



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

"The Year of the Eucharist has its source in the amazement with which the Church contemplates this great Mystery. It is an amazement which I myself constantly experience. It prompted my Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. I consider it a great grace to be able to call the whole Church to contemplate, praise and adore in a special way this ineffable Sacrament. May the Year of the Eucharist be for everyone a precious opportunity to grow in awareness of this incomparable treasure which Christ has entrusted to his Church. May it encourage a more lively and fervent celebration of the Eucharist, leading to a life transformed by love... Consecrated men and women, called by that very consecration to more prolonged contemplation: never forget that Jesus in the tabernacle wants you to be at his side, so that he can fill your hearts with the experience of his friendship, which alone gives meaning and fulfilment to your lives... May all of you, the Christian faithful, rediscover the gift of the Eucharist as light and strength for your daily lives."

Pope John Paul II: Apostolic Letter "Mane Nobiscum Domine", 8 October 2004, nn. 29-30

Monastic Voices

Abba Poemen said: "It is written, 'As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you O God' (Ps 41/42:1). For truly deer in the desert devour many reptiles, and when their venom burns them they try to come to the springs, to drink so as to assuage the venom's burning. It is the same for the monks: sitting in the desert they are burned by the venom of evil demons, and they long for Saturday and Sunday to come to be able to go to the springs of water, that is to say, the Body and Blood of the Lord, so as to be purified from the bitterness of the evil one." *Sayings of the Desert Fathers: Alphabetical Collection; 4th century Egypt.*

When we are summoned to the Mystery of our salvation, let us prepare for it in great fear. Let us beg the Lord with all our heart and all our mind to make us worthy of this great gift, and to revive in us that which is pleasing to God. Let us abandon ourselves with body, soul and spirit to His will; let us receive the Mystery in thanksgiving, and let us return to our house with joy and gladness, in order that anyone who sees us may give glory to God. Let us recite also both going to and returning from the holy assembly. *From the Regulations of Horseisios, successor of St. Pachomius as Abbot of Tabenne: 4th century Egypt*

What is the distinguishing mark of the Christian? To purify himself in the blood of Christ from every defilement of flesh and spirit (2 Cor 7:1); to have neither spot nor wrinkle nor any other such thing, but to be holy and immaculate (Eph 5:27; 1:4), and in these conditions to eat the Body of Christ and drink His Blood; for he who eats and drinks unworthily eats and drinks his own condemnation (1 Cor 11:29). What is the distinguishing mark of those who eat the bread and drink the cup of the Lord? To keep continually in memory He who died and was raised for us. And what is the distinguishing mark of those who have such memory? To live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died and was raised for us (2 Cor 5:15). *St. Basil the Great, 330-379; conclusion of his Moral Rules*

the whole of the monastic observance and the ascetical striving of the individual monk reaches its climax in the Eucharist, the dynamic encounter with the risen Christ. It is the supreme moment of the monk's conversion, the fulfillment of his penance, the response to his prayer. With his brethren he is assumed into Christ and anticipates the union of heaven to which his whole monastic life has tended. The monk should therefore esteem the conventual Mass as the most important function of each day in his life. The conventual Mass activates that charity which is the soul of conventual life. All of the other activities of the day are directed to it as to their end: the monk's work, his prayer, his reading, all find their fulfilment in the union of his sacrifice with that of Christ. The hours of the divine office are the setting which surrounds the jewel of the Mass. The monk's progress in perfection is the working out in practice of the reality of the Eucharist. If the Eucharist is the consummation of the spiritual life, then its power must inform every aspect of the monk's life and bring about in him a total conversion. Every action of the day must either be directed toward the Eucharist as a preparation or flow from it as a result. The Eucharist is the sacrament of charity, and the intensity of the monk's participation in it will be measured by the increase of charity in his life. Dom Claude Peifer OSB, Monk of St. Bede's Abbey, Peru, Illinois, USA: *Monastic Spirituality* (1966)

Dear oblates and friends,

According to the oblate Statutes, "daily Mass and communion is the centre and heart of the Pluscarden community's life of prayer. Oblates also find in the Mass the 'source and summit' of their Christian life. Through the Eucharistic Sacrifice, monks and oblates alike unite their self-offering with the sacrificial offering of Christ." Anyone writing a rule for monasteries today would surely place great emphasis on the daily celebration of Mass, and show why it must be considered the centre and heart of the community's life of prayer. Yet St. Benedict scarcely so much as mentions it. He sets out in great detail the timetable of daily prayer for his monastery, but is silent concerning the Eucharist. What are we to make of that?

As so often, we can be helped to understand St. Benedict's mind here by looking at the tradition which he inherited. The desert Fathers, John Cassian (c. 360-435) and St. Basil (330-379) all speak of celebrating the Eucharist once a week only, on Sunday, usually preceded by an all night vigil. Their writings make it clear that these early monks approached the holy Eucharist with extreme reverence and respect, absolutely convinced of Christ's objectively real presence, and of the power of the Sacrament to transform their lives. Daily services of holy communion outside Mass were common practice. St. Benedict (traditionally 480-c. 550) would have accepted this tradition as easily as we accept daily Mass. A man of the Church, he would have wanted to follow the generally accepted practice of his day.

But he was also quite capable of showing a certain independence. The contemporary Rule of the Master refuses to allow membership of the monastic community to any priest at all. Against that we have chapter 62 of our holy Rule, where we see the Benedictine Abbot choosing worthy monks for ordination, and accepting priest novices. St. Benedict also rejects the all night vigil of preparation: we can imagine his reaction to monks wanting to spend much of their Sunday in bed! He makes passing references to holy communion, for example in chapter 63, on community rank, which seem to imply frequent communion services. On the other hand, the ritual for receiving a child oblate, given in chapter 59, clearly implies a Mass celebrated in the oratory of the monastery. How frequently was it held? We don't know.

The long history of Benedictine monasticism shows the Eucharist coming to occupy ever increasing centrality in the community observance. From the early mediaeval period, great emphasis was placed on the intercessory power of the Mass. Monasteries came to need many priests in order to provide the Masses requested for the intentions of benefactors, and especially for the dead. Many side altars therefore became a feature of monastic Churches. It is remarkable to note that where in primitive times a monastic community had few or even no priests, in the course of the centuries it became normal for all professed monks to be ordained. Thinking nothing too good for the Mass, Benedictine communities also tended to lavish their ample human resources on its worthy and beautiful celebration, with elaborate ceremonial, music, vesture, Church furnishing and building. In more modern times a new impulse was given to this Eucharistic focus through the liturgical movement. Many of the most important contributors to that movement were Benedictines. I mention here with honour the names of a few: from France, Dom Prosper Guéranger (1805-1875); from England Dom Anscar Vonier (1875-1938) and Dom Gregory Dix (1901-1952); from Germany Dom Odo Casel (1886-1938); and from Italy Dom Cipriano Vagaggini (1908-1999).

Is all this development somehow independent of the Rule? Is it an extraneous observance, a piece of clutter that an authentic return to the source would need to pare away? Certainly not! That would be to ignore or even deny the work of the Holy Spirit, who does not cease to guide the Church to the complete truth (Jn 16:13). Our faith is that of the Apostles, received and handed on essentially unchanged (1 Cor 11:23). But the riches contained in the Eucharist are in principle limitless. So it is right that as they are explored with ever fresh insight, Church authority should be free to respond to current concerns by encouraging or sanctioning a certain organic development of practice. And the Rule is not left out of our modern Eucharistic celebration. On the contrary, it finds there in many ways its most perfect expression.

Take the simple fact that St. Benedict established a Christian community, in which nothing is to be preferred to prayer; nothing held dearer than Christ. The Eucharist is the supreme expression of our Christian prayer, and the place where above all we encounter Jesus Christ. It is also the Sacrament that makes us one in Christ; that fosters and expresses our mutual love; that builds us up as one Body in Him. So we are nowhere more a Benedictine community than at our daily celebration of the Community Mass. And look at who goes up to receive holy Communion. The Abbot, the seniors, the juniors, the sick, the guests: each of them, brethren in Christ, receives Christ, becomes a bearer of Christ. How could we fail to reverence each of them then as Christ Himself?

As for our profession of vows: they are meant to express our unreserved self-offering to God. But that has its source and goal in the self-offering of Christ: and Christ's self-offering is made present for our participation at every Mass. If we truly respond to that, we will inevitably be drawn towards the fundamental virtues shown by Christ in His sacrifice: His humility and obedience. Why does St. Benedict insist particularly on these virtues? Because through them we live what we receive. Through them we truly live the Eucharist.

Then consider the liturgy itself. Our listening to the proclamation of the Word of God is certainly a privileged form of *lectio divina*. Our own private *lectio* can even be thought of as above all a preparation for that. After the readings comes the response in sung psalmody. Surely this is a brief summary of what our entire Divine Office is about? Then the Abbot or his delegated substitute comments on the readings in the homily. What is this but a repeated invitation for us to listen carefully to the instructions of the Master, and attend to them with the ear of our heart?

And so to the Eucharistic Prayer. This is the "great intercession" of Christ and of the Church, and it contains many specific prayers of intercession. Nevertheless, as the word "Eucharist" implies, its emphasis is more on praising and thanking God for His goodness and mercy shown to us in Christ, than on asking Him for things. This is also very much the emphasis of the Holy Rule. Chapter 20 of the Rule is certainly to do with prayer of petition, but chapters 8 to 19 are really all about praise. It seems to have been St. Benedict's instinct to want to spend his life above all just praising God. In this way also we can discern the profoundly Eucharistic dimension of his Rule.

So now we have the Year of the Eucharist. The principal way we are living that at Pluscarden is through our daily celebration of Mass: without question the most important act of each day, and absolutely at the centre of our Benedictine life. We are encouraged by Pope John Paul's words: "Priests who faithfully celebrate Mass according to the liturgical norms, and communities which conform to those norms, quietly but eloquently demonstrate their love for the Church." In addition we have tried to mark the Year in various little ways. We have deliberately increased our donations to help feed the world's starving people. We have added an extra afternoon a month of exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, in addition to our normal first Friday. Fr. Abbot has given the community many conferences on the Holy Eucharist, and our Pentecost lectures have for their theme: The Church draws its life from the Eucharist. If the Church as a whole does that, so must each of us, oblates and monks alike!

How can oblates best live this Year? The first obvious suggestion is: when you can, go to Mass! Dom Maurus was fond of saying that Christianity is something you do, monasticism is something you do, humility is something you do. So also the Eucharist is something you do. "Do this in memory of me". Then our business is to conform our lives to the Mystery we celebrate. When we have achieved that, we will indeed be Saints!

To help deepen appreciation of what the Eucharist means, and contains, and does, I warmly recommend Pope John Paul II's recent documents on the subject. First is his April 2003 Encyclical Letter: *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*; then his October 2004 Apostolic Letter: *Mane Nobiscum Domine*: both are wonderfully inspiring, with solid

doctrinal teaching and rich nourishment for prayerful reflection. Then there are recent instructions from the Holy See which are important guides to correct celebration: *Redemptionis Sacramentum* of March 2004, and the newly translated General Instruction of the Roman Missal as revised in 2002. In addition, the 1992 Catechism of the Catholic Church has a beautiful exposition of our Eucharistic faith in nn. 1322 - 1419. We can frequently return to these articles with profit.

One remark of the Catechism I particularly treasure is in its last section, on the Lord's Prayer. We read in n. 2770 that in the Eucharistic liturgy, the Lord's Prayer "reveals its full meaning and efficacy". I would like to conclude this letter by reflecting briefly on that remark.

The Prayer taught to us by Jesus contains in itself, as the Catechism teaches, a summary of the whole Gospel, and a summary of all Christian prayer. Now what the Lord's prayer is and does, the Eucharist also is and does. Both are a turning to the Father through the Son in the Spirit. Both are the prayer of Christ, the prayer of the Church, our prayer. Both are praise, thanksgiving, blessing and intercession; desire for the Kingdom, for conformity to God's will, for union with the Saints and Angels in heaven. Both are a request to be fed, to be forgiven, and a commitment to forgive.

But note how the Eucharist gains what it asks for. Because of the objective presence of Christ, we believe, as of faith, that the Father's name is truly hallowed at Mass; that the Kingdom is mysteriously made present. At Mass, we are caught up in Christ's own total obedience to the will of the Father on Calvary. Earth is united to heaven, in that the union of the earthly Church with the heavenly is expressed most clearly in the Eucharist. We ask for nourishment, and we are given the Bread of life. At the same time, we express our solidarity with the poor. We ask for forgiveness, and we are forgiven. As a concrete sign that we ourselves are ready to forgive, we offer a sign of peace. Through our communion with the flesh of the risen Christ, we are given strength to resist temptation, and the attacks of the devil. The placing of the Lord's Prayer immediately after the Eucharistic Prayer is significant. According to 1 Peter 3:18, Christ died in order to lead us to God. So once Christ's sacrificial death has been made sacramentally present and offered for us to the Father, we naturally turn to God: addressing Him now, through with and in Christ, as "Our Father". Have you noticed the effect of these words at this moment? We could not say them if we were merely spectators, looking on while something is done on our behalf. We say them as united with Jesus. So we have to offer ourselves as He is offered; to be one with Him on the altar: ready in principle to pour out our very life's blood for love of God and each other. The Lord's Prayer is thus another and wonderful way of saying "Amen" to all that the Mass means.

Through it, also, we look forward, not just to communion, but to what communion itself strains towards: the final banquet of the Kingdom, when signs will come to an end, and the veil will be lifted aside, and we will rejoice to see God "as he is" (1 Jn 3:2), "face to face" (1 Cor 13:12). "See then how the Lord in His goodness shows us the way of life. Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide, that we may deserve to see Him who has called us into His Kingdom" (Holy Rule Prologue: vv 20-21).