“Religion is a celebration of communion”

A recovering alcoholic once remarked: “Religion is for those who are afraid of hell; spirituality is for those who have been there.” Unfortunately, this is the idea that many people have of religion and, particularly, of the Catholic religion, viz., that it is based primarily on fear. This is the view that a faculty colleague, not a Catholic, emphasizes in his textbook on *Ethics in the Workplace*, published about three years ago by a reputable textbook firm. After it had been published, the author asked me to give him my opinion of the book, especially the section on religion. After I had read it, I told him in as kindly fashion as I could that, with regard to the Catholic religion, even though a number of religious leaders have based it on fear down through the centuries, that these people have mistakenly represented the true Catholic faith which must be based on love. I noted in his bibliography that he did not list one authentic source of the Catholic religion, such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* or the Documents of Vatican II. I mention this to indicate to you that the idea of religion being based on fear is still quite prevalent and even among those considered to be well-informed.

Another person had it right when he said, “Religion is a celebration of communion” (John MacMurray). We will see that this is so when we look more deeply into the true nature of religion and what communion means for human existence. Although the etymology of the word religion is disputed, it does suggest, as one writer states: “Religion concerns what binds us together, what we bind ourselves to, what we must bind ourselves to again and again” (J. Sachs, *The Christian View of Humanity*, 39). In a real sense, true religion is intended to put us in communion with God and with one another. This yearning for communion is written, as Pope John Paul II insisted, in our very flesh, in our very bodies, in our very sexual differentiation since Sacred Scripture (Gen. 2:24) tells us that man and woman were destined from the beginning to become “one flesh,” i.e., to be other oriented and other directed. Christopher West, explaining the Pope’s teaching on the Theology of the Body, expresses it this way: “Communion is man’s origin, vocation and, destiny. This is the perspective of man’s whole life, of Christ’s whole teaching and mission” (Christopher West, *The Theology of the Body Explained*, 203). Karl Rahner sees our relationship with God and with others as essential for self-understanding. “It is only by loving other people,” he states,” that one enters into a right relationship with oneself…[for] salvation is social” (*Theological Investigations*, vol. 7 or 8, p. 201).

**Man, Fashioned By Christ’s Priestly Activity**

It is interesting to note here, the connection or comparison that St. Francis de Sales makes between the act of consecration at the celebration of the Holy Eucharist and the creation of man, of humankind. The transformation effected by man’s creation is similar to the transubstantiation of the Mass because, as Francis de Sales remarks in a sermon on the Marriage Feast of Cana, it is the same word which “gave life and being to man, and by which also at the last banquet that he had with his disciples, he changed wine into the blood of the Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist.”(OEA, 10:15). In a sense this transformation of man at his creation can be conceived of as a Passover, as a Pasch. By the word and breath of God, man passes from the terrestrial to the celestial state. In a way, the creation of man represents his first Passover in the sense of deliverance from the tyranny of the earth and earthly things. In the mind of St. Francis de Sales, man is
fashioned by the priestly activity of Jesus. The breath that makes us as human is a breath of life, of love and liberty because it frees us from the earth and cosmic forces. For this reason, human life is to be considered essentially as a life of freedom in love. So we are called by our very nature to love as God loves, to be in communion with God and with others. But notice, we are marked and destined for communion in our very make-up by the priesthood of Jesus.

**Cardinal Van Thuan – *Testimony to Hope***

In giving us the inestimable gift of himself in the Holy Eucharist, Jesus intended to redeem us by fulfilling our deepest longing and need – that of belonging to God and to one another in a holy, undying communion. We can better understand the liturgy of the Eucharist by the liturgy of the Word which precedes it at Mass. The connection between the Sacred Word in Scripture and the Word made flesh in the Eucharist was clearly understood by Cardinal Van Thuan. The Cardinal spent a total of thirteen years in prison in Vietnam under the Communists, nine of them in solitary confinement. You wonder how in the world he ever survived the solitary confinement and did not go literally stir crazy!

About eight years ago, he was asked to give the annual Lenten retreat for the papal household. At the urging of Pope John Paul II, he later published these talks in a book entitled, *Testimony to Hope*. There are a number of amazing stories that he relates in his talks to convey the importance of the exercise of his priesthood, of a spirituality of communion and the relationship between the Sacred Word and the Word made flesh in the Eucharist.

The Catholics in this prison were able to smuggle in a copy of the New Testament, which they tore up into small sections and distributed among the Catholics who then set out to learn the passages by heart. The cell floors were of sand. So when the guards came around they were able to easily hide the pieces of paper under the sand. “In the darkness of night,” the Cardinal related, “the prisoners would recite in turn the part of the New Testament each had already memorized. It was an impressive and moving experience to hear the Word of God proclaimed in the silence and darkness of the prison. To be in the presence of Jesus the ‘living Gospel’ spoken by the prisoners with all the strength of soul; to hear the priestly prayer and the passion of Christ … The non-Catholics also listened with respect and admiration to what they called the 'Sacred Word.' Many said they felt the Word of God to be 'spirit and life.'” (*Testimony*, pp. 65-66).

The Cardinal quoted St. Jerome to emphasize the relationship between the Sacred Word and the Holy Eucharist: “I hold that the Gospel,” St. Jerome tells us, ‘is the body of Jesus and the Scriptures are his teachings. The words of Jesus: ‘One who eats my body and drinks my blood’ (Jn 6:54), can be understood to mean the mystery [of the Eucharist] and also as that true body and blood of Christ that is the word of Scripture…. The Word of God is that flesh and that blood of Christ that enters within us through listening’” (Cf. *Breviarium in Psalmos*, Psalm 147: PL 26, 1334, as cited in *Testimony*, p. 62). Pope Benedict XVI expresses this connection in this way: “God's presence in the word and his presence in the Eucharist belong together, inseparably. The Eucharistic Lord is himself the living word. Only if we are living in the sphere of God's Word can we properly comprehend and properly receive the gift of the Eucharist” (*God Is Near Us*, pp. 104-105).
When he was arrested, the Cardinal, who was a bishop at the time, was not allowed to take anything with him. He had to come as he was. The following day he was allowed to write to his people in order to ask them to send him necessary things - clothes, toothpaste, etc. In addition, he wrote, “Please send me a little wine as medicine for my stomachache.” Of course, his people understood right away what he meant. So they sent him a small bottle of wine for Mass and put a label on it that read, “Medicine for stomachaches.” They also hid some hosts in a flashlight to protect them from the humidity. When the package arrived, The police asked, “You have stomachaches?” The Cardinal answered, "Yes." "Here's some medicine for you," they said.

Of course, he was overjoyed to get the wine and the hosts. He would celebrate Mass every day with three drops of wine and a drop of water in the palm of his hand. This was his altar, and this was his cathedral! He saw the Holy Eucharist as true medicine for soul and body, quoting St. Ignatius of Antioch who described the Blessed Sacrament as “Medicine of immortality, a remedy so as not to die but to have life always in Jesus.” (Test., p. 2302-231).

Describing this precious experience, Cardinal Van Thuan said, "Each time I celebrated the Mass, I had the opportunity to extend my hands and nail myself to the cross with Jesus, to drink with him the bitter chalice. Each day in reciting the words of consecration, I confirmed with all my heart and soul a new [covenant] between Jesus and me through his blood mixed with mine. Those were the most beautiful Masses of my life! Thus in prison, I felt beating within my heart the same heart of Christ. I felt that my life was his life and his was mine.” This, I believe, is the perfect image and description of what it means to be in communion with Jesus.

At that time, he was not in solitary confinement and was able to share the Holy Eucharist with other Christians in the prison. It became for him and for other Christians a hidden and encouraging presence in the midst of all their difficulties. Jesus was adored secretly by the Christians who lived with him, as often was the case in other prison camps of the last century in Vietnam.

The prison was euphemistically called a re-education camp where they were divided into groups of fifty people. They slept on a common bed, with each one having a little less than (50 centimeters) 6 feet of space. Somehow or other, he managed to make sure there were five Catholics with him. At 9:30 p.m., they had to turn out the lights, and everyone had to go to sleep. It was then that Cardinal Van Thuan would bow over the bed to celebrate the Mass by heart. He would distribute the Eucharist by passing his hand under the mosquito net. He and the other Catholics even made little sacks from the paper of cigarette packs to preserve the Most Holy Sacrament and bring it to others.

With the other Catholics, he would take advantage of the breaks in order to pass the small sack to everyone in the four other groups of prisoners. Everyone knew that Jesus was in their midst. At night, the prisoners would take turns for adoration. Reflecting on this experience, the Cardinal observed, “With his silent presence, the Eucharistic Jesus helped us in unimaginable ways. Many Christians returned to a fervent faith-life, and their witness of service and love had an ever greater impact on other prisoners. Even Buddhists and other non-Christians,” he noted, “came to the faith. The strength of Jesus’ love was irresistible.”
"In this way,” he concluded, “the darkness of the prison became a paschal light, and the seed germinated in the ground during the storm. The prison was transformed into a school of catechesis. Catholics baptized fellow prisoners and became the godparents of their companions” (Testimony, pp. 132-133).

However, even with the presence and power of the Eucharist, the Cardinal was not under any illusions of how difficult it is to live the holy communion that this sacrament is intended to achieve. In this regard, he read to his listeners words he had written in prison on the nature of communion:

Communion is a battle of every instant
Even one moment of neglect can shatter it;
a trifle is enough;
a single thought against charity,
an obstinately held judgment,
a sentimental attachment,
a mistaken premise,
ambition or personal interest,
an action done for self and not for the Lord…

Help me, Lord, to examine myself in this way:
What is the center of my life?
You or me?
If it is you, you will gather us in unity.
But If I see around me
everyone gradually leaving and dispersing,
this is the sign that I have put myself at the center. (Testimony, pp. 162-163).

We see in this heartwarming and inspiring story of deep faith and unshakeable hope under very trying circumstances how the Eucharistic Jesus created in the most unlikely of places a holy communion by means of the priesthood of this holy bishop.

**Fr. Brisson (1817-1908) And Communion**

As some of you know, I completed about a year or so ago, the long task (7 years) of coordinating the translation, editing and publication of the English translation of a documented biography of Fr. Brisson. The book was originally submitted in French to the Congregation of the Saints several years ago as part of the Cause of his Beatification. It is officially titled *Positio super virtutibus* and handsomely published by St. Joseph’s University Press last year. In the life of Fr. Brisson, I was struck by many things, especially his deep and profound understanding of the thought and mind of St. Francis de Sales, whom he rarely directly quotes. His reverence and affection for the Holy Eucharist as a priest is particularly moving and noteworthy. It reflects extraordinarily well the words that John Paul II wrote in his Letter to Priests on Holy Thursday 2005: John Paul II highlights this point as he wrote in his Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday 2005: "Christ's self-giving, which has its origin in the Trinitarian life of the God who is Love, reaches its culmination in the sacrifice of the Cross, sacramentally anticipated in the Last Supper. It is impossible -- for the priest -- to repeat the words of consecration without feeling caught up in this spiritual movement [...] The priest must learn to apply these words also to
himself, and to speak them with truth and generosity. If he is able to offer himself as a gift, placing himself at the disposal of the community and at the service of anyone in need, his life takes on its true meaning. This is exactly what Jesus expected of his apostles. [...] It is also what the people of God expect of a priest.

**Fr. Brisson’s Reflection on the Words “Hoc est enim corpus meum.”**

"Shortly after Fr. Brisson was ordained (December 1840), he wrote in his diary this reflection on the words ‘Hoc est enim corpus meum’:

> “Hoc est corpus meum” (“For this is my body”). Is it indeed true, Lord, that when I pronounce these words, I hold you in my hands and adore you *os ad os* (face to face)? Yes, I believe it, I feel it, I see it. Your union with the faithful soul to whom you communicate yourself is undoubtedly intimate but what should I say about what you contract with your priest at the holy sacrifice?

> “This is my Body:” It is yours, Lord Jesus, it is mine. This is My Body; it is yours: all the lovableness of the little infant in the crib, all the wisdom of the Messiah, the resignation of the redeemer on the cross, all the majesty of the Son who is at the right hand of the Father are found under my eyes, in my hands, near my heart.

This is my Body: It is mine because I am your Blood, bone of your bone, flesh of your flesh. You are my God, made man like me and you wish me to be made God like you in substance? No, but in resemblance. In reality? No, but in charity.

Yes Lord, here are my feet, my hands, here is my entire body, make it yours. Consecrate it into the Body and Blood and life of yourself. My flesh has need of you: it wants the life of your flesh; it is breathless, exhausted....

Communicate to me the impulse that makes you act, the sentiment that makes you love, the breath that makes you live. O my God, how truly you are my God! When shall I see myself possessing all that you are to me?

*Journal 1840-41, Orig. not found. There are excerpts in Notes Pernin, p. 53; Annales Salésiennes 1890, pp. 173-74; Summ. 174 § 554; SDA, 228-29 § 715. Ch. II of the Positio, p. 51), (Father Louis Brisson [1817-1908]: A Documented Biography, p. 24)

This shows his profound grasp and appreciation of how the Eucharist puts us in communion with Jesus and with our neighbor through charity. Fr. Brisson describes in a unique way what the Eucharist means to “Live Jesus!. Let me repeat it. Fr. Brisson prays: “Communicate to me the impulse that makes you act, the sentiment that makes you love, the breath that makes you live.” As Pope Benedict reminds us, those who are in communion with Jesus are in communion with all who are joined to him.

Numerous times in his chapters, sermons, instructions, etc., Fr. Brisson emphasizes how essential this impulse is for the Oblates to create communion in our communal life. Although he noted that the responsibility for creating communion is incumbent upon all
of the Oblates, time and time again, he stresses that it is particularly incumbent upon Oblate priests to do so. Let me simply cite a couple of examples to refresh your memories.

For Fr. Brisson, the term “cordial charity” is what creates, nourishes, and causes to flourish a holy communion in our communities. “In order to practice cordial charity, we must pray for each other. Let priests especially do this, by forming the habit of mentioning some of them at the memento for the living.” We see here, how Fr. Brisson directly links the celebration of the Holy Eucharist as the source of creating cordial charity or communion in community living and that Oblate priests have to be in the forefront of this practice.

As I noted above, Cardinal Van Thuan tells how tenuous it is to create and maintain communion, how a single word can create divisiveness. Fr. Brisson was well aware of how destructive our words can be in destroying communion. “Certainly,” he advises, “we can say harmless things for purposes of recreation. But when a priest forgets himself and speaks words contrary to charity or which wounds the respect and obedience due to authority, he deprives himself of immense graces. Let us then be careful not to profane our tongue by any conversation which may in anyway displease God to whom we are consecrated” (28 August 1879, “Fidelity”).

The Year of the Priest should remind us of how essential it is for all of us, but especially for priests, to strive daily to create communion in our communities, our various ministries and personal contacts. It is communion that gives meaning to our human existence since it is “our origin, our vocation and our destiny” (C. West). Francis de Sales saw very clearly communion as our final destiny when he says, “[The blessed in heaven] give one another ineffable contentment and live in the consolation of a happy and indissoluble union [or communion]” (IDL, Part I, ch. 16). The common union or holy communion of the blessed with the persons of the Trinity and among themselves is the source of unending happiness and joy. Albert Camus in his novel The Plague states: “It is not wrong to want to be happy, but it is wrong to want to be happy all alone.” The holy communion that we are called to create and nourish by the Holy Eucharist is concrete testimony that we are meant to be happy together forever. It is an indication that our religion and our very lives are to be a celebration of communion.

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