CENTER VALLEY – Each semester in my introductory Theology class, I take a rather informal survey of attitudes toward the liturgy. I ask my students to rate their experience on a scale that ranges from “dreadfully boring” to “joyously uplifting.” The Spring survey took place the day before the promulgation of *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, the most recent encyclical letter of Pope John Paul II “on the Eucharist and its relationship to the Church.”

For the first time in fifteen years, the majority chose “uplifting” to characterize their experience. In fact, all but one of my students rated the liturgy positively (and the one who did not hastened to add that she still goes to Church every week).

While this is good news, and hopefully the beginning of a strong trend, an examination of young people’s opinions reveals a way of thinking that suggests why the Holy Father needed to write this letter. Their analysis, whether positive or negative, focuses on what we do during the liturgy: the preaching, the singing, the community, and the surroundings. But what I try to teach them is that liturgy is best understood, and therefore experienced in a most worthwhile way, when we consider not the celebration of the event but the event being celebrated. Rhetorical skills, melodic harmony, fraternal intimacy, inspirational aesthetics – each of these is valuable. But what the Eucharist is depends on none of these.

Instead, the Holy Father invites us to that “profound amazement and gratitude” that necessarily accompany the realization that in the Eucharist we experience “a truly enormous ‘capacity’ which embraces all of history as the recipient of the grace of redemption” (no. 5). The Eucharist is “the Church’s treasure, the heart of the world, the pledge of the fulfillment for which each man and woman, even unconsciously, yearns” (no. 59). It remains so no matter how skillful (or not) our human talents.

That we might better appreciate this profound mystery is the reason for the pope’s latest writing. In this encyclical – by comparison a relatively short one and addressed not to all people but to
those within the Church – John Paul II presents a thorough summary of the theology of this sacrament, and its implications, in contrast to any “ambiguity and depreciation” that may linger.

In each of five chapters – on the mystery of our faith, the foundation of the Church, the source of ecclesial communion, the reason for dignified celebrations, and the Eucharistic attitude embodied in the Blessed Virgin Mary – the Holy Father invites us to see in this sacrament, as he has seen in 50 years as a priest and 25 as pope, the center of our lives. Responding to that invitation when we receive the Eucharist, we say “Amen” (not “thank you” or “God be praised”). We affirm, in a way analogous to Mary’s response to the angelic annunciation, that “the same Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, becomes present in his full humanity and divinity under the signs of bread and wine” (no. 55).

Press reports about this encyclical fail to appreciate both the profundity of the Eucharistic mystery and the character of the pope’s writing. Secular news agencies highlight how the divorced are prohibited from receiving the Eucharist (a state in life not even mentioned in the text!), or decry the supposed ecumenical setbacks occasioned by this letter (whereas the text highlights the unifying power of the Eucharist and the continuing desire for true and full communion).

The appeal of this encyclical is not, ultimately, to be found in its reiteration of Catholic catechesis. Rather, what comes across powerfully, especially in the introduction and conclusion, is the faith of the person who wrote it. The pope’s grasp of the radiant mystery that is the Eucharist becomes, through these words, an expression of soulful desire and heartfelt yearning for that union with God to which each of us is called and by which each of us is fulfilled.

In the sufferings of his own life, this shepherd of souls has known the paschal mystery. In numerous and varied celebrations of the Eucharist around the world, he has witnessed “a powerful experience of it universal and ... cosmic character” (no. 8). Now he writes about it, that he might share this experience with fellow believers. It is his call to our communion: with God, with him, and with one another.

This encyclical has been promulgated as a call to a renewed vision of “the most precious possession which the Church can have in her journey through history” (no. 9). That call is spoken to the entire Church. It can only be answered by each of us, personally, and must be answered by all of us, in every parish in which we celebrate the life-giving event of the Eucharist.

Some now wonder whether this fourteenth encyclical will be the pope’s last. Chronologically, it may well be, as the Holy Father nears the end of an admittedly indefatigable life and pastoral work. Programmatically, it most certainly is. For in this authoritative letter we find the climax of John Paul II’s theological corpus. The Eucharist is the Trinitarian union of human redeemer, merciful Father, and life-giving Spirit shared with us. The Eucharist is the epitome of human work and social concern, wherein the Lord makes “his presence in meal and sacrifice the promise of a humanity renewed by his love” (no. 20). The Eucharist gives splendor to the truth of our human vocation to union with God in eternity, a truth known by reason and celebrated in faith.
We all want our liturgical experience to be joyously uplifting. In *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* we find the way to that experience, a proven path trod by the world’s foremost evangelist.

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