

The Eucharistic Heart of the Priest

Michael A. Caridi

In this article Fr. Michael A. Caridi give us a reflection on the primordial bond and intrinsic link between the Eucharist and the Priesthood.

Shortly after being named Archbishop of Saigon in 1975, Francois-Xavier Nguyen van Thuan was arrested by the Communist authorities and imprisoned for the next thirteen years. In his account, *Five Loaves and Two Fish*, Cardinal Thuan tells of offering clandestine Masses while in prison, using meager amounts of bread and wine that had been smuggled in. After Mass, he would fashion a tiny container from the paper of cigarette boxes in which to reserve the Blessed Sacrament for later adoration. He would secretly carry the makeshift tabernacle with the consecrated Host within the breast pocket of his shirt, close to his heart.

A priestly dignity

While, over the course of those thirteen years in prison, the Communists time and again relentlessly tried to break the Cardinal and strip him of his emotional, spiritual and moral dignity, they couldn't. Why? Because his was a priestly dignity, a dignity not based upon comfort, position, or honor, but on the fact that Jesus Christ is always close to the priest's heart – an intense union stemming primarily from his ability to make Jesus present in the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist, a bond that offers the priest the necessary strength to endure all the demands his vocation implies.

Simply put, Cardinal Thuan survived his years of imprisonment because he could find a way to offer Mass, thus keeping Jesus near to his heart.

Earlier this year, on the Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, Pope Benedict XVI inaugurated the 'Year for Priests' in celebration of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Saint John Vianney, the patron saint for all Catholic priests. The observance of this special year affords Catholics and especially priests the opportunity not only to pray for the sanctification and renewal of priests, but also to reflect upon the dignity of the Priesthood which rests upon the unique and dynamic bond between the priest and the Eucharist.

Simply put, the Eucharist is the unparalleled Presence of Christ. The Eucharist is Jesus! As Catholics, we base this belief on the very words of our Lord at His Last Supper: 'Take and eat, this *is* my body – Take and drink, this *is* my blood.' His words on Holy Thursday transformed ordinary bread and wine into His flesh and blood, thus instituting the Most Blessed Sacrament.

Simultaneously, however, the gospels tell us that at the same time Jesus directed His Apostles to eat His body and drink His blood, He also ordered them to, ‘Do this in memory of me.’ It was at this very moment, right in the heart of the first Eucharistic celebration in the Upper Room, that the Priesthood was born. Therefore, there is a primordial bond and intrinsic link between the Eucharist and Priesthood. In a very real sense, the Eucharist is the Priesthood’s reason for being. As the Second Vatican Council put it in its document on the Priesthood, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the Eucharist is ‘the center and root of the whole priestly life.’ (14)

No one made this point more clearly than Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter of 1980, *Domenicae Cena*:

The Eucharist is the principle and central raison d’être of the Sacrament of the Priesthood, which effectively came into being at the moment of the institution of the Eucharist, and together with it. [...] Through our ordination – the celebration of which is linked to the Holy Mass from the very first liturgical evidence – we are united in a singular and exceptional way to the Eucharist. In a certain way we derive from it and exist for it. (2)

The intense and unique bond between the Eucharist and Priesthood has played itself out in the stories of multitudes of priests over the centuries who first received the impulse of a possible call to the Priesthood during the celebration of the Eucharist. As a young boy it was observing our parish priest offer Mass when I first thought that it would be ‘neat’ to do what Father was doing. It was at Mass one Sunday when the Bishop was visiting our parish that he stopped at my family’s pew to encourage my brothers and me to consider the Priesthood.

At the heart of all things

From the time I entered the seminary it was stressed that the Mass was to be the heart of our day, and how often I sat in that chapel imagining what it would be like for me preside at the Eucharist. As my priestly formation drew to its completion, despite the pressure of studying for the looming final exams, how much more time was spent planning the perfect first Mass!

Since my ordination over fifteen years ago, almost every day has begun with the celebration of Mass. Being the custodian of the Eucharist on behalf of the Church, ensuring that the Sacrament is handled and treated with proper reverence and respect, has been an almost constant preoccupation. Indeed, my responsibilities in regard to the Eucharist have formed and directed everything I do as a priest.

It is daily Mass that compels me to prepare homilies, providing the mandate for constant reflection on God’s Word, particularly the gospels. It is during the celebration of the Eucharist where I preach and teach the largest groups of people most effectively and with the greatest level of authority. It is the consecration at Mass and distribution of Holy Communion that unites me in a familial bond with those entrusted to my pastoral care. It is after Mass when I greet and speak with parishioners that they ask me to pray for their petitions and I assure them of my concern. Taking Communion to the homebound most often provides the context for my visitations of these elderly and sick parishioners, who still long to see their priest and be a part of parish life.

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And, finally, it is daily prayer before the Eucharist where I remain united to the one whom I am called to represent, where I seek His guidance and ask His mercy for the times I have failed to be His icon.

In short, while priestly ministry is not limited to Eucharistic matters, the Sacrament of the Eucharist provides the point of departure and focal point for everything we do. Furthermore, the Eucharist serves as the final goal of our ministry, for the Eucharist is Jesus Christ, and the priest exists to bring Jesus to people and to bring people to Him. Nowhere is this mission accomplished more fully than in the Eucharist.

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