



THE EUCHARIST GIFT OF GOD FOR THE LIFE OF THE WORLD

*Catechesis delivered by Jorge Mario Cardinal Bergoglio
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Introduction

The Lord proclaims: *I am the Eucharist, gift of God for the live of the world.* This theme of the 49th International Eucharistic Congress comes from the Gospel of John, where the Lord proclaims that he is the living bread come down from heaven. *The bread I give is my flesh for the life of the world.*

The Eucharist, gift of God is the core theme of the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* of Benedict XVI. In the first section of the encyclical, the pope exhorts us to adore the Eucharist as the most Holy Trinity's free gift for the life of the world. And at the end, in the third section, the Eucharist is shared. He exhorts us to become the Eucharist for all, like the Lord. The vocation of each one of us is to be the bread shared for the life of the world, after the example of Jesus.

In the first section of the encyclical, the Eucharist is presented as gift, and in the third as mission. Gift of God received and gift of life given to others.

This is the desire of Jesus Christ: that people have life in him. It is also how Jesus is present in the heart of the Aparecida document, with its tone of praise, adoration, and missionary fervor. Life is a gift of God and sharing.

Number 354 of the Aparecida document reads:

The Eucharist is the vital center of the universe, able to satisfy our hunger for life and happiness. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood in this happy banquet participates in eternal life, and thus our daily existence is transformed into an extension of the Mass.

Between gift—the first section of the encyclical—and mission, the third section, the Church is the central motif of today's catechesis: the Eucharist and the Church mystery of the covenant. In presenting this catechesis, we will proceed in three steps, as in a *lectio divina*. The first step will be a brief meditation on the covenant. I think of this as a key to better understanding our theme today.

The second section will be a contemplative synthesis in the course of which we will have the opportunity to experience and admire a few representations of Our Lady, as Eucharistic woman. In the third section will aim to draw a few pastoral conclusions to help us in our personal lives in the Church.

SECOND SECTION

The Ecclesial and Nuptial Dimension of the Eucharist

The Eucharist and the Church are covenant mysteries. With the word covenant, we want to bring out the ecclesial and nuptial dimensions of the gift of the Eucharist, through which the Lord wishes to give himself to all human beings. The Eucharist is living bread given for the life of the world and blood poured out for the sins of all human beings.

By accepting in our hearts the gratuitousness of the gift and its universal missionary dynamism, we place ourselves inside the covenant dynamic. This covenant that no one can break. “Can anything cut us off from the love of Christ?” asks St. Paul.

The first thing we see can say about the Eucharist is that this is a new and eternal covenant, as the Lord says at the Last Supper. The liturgy explains this very well in the Eucharistic prayer of reconciliation. “Time and time again we broke your covenant, but you did not abandon us. Instead, through your Son, Jesus our Lord, you bound yourself even more closely to the human family by a bond that can never be broken.”

This burning desire for a covenant no one could break was prepared by the Lord over the centuries in the heart of Israel. Jesus fulfills and perfects this desire until there is no space left in the heart for a desire to break it.

And to consolidate this covenant, the institution takes place before the passion. This is what I want to emphasize. It is essential to its role that the covenant come before the passion. In anticipating his supreme gift in the Last Supper, the Lord transforms the moment when the covenant could have been broken through Judas’s betrayal into a *kairos* of time and space of holiness where this new covenant will be lived out forever.

In approaching the covenant, I wish to look at this Eucharistic anticipation within the economy of the Passion. In meditating on this mystery, I will refer to certain insights of John Paul II that help us see the importance of this Eucharistic anticipation. The pope said that the keen desire of Jesus is to call forth the astonishment at the Eucharistic institution. A parenthesis: preparing for the celebration of or participation in the Eucharist must involve preparing our hearts for Eucharistic astonishment. The Lord’s institution of the Eucharist before his Passion is the main grounds for this astonishment.

I'll quote another passage from the encyclical:

The Church was born of the paschal mystery. For this very reason the Eucharist, which is in an outstanding way the sacrament of the paschal mystery, stands at the center of the Church's life. [...] At every celebration of the Eucharist, we are spiritually brought back to the paschal Triduum: to the events of the evening of Holy Thursday, to the Last Supper and to what followed it. The institution of the Eucharist sacramentally anticipated the events which were about to take place [...]

The blood that had just been given to the Church began to be shed in the Garden of Gethsemane. It was then truly poured out in self-giving as the instrument of redemption.

Let us proclaim the mystery of faith. When the priest says or sings these words, the faithful respond, *Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restore our life, Lord Jesus, come in glory.* Taking our cue from Christ, in the mystery of his Passion, we also remember the mystery of the Church itself.

The pope goes on to set out the characteristics that make the Eucharist the most fundamental core of Christian life as gift and mission of the Church. These constitute the first and third sections of the encyclical.

If the Church is born and journeys for the life of the world, the most important moment for its task is therefore the institution of the Eucharist. Its foundation sums up the entirety of the Easter Triduum. All is contained and summed up in the Eucharist.

Jesus Christ has entrusted the Church with the permanent actualization of the Easter mystery. With this gift, he instituted a mysterious oneness in time between the Easter Triduum and the Church's life through the centuries. Each time we celebrate the sacred mystery, the wellsprings of the Church are anticipated and summed up in the Eucharist. It is through this gift that the Lord brings about that mysterious oneness in time between himself and the centuries that pass. The encyclical invites us to marvel at the possibility of redemption; the entire life of the world is summed up in this event.

Taking up John Paul II's very words: space and time, contents, anticipation and concentration, we notice the originality of the synthesizing density of the pope's formulation. How can we make it our own without robbing it of its native power? I think approaching it on a pedagogical level may help us understand. What pedagogical value does this conclusion have: anticipation and concentration of the Easter Triduum in the gift of the Eucharist? It seems to me that the Lord's intention directs us to the function of disposing and preparing the recipient of the gift, that is, to the personal and ecclesial dimension of each disciple's heart. By concentrating this entire moment in the Eucharistic gift, the Lord succeeds in showing the disciples that they hold a stake in this great redemptive sacrifice.

The Lord's desire for the covenant and self-abandonment, self-giving, and death on the cross are not isolated facts: they aim to imbue the memory of the faithful with the Eucharistic gift at the Last Supper.

The anointing at Bethany was an important moment for the Lord to prepare his gift. Without that anointing, we would be placed before a unilateral act of God, without there being vessels to receive the new wine in the old wineskins. The Lord's act of total self-giving on the cross was received in the hearts of those who had already welcomed it in the gift of the Eucharist. This concentrates the Passion by giving it a form and scale appropriate to our ability to receive it. That is why the entire Passion can be seen as salvific, because it is part of communion and the saving love manifested by the Lord. It is a breakthrough joining the small and large, the everyday and the exceptional. The Lord's love is made available for our faith while ensuring that this extraordinary salvific act neither escapes from us nor is diluted into banality.

There is a profound similarity here to the sacramental formula of marriage in which spouses give themselves to each other and promise to be faithful in all that awaits them in their lives. Just as in the anticipated institution of the Eucharist, bride and groom anticipate their love and the difficulties they may encounter along the way.

I would like to emphasize this Eucharistic anticipation. The Lord's entire Passion is anticipated and summed up in the Last Supper and in every celebration of the Eucharist. That is how I describe the Eucharistic covenant.

SECTION TWO

Mary, Eucharistic Woman

To see the mystery of the covenant clearly, we must turn to the image of Mary—enter the school of Mary, Eucharistic woman. In the encyclical, the pope says, “If we wish to rediscover in all its richness the profound relationship between the Church and the Eucharist, we cannot neglect Mary, Mother and model of the Church.” If we turn to the image of Mary, we see how the mystery of the covenant is made possible through welcoming the gift of God. This is done in the Universal choice and in every soul.

Let us follow the dictum of the Fathers, according to which, with a few nuances: *What we say universally of the Church, we can say in a special way about Mary and individually about each faithful soul.* In Mary's relationship with the Eucharist, three images stand out and reveal features of the covenant already mentioned, which can be applied analogically to the universal Church and to our own souls in particular.

The covenant as presence, as trust and hope—this is what we see in Mary.

In the first Eucharistic image of Mary, the Virgin is shown as included in the Church. Here, we use the same category, that is, Mary included in the Church and mysteriously present in all her smallness. The pope emphasizes Mary's participation in the Eucharist. The mystery of the covenant between God and human beings is a mystery of accompaniment. It is Mary who accompanies the Church in the first Eucharist, as pointed out in the preface of the mass of Mary, Mother of the Church. The mystery of the presence that accompanies us is truly summed up there.

The covenant is the mystery of presence shared. The bread and wine shared at the family table are a mystery of continued closeness. In this fragmented postmodern world, the time has come to turn toward a true sacrament of closeness. This accompaniment is characteristic of the Lord's teaching that transforms every person the way it did the disciples of Emmaus whom he accompanied on the road, or as a model of closeness, as set forth in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

What we see in Mary as a figure of the covenant introduces us to the covenant as trust. Mary is seen as a wife who places all her trust in her husband. John Paul II characterizes this Eucharistic attitude in which Mary lived her life as self-abandonment to the Word. She sums up in herself all that is involved in following the Word. For those who prepare themselves to receive and fully live out the gift of the Eucharist as memorial of the death of Christ, self-abandonment does not mean just letting go. It is much more about remaining always in a state of receptivity. It means always taking in, after the example of John, she who is given to us as our mother. We see here an invitation to become like Christ by joining the school of his mother, by letting her be with us. Total trust and the obedience of faith make the heart of Mary the perfect receptacle for the Word to become incarnate and fully transformed in. It is the covenant as presence, the covenant as trust, and finally the covenant as hope.

These three images of Mary show us what it means to live in anticipation and what a promise can be. Pope John Paul II wrote: "In her daily preparation for Calvary, Mary experienced a kind of "anticipated Eucharist"—one might say a "spiritual communion"—of desire and of oblation, which would culminate in her union with her Son in his passion." In our will to oblation we transform ourselves into the likeness of Mary by becoming open vessels, so that the Word can become incarnate in our lives.

Mary is presented as the model of the covenant between the Lord and his bride the Church, between God and human beings. Mary is the model of the covenant as the presence of love and of trusting and fertile self-giving, filled with hope. These three of Mary's qualities correspond to three categories: initiated, anticipated, consecrated. John Paul II shows us how the Magnificat sets out this Marian school's complete program of studies. Here we see the Good News lived out as a song of glory.

Just as Mary anticipates, by her prophetic presence, God's act, so too does the Eucharist anticipate the re-creation of history. What the Eucharist manifests in its sacramental aspect, Mary

sings in the Magnificat. And when the Church takes up her song, in her, we become contemporaries of Mary and live out her spirituality.

SECTION THREE

Concrete pastoral consequences

I'd like to suggest some personal consequences before I bring up some of the consequences for the Church.

I am speaking here about catecheses that can be taught. We are invited to open up the mystery a little, but also to establish a plan of action for our personal lives.

In this catechesis, in which we have contemplated the mystery of the covenant in Mary, the richness of the Eucharist and the Church has been revealed to us. In our Mother, everything becomes concrete, everything becomes possible. In her school, God comes to us as a loving mother. One conclusion for the spiritual life of each of us is that we should choose what we like the most, following St. Ignatius Loyola in his Spiritual Exercises, and unite the sacramental Eucharist with Mary. We can ask for the grace that the Eucharist become flesh in us, as in Mary who received the Word in herself. Lastly, we can receive the Eucharist by holding our hands like a crèche and acknowledging that it is Our Lady who entrusts it to us. During communion, in silence, we can ask for the grace to sing the Magnificat with Mary and to look forward in the Eucharist to everything that will make up our day and our week, its joys and sufferings, in union with the Father and Word. The grace to lovingly believe in order to remake our life in the image of the one we receive.

Consequences for the Church

I think it would be a good idea to draw a few conclusions in light of the richness of what we have just described and that can help us in our lives in the Church.

The love and admiration we spontaneously feel for Our Lady and the Eucharist must be cultivated in our Church. Let us remember that what is said about Mary can be applied analogically to the Church as well as to each of us. Mary and the Church are transformed by the one who chose to inhabit them. Mary and the Church are the first of the new wineskins that make Jesus Christ present. Mary becomes the image of the Eucharist when the Word comes down to her. By becoming incarnate in Mary, Jesus pre-eminently transforms his mother on the highest level of reality, as anticipated in the privilege of her Immaculate Conception.

The Church acknowledges the covenant that the Lord wished to make with Mary. This is why, when Christians look at the Church, they want it to be simple and pure like Mary. They see the Church as the body of Christ, the receptacle that perfectly preserves what is put in it. Like this

faithful bride, Christians share fully in what Christ asks of her, that is, to grow each day in the contemplation of our Holy Mother the Church.

The Church's sacraments allow us to share fully in the life the Lord came to bring us. Even if her children violate this covenant on an individual basis, the Church makes it possible through Baptism and the Sacrament of Reconciliation for them to find it anew. Christians see the Church as catholic in every sense—universality, fullness, a place of reconciliation, a covenant community. Naturally we can look at it in other ways to improve particular aspects, such as its cultural life. But all such efforts must be imbued with a tremendous love for the Church. It is just this spirit of covenant that is our part, as in a good marriage, in as far as human love was initiated and sanctified in Christ.

The Church is called to participate fully in the incarnation, life, passion, death, and resurrection of its Lord. It is the Church of Mary in its concrete universality. The eternal Word became flesh and his Word entered our history for all time. We need to better savor the Church and Mary's examples of the covenant so that we can transform ourselves into the Good News.

To contemplate God's covenant with humanity, originating in the Old Testament, applying to all human beings of good will, we must look at Mary who comes to us as God's sanctified and sanctifying vessel for the life of the world.

According to Vatican II, Mary's Church as it celebrates the Eucharist receives from its Bridegroom the bread of life as well as the mission of distributing it to all for the life of the world. The close Mary-Church covenant is made holy in faith and love by its Lord, who wishes it holy and unstained.

I will close by saying that the holiness of the Church does not arise from personal or social privilege but rather from service. Let me explain. The world has the impression that the Church is always defending its power. It may be that in certain personal cases this is true, but generally it is not the case. By defending its identity and infallibility, the Church defends the conduit through which the gift of life to the world passes—the gift of the life of the world to God. What the Church is defending when it defends its integrity is its own identity. This gift, the most beautiful expression of which is the Eucharist, is not a gift among others but the most intimate and complete self-giving of the Trinity given for the life of the world, a gift made by the Son who offers himself to the Father. As Balthasar said, *“the Father's act of self-giving by which, throughout all created space and time, he pours out the Son, is the definitive revealing of the Trinitarian act itself in which the ‘Persons’ are God's ‘relations,’ forms of absolute self-giving and loving fluidity.”*

The irrevocable immensity of self-giving that is handed down requires that the Lord sanctify the Church as he did his mother. This gift has been definitively established to be handed down and received for the life of the world. This mystery of the covenant, which makes the Church holy, is a mystery of service and life. In defending its integrity, the Church defends the faithfulness of the

covenant in service and life. We must never cease to marvel at the openness of Trinitarian life, which is given not just for the few, but for the life of the world. God wishes his gift to be total and for all. By joining with Christ rather than closing in on themselves, the people of the new covenant are transformed into a sacrament. We are a sacrament for humanity. We are signs and instruments of salvation in the work of Christ, the light of the world and salt of the earth for the redemption of all.

The Church's mission carries forward the mission of Christ. As the Father sent me, so I am sending you. The Church receives the strength it needs to accomplish its perpetual mission from the Eucharist, linked to the sacrifice of the cross. Presence, sacrifice, and communion: the Eucharist is the source and summit of all evangelization, because its goal is the communion of human beings with Christ, with the Father and Holy Spirit.