The Eucharist: Enacting, Encountering, and Enabling Charity

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Introduction

Pope Benedict XVI in his Message for Lent 2012 focuses on “concern for one another” (charity). After speaking about our (1) Responsibility toward others, he then explores (2) the Gift of reciprocity. It’s there that he makes the lone reference to the Eucharist:

The Lord’s disciples, united with him through the Eucharist, live in a fellowship that binds them one to another as members of a single body. This means that the other is part of me, and that his or her life, his or her salvation, concern my own life and salvation. Here we touch upon a profound aspect of communion: our existence is related to that of others, for better or for worse. Both our sins and our acts of love have a social dimension. ... Acts of charity towards our brothers and sisters ... (are) rooted in this common belonging.

It’s a powerful idea ... we’re all in this life (and the next) together ... and it bears further consideration.

But prior to that “horizontal” dimension, that union with one another which is the root of our charity toward one another, there is a “vertical” dimension by which we are united with God. This, too, is the foundation of our charity, and this divine-human fellowship happens, as it were, by way of the Eucharist. It is the Eucharist

- in which divine charity is enacted
- through which charity is directly encountered, and
- by which our charity is enabled
These are the three aspects of the Eucharist & Charity that I’d like to explore with you today. And the guide to our exploration will be none other than ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622).

As a saint, Francis de Sales was certainly devoted to the Eucharist. Consider the testimony of St. Jane de Chantal at his cause for canonization:

*it was easy to see how deep was his reverence in the presence of God. ... Especially at the moment of Consecration and Communion the peaceful radiance of his countenance filled every heart with emotion. Indeed this Divine Sacrament was his true life and strength and in this action he appeared like a man wholly absorbed in God.*

As a Doctor of the Church, Francis de Sales has left us a slew of writings about the Eucharist, including:

- 11 sermons
- 3 chapters in Introduction to the Devout Life
- 3 short treatises
- personal note, poem!
- 106 references

Fear not ... we won’t cover all of that! In fact, given the Counter-Reformation period in which he lived and worked, much of his writing about the Eucharist is in the form of doctrinal debates. But our concern here is his spiritual teaching ... in the hope that what he says about this Blessed Sacrament will help each of you on your Lenten journey toward renewed charity.

So, let us begin with considering how ...

## I. The Eucharist ENACTS Charity

For Francis de Sales, the Eucharist encapsulates the entire Gospel story of salvation. In this perspective, the Eucharist is not just a sacrament, but the dynamic “putting into action” of divine love. Elsewhere I have written about this in terms of “theopoetics” – a fancy word for saying, in a sense, that the Eucharist is poetry in motion, that it is an event or happening, and what happens in the Eucharist is, though in different form, what is happening in the Gospel. Consider just these few elements of the story:

“kenosis”

The good news of salvation begins with the kenosis of the Word of God become flesh. This is Paul’s term for “emptying” when God deigns to become human. This is John’s image for the journey of the Logos, the “word become flesh.”

For St. Francis de Sales, this kenosis, or act of self-abandonment, is mirrored in the Eucharist. In one of his letters, he points out that in both mysteries we find Jesus “who, in order to unite
himself to us, abandoned and gently abased himself, even to rendering himself food and nourishment for us who are the nutriment and food of worms.” (OEA XVIII:400)

Granted, it’s not the most appealing of images, but it’s true! And it highlights the immense gap between us and God. We who end up as but the ashes we wore a few days ago are fed by God’s very self. Astounding!

Incarnation

That kenosis happens when God is incarnate by the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. For Francis de Sales, this Incarnation is a joyous mystery also mirrored in the Eucharist. He says:

In imitation of (Mary) this same contentment may be attained by those who have received Holy Communion and with sure faith feel that which “neither flesh nor blood” but the heavenly Father has revealed to them. They know that their Savior in body and soul is present with a most real presence in their body and their soul in this most adorable sacrament. (TLG VI:7).

We may not have the immense honor of giving birth to God in the flesh that Mary did, but we share a similar experience of having Jesus within us … and our Christian life is a call to “give birth” to the Savior again in our lives.

Passion

At the other end of the Gospel story is the ultimate sign of salvation – the tree of love that is Mt. Calvary.

In a work entitled “Defense of the Standard of the Cross,” Francis de Sales claims that the crucifixion and the Eucharist both speak of Jesus’ passion, “for the Eucharist represents it principally on account of the total identity of the one who is offered there and of him who was offered on the cross, who is none other than Jesus Christ.” (OEA II:216)

Once again, the Eucharist puts charity in action, because it is, really, the same actor, even though – and thankfully – the Eucharist enacts that divine sacrifice in an unbloody manner.

Resurrection

And, as we well know, the Passion of Jesus reaches its new and eternal climax in the Resurrection. Remember with what difficulty the early disciples struggled to comprehend what they were seeing, for this mystery of new life is just that … new, novel, never before experienced.

In his notes for a sermon on the Real Presence, Francis writes about the dimension of imperceptibility that the Eucharist shares with this mystery: “[Jesus] will come out of the sepulchre really but in an invisible manner, whereas the angel, on the contrary, will be visibly dressed in white. What marvelous exchange! One will see a spirit; one will not be able to see a
body. In the same way, on [Easter] Monday, you will see Christ the pilgrim making a journey without being recognized."

So, too, with the Eucharist. We may not see it, as we perceive material reality, but is living presence is no less real. “The body of Christ is thus in the Eucharist, and not only his body, but also his blood, his living and vivifying soul and his divinity.” (Sermons, Advent & Christmas, p. 107)

There are other parallels with the Gospel that Francis de Sales draws, but that should suffice to help us realize that the Eucharist enacts the very story of divine charity that is the Good News of salvation. So, let us now shift to the present and consider, secondly, that

**II. Through the Eucharist We ENCOUNTER Charity**

This encounter takes place whenever we receive Holy Communion. Unfortunately, though, the brevity of that event masks the enormity of what is taking place. So, with the aid of our Doctor of the Church, I’d like to suggest that we learn to make a P.A.C.T. with God during the liturgy. That’s an acronym for the Salesian method by which we can receive Communion at Mass even more beneficially.

*Preparation*

Let’s face it. Receiving Communion is not hard to do. It doesn’t need extensive preparation. In fact, it can be quite routine: just stick out your tongue or hand (at the appropriate time!) and you get it, in the material sense.

But to "get it" in the spiritual sense, does require paying attention. Why? Because, as Francis de Sales reminds us, “we have to approach the Sacraments with great attention, just as much because of their sublime action as of what each Sacrament requires from us.” (Spiritual Conferences, 3)

To participate fully in this sacrament, and thus to be united with God by means of it, the first step is to prepare … by simply making ourselves aware of what’s happening in this action. Our saint reminds us: “you cannot consider our Savior in an action more full of love or more tender than this. In it he abases himself, if we may so express it, and changes himself into food, so that he may penetrate our souls and united himself most intimately to the heart and body of the faithful.” (IDL II:21)

This is why Francis exhorts us that “when we go to Communion we should have a heart filled with fervent love.” It is also why he believes that “the most important preparation we should make for the reception of the Sacraments is the total abandonment of ourselves to God’s will, submitting without any reserve our will and all our affections to God’s dominion.” In this way, we will be able to “receive through love that which Love alone caused to be given to [us].” (IDL II:21)
Aspiration

Still, that moment in which we encounter love is a fleeting one; it takes just a quick swallow, a short turn, and we’re walking away.

To transform this ordinary, and sometimes perfunctory, routine into a true encounter, St. Francis de Sales counsels the use of brief aspirations to help us focus on what is happening in the moment. Interestingly, he says this could be mental or vocal -- in the silence of the mind or actually said. (But please don’t be blurting out stuff ... you’ll just confuse the person distributing Communion!).

So, for example, he says:

At the moment of communion, they could use some mental or vocal aspirations, such as that of St. Francis: **Who am I, Lord, and who are you?** or perhaps that of St. Elizabeth: **Where does this blessing come from — that my Lord should come to me?** (Luke 1:43) or that of St. John the Evangelist: **Yes, come, Lord Jesus.** (Revelation 22:20)

Whatever works for you, the key here is to acknowledge what is truly happening ... an encounter with the Lord. (And that, by the way, is the reason why we are to make a sign of reverence -- a bow of the head -- after the priest says “the Body of Christ.” It’s also what is incorporated in that one word response on our part: “Amen.”)

Communication

But the encounter isn’t over yet, though it seems to pass quickly. Digestion doesn't take long. The taste doesn't linger.

Because it is not sensible, it takes some doing on our part to appreciate the real presence of God now within us. For this reason, St. Francis de Sales counsels us to "summon" our "faculties and senses" to pay attention to what has transpired. Having considered that this really is our God, and having experienced that this God really has come (in)to us, we naturally are moved to thoughts and feelings that correspond to, and follow from, this newfound union.

And when we receive this divine Love with the whole of our being -- in mind and heart and soul -- our encounter can become a privileged means of communicating, affectively and effectively, with God. On the one hand, this encounter should generate an affective response on our part. In one of his sermons, St. Francis de Sales says: **“Certainly we ought to make a thousand adorations each day to this divine Sacrament in thanksgiving for the love with which God dwells among us.”** (Sermons, Advent & Christmas, 107) And that love is decidedly personal. As our saint explains elsewhere: **“After you have received him, excite your heart to do homage to the King of salvation. Converse with him concerning your inmost concerns. Reflect that he is within you and has come there for your happiness.”** (IDL II:21)
Thanksgiving

Finally, and quite simply, our P.A.C.T. concludes with an act of Thanksgiving, “for this heavenly bread does not receive life from the one who eats it, but gives it to him absolutely, and changes it in him.” (OEA VII:183-184) We’ve been given a gift. It’s only right that we say “thank you”!

There you have it: prepare, aspire, communicate, give thanks. Hopefully, you can get all of that in before the second collection!

Nevertheless, our encounter with the charity that is enacted in the Eucharist doesn’t end there ... although my talk here will soon end! In this last part, we come full circle back to the pope’s Lenten message to see that ...

III. The Eucharist ENABLES Charity

As I suggested at the beginning, the foundation to the Pope’s claim that charity has a social dimension based on our ecclesial fellowship is the realization of our first being united with God in the divine-human fellowship that the Eucharist makes possible.

For St. Francis de Sales, this fellowship – with God and with one another – is the very purpose of the Gospel and of the Sacrament. In the words of one of his own sermons for Lent, Francis says:

To what extent did the greatness of God lower itself for each one of us, and to what extent does He wish to exalt us? To unite us so perfectly with Himself as to make us one same thing with Him. Our Lord did this to teach us that (just) as we are all loved with (the) one same love by which He embraces us all in his Most Holy Sacrament, so He wishes us all to love one another with that same love, a love which tends toward union, but a union greater and more perfect than can be conceived.

(So, let me note here, the Eucharistic liturgy is something much more than a meal of merely human fellowship ... which, I think, is the overriding purpose for the changes in the words that we use, and are still getting used to!)

The saintly preacher continues: We are all nourished with the same bread, this heavenly Bread, the divine Eucharist. The eating of it, called Communion, represents to us the common union that we ought to have together; without this union we would not be worthy of bearing the name of “children of God,” since we would not be obedient to Him. (Sermons, Lent, p. 95)

Francis de Sales was certainly obedient to him in this regard ... that’s why we call him a saint! And this saint’s abiding claim as a Doctor of the Church is that each and every one of us is also called to be a saint. Thus, for each and every one of us, the Eucharist is the key means of fulfilling that universal call to holiness.

Looking back on his own calling and the centrality of the Eucharist in his own life, St. Francis de Sales wrote in a letter about four ways that the Eucharist can affect us:
“Experience has made me realize in my twenty-five years of serving souls the all-powerful virtue of this Divine Sacrament, to strengthen hearts in good, exempt them from evil, console them, and in a word make them God-like in this world if it be frequented with faith, purity and devotion” (Letters to Persons in the World, p. 204).

First, the Eucharist strengthen(s) hearts ... how can we not be refreshed, revived, reinvigorated knowing that God is with us, indeed within us. The eternal Good present in us, strengthens us to do good in turn.

Second, the Eucharist exempt(s) from evil ... the all-good God certainly doesn’t share space with what is not good! So, even though our bad tendencies or inclinations remain with us and at times come to the surface in how we act, nevertheless God’s love is so much greater, so much more powerful, so much more enduring.

Pondering this truth, the Eucharist will, thirdly, be consoling to us. God demands nothing of us in order to receive Communion, other than that we be properly disposed, with faith, purity and devotion. As the memorial of His sacrifice of mercy for the salvation of the world, the Eucharist dispenses that mercy to us yet again. And once again, in the Eucharist, Jesus is who He is ... Emmanuel or “God with us.”

And when God is with us, we are made God-like in this world ... we carry the Savior within us to the world outside of Church that awaits us, a world which, as the Holy Father is right to point out, is ever more in need our charity.

**Conclusion**

That, then, is my hope for you during this Lenten season ... that you learn, yet again, how the Lord Jesus enacts His divine charity in this Blessed Sacrament, how we are so incredibly blessed to encounter that charity each time we receive Holy Communion, and, because of the grace given to us in the Eucharist, how we might be inspired anew to live that charity in our interactions with one another.

+ May God Be Blessed +