest, permanent and heartfelt communion.

The Cross and Resurrection have not removed the presence of Christ from the rest of history, but have brought him into the warp and weft of human events, precisely through the sacramental sign of the Eucharist. By our contemplation of the eucharistic bread and wine, we come to understand, in fact, that Jesus is truly Emanuel, God with us, who has made his dwelling-place among us for ever.

²¹ cf. Eucharistic Prayer 5

²² C 88

²³ cf. Const. FMA 40

²⁴ cf. Jn 14,20

²⁵ PAUL VI, *Mysterium fidei*, cf. AAS 57 (1965), p.764

The living sense of the presence of God which characterizes our spirituality and which Don Bosco was at such pains to inculcate in his boys and collaborators, finds in this its root and foundation.

Today, as yesterday, only those who learn to see his presence in the Body and Blood of Christ are able to contemplate God in action.

It is there, as we learn from the episode of Emmaus, that our eyes are opened and we recognize the Risen One who until then had been hidden by common words and actions. It is there that the disciples discover the continuity between the One who was crucified and the One who still lives, and come to understand the extraordinary significance of the death of Jesus. In a similar way, in the breaking of the bread an authentic apostolic action begins, which bears the signs of a real encounter with the Lord and proclaims a communion with him which is personally lived and experienced.

In a stimulating and enlightening manner, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*²⁶ and later other texts bring together the different forms of presence of the Risen Jesus, placing first among them the extraordinary one in which Jesus identifies himself with the eucharistic bread and wine, celebrated in his memory by the community of the disciples.

Jesus is really present in his Word, in which he already gives himself to us as light and food. He is also present in all the sacraments, which are “powers that come forth from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving”²⁷ through the work of the Spirit: “When anyone baptizes it is Christ himself who baptizes”²⁸, when anyone absolves it is Christ who absolves.

Jesus is present in prayer, especially in the Liturgy of the Hours: the same Jesus, incorporates us into his prayer, the supreme prayer of the Risen Lord, making us concelebrate praise of the Father and intercession for the world.

Christ is really present in the community, in the minister who presides at the celebration²⁹ and visibly gathers the community to its foundation which is Christ himself.

After the celebration he prolongs his presence in the sacrament for the benefit of all those who want him or seek him (the sick, those who visit him) and have not been able to come to the celebration; he continues to be really present also in the poor and the sick: “You did it to me”.³⁰

This understanding of the multiform but unique presence of the Risen Saviour gives unity to our life. The sacraments, liturgical prayer, the community and mission, the experience of fraternity and service to others: all remain united by the conviction

²⁶ cf. SC 7

²⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), 1116

²⁸ SC 7

²⁹ cf. *ibid.*

³⁰ cf. CCC 1397; Mt 25,40

that the Lord Jesus is present at every moment, as he himself has assured us: "I am with you always, to the close of the age".³¹

The Eucharist is the sacrament of his presence, just as it is also of his sacrifice: the sacrament in which he comes nearer to us with greater intensity to make himself available to our gaze, our supplications and our friendship.

This presence is not to be understood as one of material reality, as though the body of Christ were enclosed, motionless and static; rather it is alive and radiant, active and working. We are not hosting a stranger or a foreigner; we do not make him a prisoner of some product of our own creating. He is the Risen One, the Lord of the universe and of history who, after expressing his love in the fullest measure, exercises over the world his saving sovereignty, unlimited by space or time, just as he demonstrated after the Resurrection.

This is an aspect of the mystery on which we must meditate at length and contemplate it in a silence permeated by prayer and docility to the interior illumination of the Spirit.

The eucharistic presence, while resisting our temptations to capture the divine, will open us to greater humility and authenticity in contemplating God's Gift. The contemplation of such a Gift is never just the seeing of some "thing"; it is possible only when an understanding has been achieved between the giver and the receiver: it is to this spiritual understanding with Christ that the eucharistic presence silently calls us.

It is on this presence that the cult of the Eucharist is founded, in both its public and private forms. Its surpassing value, constantly proposed by the Church's teaching and by the example of innumerable ranks of saints, must be rediscovered by ourselves. By adoring the Eucharist we shall learn to enlarge our hearts after the measure of that of Christ; we shall discover the joy of listening to him at length, of joyful praise and confident intercession for the needs of so many of our fellow-men, and especially for so many young people whom we meet, or whom we personally shall perhaps never meet.

The Pope once wrote: "Divine intimacy with Christ, in the silence of contemplation, does not distance us from our contemporaries but, on the contrary, makes us attentive and open to the joys and problems of other people, and broadens our heart to the dimensions of the world itself. It makes us at one with our brothers and sisters, and particularly with the lowliest ones, who enjoy the Lord's predilection".³²

In this perspective he addressed a pressing invitation which comes right home to us: "I recommend to priests, to men and women religious and also to the laity, to continue and redouble their efforts to teach the young generations the meaning and value of adoration and eucharistic devotion. How will young people get to know the Lord if they are not introduced to the mystery of his presence? Like the young

³¹ Mt 28,20

³² JOHN PAUL II, *Letter on the adoration of the Eucharist of 28.05.1996*, sent to the Bishop of Liege on the 750th anniversary of the feast of the Sacred Body and Blood of Christ, 5

Samuel, by learning the words of the prayer of the heart, they will be nearer to the Lord who will accompany them in their spiritual and human growth and in the missionary witness they must give throughout the whole of their lives”.³³

3. THE CALL TO CELEBRATION

3.1 “I received from the Lord”.³⁴

Once we have grasped the significance of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, it should not surprise us that the Church, guided by paschal experience, has placed at the centre of its life and public identity the frequent and persevering practice of the *fractio panis*.³⁵

Events like that of Emmaus, in fact, highlight how the repetition of the eucharistic action is the place of recognition of the Risen Christ, the sign of the new nature and continuity of the relationship of Jesus with his disciples after his death and Resurrection, the most evident manner in which he continues to make himself present in their midst, to speak with them and to admit them to an unimaginable communion with himself.

The repetition of the words and actions of the Last Supper becomes in this way for the emerging Church the new way of approaching the mystery of God. It is no longer possible to think of God, except by way of the death and Resurrection of Christ, and hence through the Eucharist which is their memorial. It is impossible to find an experience of more immediate rapport with the Risen Christ than the recognition of his real and living presence whenever the “breaking of bread” is celebrated.

And so the celebration of the Eucharist marks the detachment of the Christian community from the ancient rite, the re-reading of all the earthly circumstances of Jesus’ life in the light of his Paschal event, and the identification of his disciples as those who “eat the same bread” and form with him “a single body”.

The teaching of St Paul to the Corinthians,³⁶ which expresses the tradition of the very first period, shows how Jesus’ command regarding the eucharistic rite from the outset penetrated very deeply into the life of the community and became the foundation of all ecclesial experience.

The process which links our Eucharist with the apostolic *fractio panis* and the Lord’s Last Supper is marked by a long historical route and a slow evolution of rites which has seen the rich influence of various times and places. Basically the ritual development of the Eucharist goes hand-in-hand with the historical process of the People of God, generated by the Eucharist in which it expresses its own adherence to the Lord.

³³ ibid. 8

³⁴ 1 Cor 11,23

³⁵ cf. Acts 2,42

³⁶ 1 Cor 11,20-34

It is not surprising therefore that the Church preserves the words and actions of Jesus with affectionate attention, placing them at the heart of her finest celebration, and passing them on with faithful care from one generation to the next. We can also understand why the Christian community in times of persecution, even though in a hidden manner, insisted on celebrating the Eucharist not just in any way at random but in that of the universal Church which was their invisible support. In the Eucharist are to be found, in fact, all good things of the people of God: grace and unity, history and mission.

Beyond the variations in the external forms of the rite, which are nevertheless strongly linked with the unchanged central position of the words and actions of the Last Supper, there is a significance we must not overlook.

The Eucharist is a “celebration”, or in other words a ritual action which has as its visible subject the community of believers presided over by its own pastors in communion with the Bishop and with the Pope. Hence immediately from its very essence the act of eucharistic celebration highlights the Church’s structure as a communion.

The Eucharist, in fact, does not appear with the characteristics of the private action of a single person or of an occasional group but, on the contrary, manifests the hallmarks of a communal act, which always involves the life of the Church in its totality.

No one can be unaware of how important this is in an era marked by strong individual convictions, which are sometimes reflected in the daily experience of our communities. The celebration of the Eucharist places us immediately in a relationship with others. In fact it is possible only by reason of the continuity of the apostolic ministry and our membership of the Church in communion. In the “memorial”, the substantial moment of celebration and ritual, we are joined together with all the Churches of the world and with the disciples who have succeeded each other from the Last Supper to ourselves today.

The very fact of coming together to celebrate is in itself a great act of faith: what moves us to do so is not some plan we have worked out for ourselves, but the knowledge that we must manifest, all of us together as a community of disciples, our obedience to Christ’s command.

If we look at the liturgical celebration in greater depth, we become aware that in addition to it being an expression of ecclesial faith, it is a more radical expression and visible presentation of the action of Christ Jesus. The liturgical actions we carry out have meaning only to the extent that they refer us to something that he is doing today, through us. The protagonist in the liturgical action is Christ himself and the whole rite, in its beauty and sobriety, is meant to allow his divine presence to shine through.

The disproportion that exists between the simplicity of the ritual actions and the greatness of the mystery they contain, and the double epiclesis over the gifts and the assembly which enshrines the account of the institution in the Eucharistic Prayer,

remind us daily that what is done in it comes from on high, and it is not we who are at the origin of the sacrament and its saving efficacy. For this reason anything that could give the idea of our own autonomous protagonism in our celebrations, which would distract from the essentials, must be avoided.

Above all, those of us who are priests must call frequently to mind that our duty of presiding at the celebration is not the exercise of authority over the Eucharist, but a service of representing the Lord according to the Church's directives. Anyone who thought that he could interpret and decide for himself about the rites in the name of the ministry he has received, would display an extremely clerical concept of ministry which would impose on the community the priest's personal ideas.

Faced with this kind of temptation, which we can experience in many ways, we must renew our joy at giving our hands, senses and voices to the action of Christ who finds in our willingness to represent him the way to make present his personal initiative of love. In other words, we ministers preside over the Eucharist *in persona Christi*; we have no personal and magic power of our own for capturing the presence of the divine, but only the task of making visible the action by which Christ, in his freely given love, comes and makes himself present in our midst.

3.2 "You are the body of Christ".³⁷

"If you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to what the Apostle says to the faithful: 'Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it (1 Cor 12,27). If therefore you are the body of Christ and its members, on the Lord's table is placed your sacred mystery: the sacred mystery you receive. To what you are, you reply 'Amen', and by so replying endorse it. You hear in fact the words: 'The body of Christ', and you reply: 'Amen'. And so be truly the body of Christ, so that your 'Amen' be the truth!'"³⁸

This text of St Augustine leads us to another point we want to consider: the Eucharist as the sacrament which constitutes the Church.

We have often heard the saying: "The Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church". Both are born and grow together. The Eucharist gathers the Church into unity and makes it visible. This is what happens every Sunday in all churches. But above all the Eucharist builds the interior reality of the Church, as the food we assimilate builds our body: it strengthens in the Church the awareness of the mystery on which its existence is founded.

The eucharistic celebration does not exist as an end in itself, or to remain enclosed in the time and place in which it is celebrated; its purpose is to give rise to a humanity which lives in a communion of love and commitment with Jesus. The bread and wine we place on the altar are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, so that all who communicate fruitfully in this mystery may become a single being in Christ. By saying "Amen" to his eucharistic body, we say "Amen" also to his ecclesial body, which we believe is real and of which we want to form part according to its nature.

³⁷ 1 Cor 12,27

³⁸ St AUGUSTINE, *Discourses*, 272

From this truth derives the spiritual tradition which considers the Eucharist as the sacrament of charity, of unity, and of fraternal communion.

The importance of this truth for our daily life and our pastoral activity will not escape anyone. It teaches us, in fact, that there is no other way to realize communion between men and to oppose the disrupting logic of sin than that of entering into the New Covenant offered by the Eucharist, where the loving and welcoming closeness of God enables us to be open to one another, to recognize and accept as a gift our diversity and to be proud to be of mutual service in fraternal friendship.

In the light of the Eucharist, the building of the Kingdom, of the Church and of our fraternal life, does not appear as a task needing a great quantity of goodwill, but rather as the result of the Lord's Easter victory, which we have always before us so that we can tend towards it and let ourselves be permeated by it.

All the recent documents on the religious life endorse this point and prompt us to a deep rediscovery of the eucharistic origin of the common life. So, for instance, the document on fraternal life in community reminds us: "It is around the Eucharist, celebrated and adored, 'source and summit' of all activity of the Church, that the communion of souls is built up, which is the starting point of all growth in fraternity",³⁹ and then it goes on (quoting a text of Vatican II): "From this all education for community spirit must begin".⁴⁰

3.3 "We proclaim your death".

Since it is at the origin of the Church, the Eucharist is also at the origin of the Church's mission. The Second Vatican Council had already taught authoritatively that "all the sacraments, and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate are bound up with the Eucharist and are directed towards it",⁴¹ to such an extent that it "appears as the source and the summit of all preaching of the Gospel".⁴²

We do not treat these statements as vague and mere comments, but we try to identify their real implications for our spiritual and apostolic life.

To say that the mission is born of the Eucharist means that we recognize that our educative and apostolic activity cannot be other than participation in the mission of Jesus.

Now it is precisely this participation that we must not take for granted, nor consider as already fundamentally assured by our consecration. The Gospel reminds us, in fact, with particular insistence that one can be in the Lord's vineyard but without truly working in accordance with his intentions and at his service.

³⁹ Cong. for Institutes of Consecrated Life, *Fraternal Life in Community*, 14

⁴⁰ PO 6

⁴¹ PO 5

⁴² *ibid.*

The discovery of our identity as having been sent by the Risen Christ is the fruit of a long apostolic maturing process, marked by the purification of the motives which prompt and direct us to an ever deeper dedication to the demands of the Kingdom. And it is precisely this self-donation which constitutes the real soul of the mission, and distinguishes the good shepherd who gives his life for the sheep from the mercenary who appears to do a great deal, but does not in fact have real love for his flock.

Without freely given self-donation for the love of God and one's neighbour, there is no Christian mission and no evangelization. The latter is born of the Eucharist because it is a participation in the mission of Christ which reached its culmination on the Cross and is made present today by the sacramental action and by the Spirit.

The statement in our Constitutions, according to which "the salesian spirit finds its model and source in the very heart of Christ, apostle of the Father",⁴³ sees its greatest realization precisely in the Eucharist. There the heart of Christ, sent by the Father and true missionary of the Kingdom, conforms us to himself, making us his apostles. No one can be an apostle among young people unless in the eucharistic celebration he is a disciple who, like John at the Last Supper, can place his head on the Master's heart.

4. A CALL TO CONVERSION

When we apply what we have been saying to salesian spirituality there are some images and sayings which spring almost at once to our minds: our three devotions, the pillars of the preventive system, the dream of the two columns.

But generalized slogans, even though they may contain precise messages, risk remaining inoperative and even incomprehensible if we fail to apply them to our daily lives.

The brief maxims with which Don Bosco summed up for his family his convictions about the Eucharist, were the result of spiritual experience and long pedagogical practice.

4.1 Don Bosco, man of the Eucharist.

Don Lemoyne wrote in the Biographical Memoirs: "Many people told us what we ourselves experienced every day. We assisted at his Mass many, many times and our faith was always intensified at the sight of the devotion which breathed from him by his exact performance of the sacred ceremonies, in his clear pronunciation of the words, and in the fervour which accompanied his prayers. This edifying impression was indelible",⁴⁴ words which show that the eucharistic celebration was an experience of such intensity that it was externally perceptible, so involving as to leave in everyone a memory and a desire to approach the Eucharist personally.

⁴³ C 11

⁴⁴ BM 1, p.387

The heights of intensity reached by Don Bosco in celebrating the Eucharist, sometimes accompanied by extraordinary phenomena, were not rare and isolated moments, but the result of a process marked by rigorous interior discipline and a well-tried fidelity.

We know, in fact, that Don Bosco surrounded the eucharistic celebration with an atmosphere of silent recollection which he respected himself and inculcated in others. "He required absolute silence to be maintained from after night prayers until the conclusion of Mass the following morning. We met him several times early in the morning as he left his room to go to church. At such moments he would smile at us and allow us to greet him by kissing his hand, but he would not say a word, so absorbed was he in his preparation for Mass".⁴⁵

Though Don Bosco was capable of breath-taking activity and explosive joy, before the eucharistic mystery he appears to us as the man of silent prayer which envelops in recollection the sacramental encounter with Christ.

We need to meditate on this attitude of his. The silence is not, in fact, an extrinsic and merely devotional element of the Eucharist, but an essential component which refers back to the mystery: to those silent nights when Jesus, wrapped in prayer, prepared his mission; especially the silence of that night when he had instituted the Eucharist, when in the Garden of Olives Jesus ratified his filial offering to the Father without being able to involve his tired and distracted companions, who just a little earlier had taken part in the first eucharistic fruits of his Supper.

Often the hectic life to which we are called in days filled with apostolic commitments, has an essential need for this regenerating silence: it is a condition for making sure that the celebration does not become an external formality which finds us incapable of listening to the Word and of communion with the Lord.

The importance that Don Bosco gave to this preparation, and also to thanksgiving afterwards, is such that in his testament, drawn up in 1884, he made a point of writing: "I must ask you to forgive me if someone may have noticed that several times I was too brief in my preparation for Holy Mass and in my thanksgiving afterwards. To some extent I was compelled by the crowd of people surrounding me in the sacristy who left me no possibility of praying either before the Mass or after it".⁴⁶

When we compare these words with what we know to have been the tenor of his interior dispositions, we cannot but remain confused at this confession and wonder whether we know and take sufficiently seriously the spiritual teachings of our Father.

4.2 An original pedagogy.

His personal experience and priestly concern for the souls of his youngsters led Don Bosco to draw up a catechetical preparation for approach to the Eucharist.

⁴⁵ BM 4, p.315-316

⁴⁶ MB XVII, p.272

In the pages of the *Memoirs of the Oratory* in which he speaks of his first communion, are evident some elements of spiritual pedagogy which he will foster all through his life and propose insistently to his boys.

Don Bosco describes how, through the efforts of his mother, he was able to make his first communion a year before his companions. Reading between the lines we can discern his thought as Master of the spirit of young people, as he writes in the *Preventive System*: “Avoid as a plague the opinion that the first communion should be deferred to a late age. (...) When a child can distinguish between *Bread* and bread, and shows sufficient knowledge, give no further thought to his age, but let the heavenly King come and reign in that happy soul”.⁴⁷

Then there are his repeated references to the climate of recollection surrounding the event: “My mother helped me for days at a time. At home she saw to it that I said my prayers and read good books, and she always came up with the advice which a diligent mother knows how to give her children. On the morning of the first communion itself, she did not let me speak to anyone. She accompanied me to the altar and together we made our preparation and thanksgiving (...). On that day she did not wish me to do any manual work, but spend the time in reading and praying”.⁴⁸

With the same insistence Don Bosco emphasizes the link between confession and communion, for which his mother not only encouraged him but prepared him with her recommendations about sincerity, repentance and a purpose of amendment, which were the very teachings that Don Bosco would pass on later to his boys.

And then there is the reference to the newness of life to which the sacramental experience is linked and to the spiritual fruits it brings with it. “My dear son, this is a great day for you. I am convinced that God has really taken possession of your heart. Now promise him to be good as long as you live. Go to communion frequently in the future, but beware of sacrilege”. And then Don Bosco comments: “I treasured my mother’s advice and tried to carry it out. I think that from that day onwards there was some improvement in my life, especially in matters of obedience and submission to others, though I found that very hard at first”.⁴⁹

It is not difficult to gather from these pages the experience of the skilled educator who, while telling the first Salesians the story of his life, highlighted the kinds of behaviour and attitudes to which he attached a permanent value.

A detailed examination of the text would reveal many significant aspects of the spiritual ‘vocabulary’ of our Founder, but for the present it will be enough to gather some pedagogical elements.

⁴⁷ *The preventive system in the education of the young*, Appendix to the Constitutions, p.250

⁴⁸ *Memoirs of the Oratory*, English edtn. p 32,33

⁴⁹ *ibid.*

A first element is the *symbolism and the powerful impact of receiving the Eucharist*. Don Bosco dwelt deliberately on the way in which Mamma Margaret presented the event of his first communion: not as an automatic step to be taken for granted, but as a decisive factor in the making of choices and daily commitments. He himself followed the same practice at Valdocco, with a wise blending of educative and pastoral practices which, in a atmosphere of freedom, aimed at putting forward the Eucharist as the central and most important moment of the life of the Oratory. A large part of the efficacy of his educational method derived from this approach, with its accompanying fervour and ability to arouse expectation and desire.

This leads us to some self-examination; it makes us wonder whether our pedagogy has the clarity about objectives and emotional impact that the eucharistic mystery has, without which the figure of Don Bosco is inconceivable. The first condition, if not the only one, leading to the discovery of the richness of the sacramental mystery of Christ is, in fact, an environment and a group of educators where the mystery is lived with great enthusiasm. That is how it was in the early Church, and that is how it was for Don Bosco as a boy and for Don Bosco the educator. And only on these conditions can it also be the same for us.

And so we candidly acknowledge that the first cause of difficulty in our pastoral work relating to the Eucharist can consist precisely, even though not necessarily, in the lack of a eucharistic atmosphere in our communities and environments. Where the Eucharist is at the centre of a daily life illumined by faith and inspired by joyful trust, eucharistic pastoral work has already found its most fundamental resource.

The second element, closely connected with the first, is the importance of a *personalized pedagogy* which leads children and young people to an interior encounter with the Eucharist which is not merely ritual. In the significant early experience of the young John Bosco, Mamma Margaret led him along a path which was basically that of the old-time catechumens. Without knowing it, his mother drew from her treasury of faith and wisdom the elements the Church has always considered indispensable for the sacrament to be fruitful, and which Don Bosco reaffirmed times without number by the word 'preparation': the Eucharist is fruitful when it is well prepared. And the preparation does not consist in technical or extraordinary expedients but in a prayerful and serious approach, with explanation and instruction proportionate to the age of the candidate.

Here too there are some motives for reflection about our own pastoral work, which can run the risk of giving too much weight to techniques for making the celebration more "interesting", and undervaluing the internal attraction exerted by the Spirit on hearts which are open in prayer and committed to the struggle against evil.

This is an action of Grace, which we can in no way substitute, because it is a work of the Spirit which leads by interior persuasion to the fullness of truth. Preparation for the sacrament consists in the first place in helping hearts to be disposed to this action by freeing themselves from sin and learning to savour the beauty of the spiritual life.

And there are many other pages which can throw further light on the bond between Don Bosco and the Eucharist: we need think only of John's formation as a seminarian at Chieri, of the beginnings of his ministry, of the wonderful pages of his Good-Nights and dreams (of which the one of the 'two columns' is an outstanding example) in which reference to "Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament" is constantly emphasized, of the biographies of his boys in which is indicated a process of sacramental pedagogy of which the eucharistic ecstasy of Dominic Savio was a result. Together they form a collection of elements which reveal the effective realization of his program expressed in the words: "Frequent confession, frequent communion and daily Mass are the pillars which must support the edifice of education from which we propose to banish the use of threats and the cane".⁵⁰

4.3 The Eucharist and 'da mihi animas'.

From the brief remarks we have made above the importance of the Eucharist in the thought of Don Bosco is clear, and hence also its place in his unique spirituality which we must translate faithfully for our own time.

But the element which reveals more than any other the extent to which the eucharistic mystery marked the life of Don Bosco, and hence must also mark our life as Salesians, is the relationship with pastoral charity which he expressed in his motto "Da mihi animas, cetera tolle".

These words, which we have repeated and made our own, are the plan and process of Don Bosco for modelling himself on Christ, who offers his own life to the Father for the salvation of mankind. To understand them more deeply, to repeat them with greater conviction and translate them effectively into our daily experience, we must meditate on them in the light of the Eucharist, like the parable of the Good Shepherd.

Seen against the background of the Eucharist, "Da mihi animas" seems to us to be a prayer rather than a motto, an echo of the priestly prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper: "Father, they were yours, and you gave them to me. (...) For their sakes I sanctify myself".⁵¹ This is the highest expression of our dialogue and rapport with God and it helps us to overcome the dichotomy between work and prayer which, at an existential level, we do not always manage to avoid.

"Da mihi animas" is in the first place a recognition that in the mission the protagonist or principal actor is God. It introduces us to the apostolic service of our fellow-men through the invocation we address to the Father. To say "Give me souls" is primarily to invoke the Lord's intervention, to entrust ourselves to his solicitous love and leave room for his initiative of salvation.

In this way is renewed in us the awareness of Don Bosco and of the great apostles of every age, who have always recognized that the movement of charity towards others and the energies that it produces in us come from God, and to God they must therefore be referred in everything we do.

⁵⁰ *The preventive system in the education of the young*, Appendix to the Constitutions, p.249

⁵¹ Jn 17 6.19

This, moreover, was the attitude of Jesus himself. He understood his life as a mission entrusted to him by the Father, and has left us his eucharistic offering as a gift of the Father, who “so loved the world as to give his only Son”.⁵²

It is this recognition of the Father’s initiative that gives to “Da mihi animas” its character of humble and courageous prayer. We are asking the Father, in fact, to make us a centre for the spreading of the Kingdom, able to attract souls to Christ and hence to salvation. It is a very particular kind of request which we can make only because we know that it corresponds to God’s own heart, which wants men to be fully and actively involved in his loving design. We make it with faith and courage, knowing that we are not asking for “souls” for our own gratification, but to be able to serve them with humility and dedication.

Such a prayer implies for us a process of patient configuration to Christ. Only on his lips does the prayer “Da mihi animas” not sound pretentious, because when he is raised from the earth he can draw everyone to himself. We know that in the Eucharist Jesus wants to share with us this charity which, in leading to his being raised on the cross in the paschal event, makes him a mysterious centre of attraction.

In this way the Eucharist throws light on another aspect of “Da mihi animas”. When Don Bosco interprets his motto through the words “try to make yourself loved”, he is not merely proposing to his collaborators the development of their natural gifts of empathy, which are so important in an educational environment, but more deeply he is asking them to share the process by which Christ “studied to make himself loved”, or in other words by the process of the daily giving of himself.

Only evangelical charity, drawn from the heart of Christ in communion with his Body and Blood, can give the educator a true spiritual ascendancy, totally purified of forms of self-promotion and sympathy seeking, and fully free to spread among young people the fascination of men of God.

For this reason “Da mihi animas” is completed in “Cetera tolle”. It is not possible to participate in the saving action of Christ without subordinating to this commitment all other interests and desires. In this way we understand Don Bosco’s motto as a prayer of self-offering which, in imitation of the priestly prayer of Jesus, makes him always available, offering his time, friendship, and expertise.

“Cetera tolle” applies to everything; it is all-embracing, as is the Eucharist itself. Don Bosco translated it into words and actions of a very concrete nature: he promised God that he would give of himself to his last breath for the young. And that is precisely what he did. Sacramental participation in the sacrifice of Christ leads us to make ourselves one with him in his apostolic sentiments and in his generous dedication for the demands of the Kingdom.

I invite you to renew each day in the Eucharist the personal prayer of “*Da mihi animas, cetera tolle*”. In intimate dialogue with the Lord this expression will assume a thousand and one shades of meaning, it will take on within us a new existential importance and will become translated into that “tireless industry made holy by

⁵² Jn 3,16

prayer and union with God that should be characteristic of the sons of St John Bosco".⁵³

4.4 A journey in our communities

These reflections we have been developing, suggest many applications, and in the first place for our salesian communities.

The Eucharist is essentially a community celebration; it involves individual Christians in so far as they are members of the People of God, and hence each one of us as members of a community. The latter is the subject of the celebration.

The first line of suggestions concerns the *moments of celebration in the community*. It is a matter of rediscovering the human and spiritual implications of celebrating together and drawing the necessary conclusions.

Faced with the danger of personal distractions and an individualistic management of commitments, the eucharistic celebration brings us back to what is essential, asking us to commemorate Christ together and enabling us to share in his love for others through the power of this greatest of sacraments.

Every community will be able to recognize in what this most evident aspect of the Eucharist consists. Not infrequently it will be a time which is less strenuous, a more active participation, a more careful preparation, a fresh way of looking at daily life.

We need to rediscover a way of celebrating the liturgy in a more dignified manner. In careful attention to expressive gestures, in a worthy proclamation of the Word of God and of the liturgical texts, through the beauty of the singing and respect for the moments of silence, we realize our openness to the One above, who must be perceived, listened to, heard and contemplated in faith, and whose divine presence justifies all the care and generosity we have put into the preparation.

Young people are particularly sensitive to the genuine nature of the symbolic gestures in which the liturgy abounds, and they frequently form an idea of our faith more by observing the sincerity and quality of our celebrations than by listening to what we say.

In this climate we can suggest the reappraisal of Concelebration by all members of the community, at least weekly on the community-day. We could also consider a greater frequency of communal adoration of the Eucharist, which renews our adherence of faith and our prayerful attention to the presence of Christ among us, or we could give particular attention to the Sunday and Feast-day liturgies through a reflection in common on the Word which we have to share with the young and the people in general.

It would be a good thing too if the communal Eucharist were to be open, as now happens in many places, to the young people with whom we want to form a single family. This would enrich our assemblies with a youthful freshness, while at

⁵³ C 95

the same time helping the young to gain valid experiences of interior life and spiritual sharing.

We all have experience of celebrations in which words and actions seem to achieve their full significance. To a visitor from outside there is evident a single heart and soul. At other times there is a different kind of atmosphere: a less than perfect fusion of hearts in the assembly, a lack of association between rite and life, and a eucharistic development which is still unfinished.

Our Constitutions tell us: "The Eucharist is the central act of every salesian community: it is a daily festive celebration in a living liturgy. There the community celebrates the paschal mystery and unites itself to the immolated body of Christ, receiving it so as to build itself in him into a fraternal communion and renew its apostolic commitment".⁵⁴

The second line of suggestions is the *visible linkage between the Eucharist and fraternal life*.

We have meditated on how from the Eucharist the Church is born, the experience of communion among men in the name of Christ and the proclamation of the Kingdom made present in history. It is a matter of drawing from this some practical conclusions which are not automatic, but require a generous effort from each one.

To speak of the Eucharist, and especially to celebrate it, has no meaning if the community does not set itself to overcome the tensions and divisions to which it is liable. In this we must be very sincere and call a spade a spade, knowing that we have to measure ourselves against a biblical teaching that leaves no room for half measures or compromise.

It may be useful to read over again, personally or in common, the text of chapters 10 and 11 of Paul's first Letter to the Corinthians in which he points to the fact that the Eucharist is incompatible with divisions, with mutual exclusions, and with individualism of any kind. As the Apostle says, "Let a man examine himself",⁵⁵ and as he becomes aware that as there is a single bread so we form a single body, let him avoid profaning the Sacrament of the Lord.

Sacramental communion does not lead us to communion of life with Christ if we exclude our brothers from our esteem and our dealings, if we harbour ill-feeling against them, and do not contribute to the building of fellowship. The Eucharistic exists so that we may love each other, forgive each other, and allow the Lord to build the house where he wants to make his abode.

In the eucharistic prayer, after invoking the Spirit that the bread and wine may become the Body and Blood of Christ, we ask that by force of the sacramental action he will unite us in a single body. Brotherly love and the Eucharist are two signs that cannot be separated. When the first is missing, it "makes the sacrament a lie".

⁵⁴ C 88

⁵⁵ 1 Cor 11,28

When the Eucharist is not lived, love loses its dimensions and is cut off from the source of nourishment. “Lord, grant that by participating in so great a mystery, we may attain to the fullness of charity and of life”.⁵⁶ May this be the intense expression of our desires and an authentic commitment of our will.

A third line of thought we may explore is our *personal relationship, internalized and convinced, with the mystery of the Eucharist*.

“We can form praying communities only if individually we become men of prayer”.⁵⁷ This statement, which our Constitutions refer in a general way to our life of prayer, is applicable in a quite particular way to the Eucharist.

In the first place we shall need to develop a deeper knowledge of this sacrament. Preoccupied as we are with the urgency of the problems of every day, it may be years since we read any serious work about eucharistic theology, with the result that our understanding of the mystery begins to fade and our interior motivations grow weaker. The World Eucharistic Congress of the Jubilee Year will certainly place at our disposal material and stimuli which we must not leave only for the attention of experts.

We must rediscover too the lesson that comes to us from Don Bosco, i.e. the synthesis, the “splendid blending”⁵⁸ of prayer and apostolic dedication combined together in “Da mihi animas”. What we are seeking in prayer and apostolic activity is really one and the same thing: participation in the love of Christ, which the Eucharist makes possible for us.

It will be important therefore for each of us to grasp the occasion of grace of this Jubilee, to return to the most authentic roots of our own vocation and renew our commitment to the pastoral charity towards the young that is characteristic of our spirituality.

But in this process we must keep in mind and avoid the risk of certain false notions. The synthesis of work and prayer in a single movement of love for God and our neighbour is not an objective we can attain merely by following some specific course of action. The mystery of the Eucharist is not only inspirational; even more it is the inescapable moment in which the contemplative and apostolic heart is formed in contact with the heart of Christ. Between eucharistic practice and a successful apostolic synthesis there is a relationship that cannot be reversed.

For this reason it would be naïve to think one could be generous and selfless in the service of the young while neglecting to cultivate a strong eucharistic devotion. Where an intense relationship with the Eucharist, as the centre of Christian life, is lacking there can be neither contemplation nor apostolate, because they stand or fall together.

⁵⁶ cf. Eucharistic Prayer V

⁵⁷ C 93

⁵⁸ C 21

Let us ask ourselves therefore what more we must do personally to correspond with Christ's command: "Do this in memory of me".⁵⁹ In the matter of personal forms of eucharistic devotion our tradition leaves a lot of room for each one's personal initiative; but this does not mean that the required commitment is any the less intense and that one approach is as fruitful as another.

A son and spiritual disciple of Don Bosco will be able to find a daily space for silence before the Eucharist in the traditional form of "visits" or in other expressions of authentic adoration and communication.

4.5 The educative process with young people.

If our communal and personal commitment to the rediscovery of the Eucharist is authentic, it will result in abundant pastoral fruits.

The challenges of our times are almost compelling us to bring together once again theological knowledge, spiritual life and pastoral praxis.

Conviction and communal experiences are forcing us to recognize the fact that pastoral activity is not a more or less refined technique placed at the service of the Gospel: it is rather the witness of a life which stems from a deep communion with the Lord. The more intense and persevering this proves to be, so much the more will our every word and action be transparent in revealing the coming of the Kingdom.

A first application of this, in the field of pastoral work, concerns the *educative community*. Renewed attention to the Eucharist will enable us to make plans according to the spirit of the Gospel. Charity has its own specific way of seeing, evaluating and reacting to pastoral situations and challenges. It has its own eyes, its own intelligence, its own creativity, its own farsightedness, which cannot be substituted in any way. These are things we know but which need continual repetition, to avoid the risk of taking up in our apostolic activity models of organization and arrangements that correspond to a dynamic and logic which are not those of the Kingdom.

The Eucharist tells us, for instance, that a Christian community can never organize its experience of faith merely on the model of a business enterprise, and this at many levels ranging from motivations for action to the style of relationships, from criteria behind decisions to the manner of its representation, from the type of authority to the forms of financial management. The kingdom has its own unique and unmistakable dynamics and logic. We must overcome the temptation of thinking it not practical, because the Eucharist itself makes it daily both relevant and practicable for us.

The most immediate application of this point will be the recognition that only the Eucharist will be able to give the proper physiognomy to the educative and pastoral community (EPC) which we are committed to constructing in all our works. The form of encounter, of exchange of views, of sharing responsibility, of charismatic

⁵⁹ Lk 22,19

inspiration, of attention to the Word of God, of the practice of the evangelical charity we want to live, cannot be realized unless we start from authentic communion in the mystery of Christ.

Outside this communion there can be no educative and pastoral community for the simple reason that apart from this communion there can be no Church. We must not be afraid that the Eucharist, placed at the centre of the EPC, will give rise to exclusion or selectivity between those we work for and our collaborators; indeed we can be certain that the opposite will be the case. It is, in fact, precisely and only from communion with Jesus in the Eucharist that we can learn to be open to everyone, with a sincere concern for those who find greater difficulty in their life's journey and in that of faith, and the overcoming of our interior resistance. In a world in which attention to communication is of enormous interest, we know that only communion with Christ will truly enable us to communicate and be builders of communion.

On the other hand, the charismatic experience of Valdocco confirms us in the knowledge that the secret of effective pastoral activity is an explicitly eucharistic environment, in which even those who come in contact with it only marginally or with a kind of question which is not directly religious, know intuitively that the generous and affectionate reply they receive is born of the charity of Christ.

There is a second setting in which the eucharistic mystery requires of us greater attention and growing conviction: it is that of our *educative and pastoral projects*.

The Eucharist can suggest to us ways of examining both the objectives of our projects and the way we attain them.

At the level of objectives we must make our own the objective that was Don Bosco's, i.e. the proposal to young people of Christian holiness. We know that the situations of our own youngsters are widely diversified. As soon as we hear the word "holiness", we immediately get the impression of an abstract and ingenuous manner of looking at things.

But it is important that we do not allow ourselves to be deceived by an idea of holiness that savours of the miraculous and is meant only for extraordinary youngsters, and that we keep before our eyes the model of youthful sanctity which Don Bosco presented so clearly and naturally to his boys, both privately and publicly: a holiness built on a generous will, on the knowledge and friendship of God, on the use of the sacraments, on the daily commitment to one's own maturing, on genuine happiness, on service to companions, and on self-donation in other fields attractive to the young.

These are our educational objectives, for which we have given and continue to give ourselves every day of our lives, in the conviction that even the most difficult youngsters are called to discover God with joy and experience him in their lives, and that everything is possible to one who has faith.

In any case, the young people who frequent our environments have the right to be told by us, with sympathy and understanding but also with enthusiasm and a certain persuasiveness, of the destiny to which God has called them and how he thinks of them and loves them as a father. There is nothing more beautiful that we can do for them than propose to them, in forms and ways charity and pedagogical experience suggest, a living communion with him who is the Holy One of God, the, Light, the Truth and the Life.

As to how we do it, we need to reflect seriously to see whether we are managing to avoid the risk of putting forward a kind of Christianity characterized more by things to do for the Lord than by personal relationship with him.

The argument of St Paul against a justification that stems from works is a warning to us not to substitute the happy experience of a free and loving encounter with the Lord, who is the centre and origin of everything, with simple involvement in good works and charitable enterprises.

It happens not infrequently in our environments that we meet well disposed youngsters, who are willing to dedicate a good deal of their time and activity to those who are younger and poorer, but find it difficult to understand and practise a sacramental encounter with the Lord. This should make us reflect seriously on the image of Christianity we are putting across by our suggestions and by our life.

It is a matter of a process of verification which not only we but even the whole Church feels that it must make. In recent years many pastors and many authoritative voices have made similar suggestions. On the other hand, the need to rediscover the primacy of Grace, the central nature of the relationship with Christ and the role of the sacramental experience, is one of the fundamental components of the Jubilee process.

For this reason we need to question ourselves with courage and be able to translate into an educative form the good news that has resounded for two thousand years: the Word was made flesh to offer us his friendship.

It is not possible here to give examples of how this primacy of Grace should be translated into educative processes. It will help us if we go back to the educative experience of Don Bosco. Among his many suggestions on which we can reflect, after transferring them to our own contexts, there is the frequent use of the sacraments as the driving force in grace and in apostolic generosity; there is the pedagogy attaching to feasts, in which daily duties are illumined by a moment of grace which is looked forward to and prepared, as a source of energy and other consequences; and there is the spirituality of the joy which follows a personal encounter with Jesus.

If we once again place the Eucharist at the centre of our pedagogical and pastoral projects it will help us to be aware, and to make others aware, that the desire to commit oneself to the good of others gets off the ground, becomes enduring and attains authenticity only from the experience each one of us has of being welcomed by Christ. That is where love is found, and without limit.

As a third point for our attention I would like to emphasize the importance of an authentic *education to the eucharistic celebration*. We know how liturgical experience, especially in certain cultural contexts, can appear irrelevant to many of the youngsters with whom we work. We are also aware, on the other hand, of the resources which rites and symbols with their sober beauty can provide when we are dealing not with a mechanical and superficial action but with an expression of authentic faith.

In past times eucharistic pedagogy could count on many favourable preconditions provided by the environment. Nowadays there is frequently need for education to the most fundamental attitudes and actions: silence, prayer, singing, choral movements, gestures to be made. We must not undervalue the importance of this factor which, especially among young people, acquires a great influence over their active and emotional involvement in the celebration.

Our experience is that participation in the Eucharist is improved where there are youth groups who are enthusiastic in the preparation of liturgical music, a fresh and effective artistic language when animated by talented people; while being satisfied with improvisations or repetitions, or styles not in harmony with the spirit of the liturgy, merely lower the tone and prove an obstacle to the maturing of the young people.

What is true of music is also true of the liturgical, of the proclamation of the readings, of every expression that forms part of the Eucharist and of the various moments in a communal celebration. We must not forget that in the eucharistic celebration there is also a pedagogy of time and priority between various parts; there is little sense in putting great emphasis on parts which are secondary while giving less attention to parts which are more important.

Particular attention will be needed for education to the listening to biblical texts. The Eucharist is totally permeated by the word of God, not only in the readings which are proclaimed, but because of the constant references to Scripture in the texts of the Missal. The richness of these in the eucharistic celebration cannot be understood without an appropriate introduction to the Bible.

We often ask too much of the Eucharist, expecting it to become a didactic and pedagogical occasion. Though this aspect may be rightly present, it is not the primary element, and it can lead to an imbalance which makes the rite become heavy and causes the fundamental purpose of the sacrament to be lost sight of.

If we know how to carry out this formative process well, the Eucharist can become in truth a “celebration” of the sacrifice of Christ, in which the community comes together for an encounter with the Lord, in an understanding with him which familiarity with the Gospel has already made possible.

Conclusion – A “eucharistic” year

There remains always in my mind a thought I once heard in a meeting on Catechesis and Eucharist.

For the first Christians, catechesis was a kind of progressive journey towards the eucharistic mystery celebrated by the community. The catechumens were led by the hand, as it were, to the eucharistic mystery through an ordered explanation of Christian doctrine and life. The baptized, on the other hand, after their introduction to the Eucharist, meditated on and celebrated all God's work, deriving the consequences for their lives, as the apostle Paul often does. By means of an enriching revision, they came to understand more fully their starting-point and the road they had covered: the desire for truth and life, the life and ministry of Jesus, his passion, resurrection and the gift of the Spirit, and the history of salvation past and present.

This is, in fact, the journey we still find in our present eucharistic celebration.

Why do we not try to do the same thing ourselves, personally and as a community? Light and generosity will be set free in our lives as consecrated persons, for brotherly love, for the mission, for the quality of our education!

May Mary most holy, "the Virgin Mother of God", whom we recall and with whom we feel ourselves united in the celebration of every Eucharist,⁶⁰ be our guide in these dispositions with which she herself shared in the mystery of her Son, offered for the life of the world: attentive listening to the Word of God, active participation in the sacrifice of Christ at the foot of the Cross, and the love of Christ's Body which is the Church.

I send you my cordial greetings and my prayers that your Jubilee pilgrimage, both as individuals and communities, may be ever more intense in the light of the Risen Christ, who is living and working in our communities and in each one of us.

Juan Vecchi

⁶⁰ cf. Eucharistic Prayer