

The Eucharist and the Healing of Affection for Sin
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The Eucharist stands at the core of Catholic imagination and practice. It is the reaching out and down through time of the *mystery of Christ's salvific self offering* in and through the ministry of the priest from within Christ's own Church. This offer of salvation is such that the bride of Christ is invited to respond in love, vulnerability, and trust at the deepest level of Her being. When fully conscious of this offer the Church, like Mary, is stunned into silence, contemplating all these things in her heart. He died for the Church and yet, through signs, Christ left a way to always and everywhere access His act of love so that the salve of its truth might anoint Her. If the Church's vulnerability before this gift is real, then participation in the Eucharist changes Her moral character over time.

It is said that the Eucharist is the place where salvation is offered, and so it is; but is the reception of such salvation by priest and people a conscious appropriation of its healing power or simply a rubrically correct executed act of worship? All worship of God is virtuous but without the love of participants, we know that liturgy can remain an inert reality barely welcomed into the heart. The healing known in the Eucharist is one that Christ grants through His power and our faith. *Christ is a healer*, "'Lord, if you wish you can make me clean' Jesus said, 'Of course I will it'" (Mt 8:1-4). Are we eager recipients of the gifts He wants to give us? This personal question is one appropriate to spiritual direction, but on occasion it must be asked both in the forum of worship and in the forum of speculative reflection. In so doing we seek to enlarge our imagination and open our mind to new ways of engaging in study of God's revelation.

With ever more accurate darts of love the Holy Spirit opens our consciences before God so that deeper and more effective healing can occur; at times His coming is so pure that it causes us to have pain and recoil at the level of intimacy God wishes His Son to achieve in our being. We recoil at our own needed medicine because it will bring about a change, and sin wishes no

change to occur. Sin pathologically clings only to the endless boredom of repetitive daily features of the interior life: constant rehearsal of our sinfulness, continued recollection of personal inadequacies, denigrating thoughts about the imperfections of neighbors, resentment toward the mundane *horarium* of each day, bathing in negative thoughts and moods, existing in cynicism and all manners of interior desires bent on disorder, greed, lust, envy, pride, sloth, anger, and gluttony. All of these desires weigh us down from within and become the signature upon the letter which is our face. The blood of Christ courses through us to heal the mind of its errors and ideologies unless we have simply reduced worship and its content to an ideology itself; then we have entered the biblical realm of hardness of heart.

For those who have the courage to approach the founts of healing, the Eucharist and the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the interior life begins to lighten. His Presence, His Mysteries, and the hope they bring *within our souls* begin to define the day rather than the boring exchange between the dreary dominating ego and the wispy enthusiasm of affected optimism. Something greater than the mantras of self-help gibberish and post-modern syncretism is demanded if spiritual healing is to occur. An encounter must occur. We must be seized with the Presence. In this Presence, perhaps dramatic at first, perhaps not, we appropriate meaning, love, and healing at ever expanding levels of integration throughout our life. The Eucharist is the encounter with Him Who does not will anything but mercy and healing. Such an encounter is by its nature ordered toward the healing of interior suffering and, at times, physical cure. We cannot be in union with Christ at the Eucharist without receiving the effects of His virtue, His power to heal, mend, restore. We are attracted to so much in these short days of living, but the attraction to the Eucharist is the one desire that sets all other attractions within proper proportionality. Without the desire to have Christ's mysteries lived over again in us by way of the Eucharist, the passing age (Rom 12:1-2) will have more effect upon our interior life than eternity, opened up for us in the Paschal Mystery.

In the lives of very simple Saints like Venerable Solanus Casey, OFM.Cap., we find this intrinsic connection between the virtue of thanksgiving and healing. Solanus had a renowned gift

of healing, but with each healing he connected the recipients to three prominent ends: the need to be grateful, the necessity of attending the Eucharist, and a promise to amend one's life. In other words, the healings and cures connected the person to the entire Christian mystery and, therefore, separated them from magic (see, Michael Crosby, Solanus Casey, NY Crossroad, 2000.

p.121ff). The Eucharist plumbs the very depths of sin and all human action that leads to the lack of hope bred by sin and evil. In and through the cross, represented at the Mass, the believer is healed of the fear of death, but also begins a journey wherein the blood of Christ heals the power of death's attendants: sin, despair, hate. All such healing is a received healing, not a magic trick simply born of manipulating spiritual power. The true model for any spiritual or physical healing is expressed in the story of the ungrateful lepers (Luke 17:11ff). In this story of healing, Christ points out that only the foreigner came back to give thanks to God. Christ wills that no one be foreign to him, no stranger; He wills only to call persons His friends (Jn 15:15). This friendship is entered by participating in His death, which becomes healing prayer (Joseph Ratzinger, 49).

For these friends, moral and spiritual healing will come; even cures will come if they are associated with the Paschal mystery. Those who are not healed by the Eucharist or the intercession of Saints, such as Venerable Solanus Casey, either failed to connect to the Mystery or must be seen to have been given a special vocation to bear suffering while preserving their interior intimacy with Christ. This latter vocation was, in fact, Solanus' own. While dying he filled the hospital room with praise and concern for the salvation of others, even as he prayed for more suffering so as to help bring others to salvation. In the end, he was tortured by his decaying body yet stayed connected to Christ and to others in need. (His last words were, "I give my soul to Jesus Christ"; "I am offering my suffering so that we all might be one. Oh if only I could live to see the conversion of the world" (Crosby, p.146)). Solanus was known to have attended two or three Masses a day, and the depth and level of his personal prayer life is legendary (Crosby, p.113). He was available to those who needed him in charity as Porter of the monastery and available to the mystery of Christ inhabiting him during deep and prolonged mystical prayer.

In true Eucharistic healing, prayer becomes life itself, a participation in the Divine life as shared by Christ. We can see this principle in Venerable Solanus's prayer life. This "life" dwells within us and heals our affection for sin and sees us through death's door to life eternal. Will prayer become the principle of life for those who worship at the Eucharist? As then Cardinal Ratzinger reminded us, it is not mortal sinners who share in the sacrifice of the Eucharist but only the reconciled; therefore, the affection and residue of sin is what is being healed at the Eucharist, as well as any 'weakness' or venial sin.

"The Eucharist is not in itself the sacrament of reconciliation, but in fact it presupposes that sacrament. It is the sacrament of the reconciled, to which the Lord invites all those who have become one with him; who certainly still remain weak sinners, but yet have given their hand to him and have become a part of [the Lord's] family. That is why from the beginning the Eucharist is preceded by a discernment" (Joseph Ratzinger, God is Near, p.60). So in this *sacrament of the reconciled*, we are invited to go deeper into the Presence of the Lord, to appropriate this Presence, to never leave this Presence but invite It take up residence within them, thus furthering the healing of affection for sin and strengthening us in our weakness so that *we become what we have welcomed into our hearts*.

What Newman said of his hope for his personal prayer life, we say in the context of the Eucharist as source: Will we come to learn to love that which will occupy us for all eternity? We can answer this question because the "energy of the HOLY does not operate by giving us ideas about Christ but by PURIFYING our hearts FOR HIM" (Jean Corbon, The Wellspring of Worship, 1988, p.67, capitalization added). The work of the Spirit must be met with a vulnerable faith so as to receive the truth of who Christ is from within the poverty of our being. "He must increase; I must decrease" (Jn 3:30). What is being received here is a healing that is a *purifying power* and not essentially a reconciling power because, as noted above, we ought not, and apparently cannot, enter fruitfully into the Eucharist while at the same *being against the truth* (i.e. in mortal sin) of its very meaning as the Divine Son's self gift. This is why *atonement*, understood as repairing or healing the wound, is an apt meditation.

In mortal sin we are closed to grace. Once repented, we need to repair or undergo therapy of the affection for sin, receiving new affection from the Mystery of the Eucharist itself. St. Francis de Sales notes the following about the effects of participating in the Eucharist, “Your great intention in Communion should be to advance, strengthen, and comfort yourself in the love of God. You must receive with love that love alone has been given to you...If worldly people ask you why you receive Communion so often, tell them that it is to learn to love God, be purified from imperfections, delivered from misery, comforted in affliction and supported in weakness... Tell them that two classes of people should communicate frequently: the sick that they may be restored to health and the healthy lest they fall sick” (Introduction to the Devout life (NY. Image, 1989 ed. p.118).

Christ’s own power and authority elicited the truest approach that we all must take toward liturgical healing when the centurion uttered his humble cry of confidence in light of Jesus’ own majesty. “Lord I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof...but only say the word and my servant will be healed” (Lk 7:7). Only a regimen of interior examination could have led the centurion to such humility. In our time there is a presumption in favor of personal worthiness. This disposition allows us to forgo any claims that repentance might have on us in light of our present sins and so *all* are bid to come forward to “entertain” the Presence of God in our “house.” To receive the healing of sinful affections, we must be in line with the truth about our interior state and seek reconciliation where necessary. Then the grace of God can work upon the residue of sin that exists in the memory and affect (Mt 5:27-28).

Further, if we look to Colossians 3:1-17, we can see the whole sweep of the Eucharist and its healing power upon human interiority. Here we see the rich invitation of the Christ to enter His Mystery and become a new self (v.10). This new self is aware that, to receive such newness of life, forgiveness is first to be received (The Eucharistic Penitential Rite); then, the fruits of having such venial sins forgiven can be received as the peace of Christ (v15). We are also bid to let the Word in its richness dwell within us (v.16), and then the invitation goes out to all that such a peace and such an *indwelling* should characterize all that we do (v.17) in ordinary living

(the Eucharistic dismissal rite). This gift of indwelling by the Christ, and our receptivity toward it *in purity of heart*, are factors that cause any healing gifted to us by the Eucharist.

The healing of sinful affections may happen at such deep levels as to escape our capacity to articulate our real needs. God answers our groans, our sufferings, with the silent coming of the Holy Spirit...instilling within us the reality of Christ living His Mysteries over again in our lives. Our groans, our pain, our need for healing is met by the silent power of Love itself taking up residence within us. Our free “yes” meets the free gift of the mystery of Christ’s Passover, reaching “depths not touched by the wounds death has inflicted on us”; thus in this HOLY COMMUNION we are healed in peace, not with emotional upheaval or storm...but as quietly as the epiclesis (the renewing Spirit) itself (Corbon, p.71-2).

The Mystery of the Eucharist conspires to bring us back to the heart, where all salvation is first received and where the battle to eliminate affection for sin is waged. The Latin word *recordari* is an apt expression for the effect the Eucharist has upon the soul. The self offering of Christ brings us back to the heart, which is what *recordari* means (John 14:26). When we celebrate the Eucharist, we are bid to *remember* on one level; on another level, though, we are bid to *welcome healing*. To remember, to be brought back together in the Lord, is the work of the Eucharist. This is counterpoised against our sinful desire to *disassemble* before the Lord by driving ourselves into loneliness through our choices against the truth and dignity of the human vocation. The Eucharist bids us not to go back to Egypt in slavery but to remain in the Presence, remain reconciled, remain in communion with Life itself, and thus enter ever more deeply into the healed life.

Specifically, when we accept the “gift of life” or the Holy Spirit, our healing in the Eucharist has already begun. God “no longer acts alone”, like at the beginning of creation, but *seeks our cooperation through faith*...in order to receive the gift we are called to entrust ourselves to the mystery of Christ’s presence and self offering among us. (Corbon, p. 59).

It is in this divine self giving and the positive human response to accept such love that healing is known. Trust, vulnerability, rapt listening, integrity all precede the fullness of healing;

otherwise God could incorrectly be seen as entering a magic relationship and not one of human freedom and fullness. We must present ourselves in such a way that Christ can enter our heart with truth. And such a way of presenting ourselves is encapsulated in the virtue of humility. We, as a believer, approach the mystery of salvation and growth in holiness as if coming before a wise healer, “To whom shall we go, Lord, you have the words of everlasting life” (Jn 6:68). These words themselves begin to heal because we realize in their utterance the weight we have been futilely carrying in trying to heal the self. Such is impossible. As Ignatius of Antioch noted, the Eucharist is the “medicine of immortality” (Ignatius of Antioch as quoted in O’Connor, *The Hidden Manna*, San Francisco, Ignatius, 1988, p.17). Participating well, we will receive what we need to make it through death’s door and come to everlasting life. Only in the regular celebration of the Eucharist can we come to see clearly that we are meant to be ministered to by He who not only heals and restores but opens up the eschatological gift as well. This healing of affection for sin is simply the foretaste of what immortality will encompass: a heart purified to participate in eternal divine love. When Eucharist becomes a habitual disposition of our lives, we are receiving the new covenant, the divine power that raised Christ from the dead. Such power is now shared with Christ’s Church as His gift. As St. Claude La Colombiere wrote, “You must give us your own heart, Jesus. Come Lovable heart of Jesus. Place your heart deep in the center of our hearts and enkindle in each heart a flame of love...O holy Heart of Jesus, dwell hidden in my heart, so that in the end I may live with you eternally in heaven.” All present healing is a conspiracy of divine grace that sets up the right conditions, enabling us to host the Heart of Christ within our heart. There is no better description of what the Eucharist entails. It is the welcoming of all that Christ is into our hearts so that His Heart might transfigure ours under the power of and through His divine character of obedient love. Such a created interior environment heals our broken hearts, hearts so broken that without such divine intervention they would continue to display affection for sin.

St. Gregory of Nyssa associated the Eucharist with a “remedy” for sin, noting that Christ’s body is stronger than death (O’Connor, p.34). In desiring to be healed of affection for

sin, we must establish a relationship with the body of Christ. Thus we see the power of devotion to the Sacred Heart in and around devotion to the Eucharist. In a spiritual way, we must unite our heart, *who we are, with who Christ is*, not just as an idea but in His body, both glorified and ecclesially. We do this by means of what our bodies do. We worship, and we give over ourself in concert with Christ having done the same for us out of the power of His heart. In so doing, we pass beyond the self by means of sharing in Christ's own crucifixion and resurrection. We will be healed of our ego by offering it up into the self offering of Christ upon the cross. As Thomas Dubay has noted, "the taproot of all healing is one's deep love and intimacy with the Lord" (Deep Conversion, Deep Prayer, p.75). Do we love Him enough to enter *Histransitus*? At the Eucharist we realize that the Lord may be loved in all the circumstances of our life: sickness, health, failure, success, fear, courage. The Lord has entered death; so now no reality is void of His Presence. In this way, we rejoice in maintaining openness to the healing Presence of Christ, not simply during worship but as the truths of worship come to abide within us over time. Since the intimacy with the Christic Mystery lives in us, the intimacy remains and the healing is received throughout our days.

Dubay further states that "the healing of our deepest wounds comes from contemplative intimacy with the indwelling Trinity, and the deep conversion that makes such intimacy possible" (Dubay, p.77). Only a contemplative intimacy can continue to receive the healing benefits of the Eucharist throughout the day. When the Eucharist's power is treasured in our heart as truth, then by the Spirit, healing marks our character as the norm and not simply as an occasion. In a sense, as the healed or reconciled participants of the Eucharist, we become charismatic; we stand now to only further the kingdom and share the communion with Christ that we have graciously been given and received (see Lawrence Hennessey, *The Spirituality of Priestly Identity*, Chicago Studies, 2006). The healing by the Eucharist then is not simply to comfort the individual who receives such affection from God; it is also meant to be the food upon which the public figure Catholic citizen is bid to consume so that he or she may be faithful in giving public witness to Christ the Savior. As Edith Stein noted, "the greatest figures of

prophecy and sanctity step forth out of the darkest night. For the most part the formative stream of the mystical life remains invisible” (The Hidden Life, 1992, p.110). The Eucharist that heals the heart’s affection for sin by its communion with the Sacred Heart is the “formative stream of the mystical life.” Such a life, however, is only measured for good by the service it renders to the world in charity and works of justice. The Sacred Heart is given at the Eucharist so that the healed heart of the Church can bear that same Holy Heart to the world in service. This witnessing to the Person of Christ is in gratitude for the healing He has rendered to all who fall under the weight of disordered affections. We can be assured that we can receive the healing remedy for the spiritual disease we are affected by: sin (STIII, q.61, a.1, c).