

The Eucharist, Source and Model of Self-giving

Manuel Barbiero, SSS

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“Christianity is above all a gift - said Pope Benedict XVI - God gives himself to us, he does not give something, but he gives himself. And this does not happen only at the beginning, at the moment of our conversion. He remains permanently the giver. He is always offering us his gifts. He always precedes us. Therefore, the central act of being Christian is the Eucharist: the gratitude for having been gratified, the joy for the new life he gives us.”¹

This quote from Pope Benedict XVI outlines the fundamental lines of this contribution. Our entire human existence is placed under the sign of gift.

God is the giver, the originator of every gift (“The best gifts, the perfect gifts, all come from above; they come down from the Father of lights”, James 1:17). He gives himself to us especially through his Son, Jesus Christ. Everything in the life of Jesus Christ is an expression of the Father's gift. At the summit of his life, Jesus offered us the gift of his Body and Blood, the gift of all himself in the sacrament of the Eucharist. And he leads us to follow him, calling us to be a gift for others, to offer all of ourselves, our lives, for others.

¹ Benedict XVI, *Homily at the Lord's Supper*, March 20, 2008. In the Apostolic Exhortation, the fruit of the Synod on the Eucharist, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “The first reality of the Eucharistic faith is the very mystery of God, Trinitarian love. In the dialogue between Jesus and Nicodemus, we find a luminous expression in this regard: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish, but will obtain eternal life. For God sent his Son into the world, not to judge the world, but that through him the world might be saved' (Jn 3:16-17). These words show the primary root of God's gift”, SCa 7.

Jesus Christ: a life marked by gift

Jesus Christ is all love, he is all gift, said Saint Pierre-Julien Eymard;² he is the gift of the Father to humanity; he is the gift in person; he is only “gift”. “His presence on earth and his links with the members of the church are expressed in this little word.”³

If we examine the occurrence of the verb “to give” in the gospel of Saint John,⁴ we notice that it is massively used in relation to Jesus who is presented as the “gift” of God par excellence; but also Jesus gives and receives gifts; moreover, the Father is often involved in this relationship.

Jesus Christ, in his dialogue with Nicodemus, affirms that he is the very gift of God, he defines himself as a gift by claiming his status as a gift given by the Father.

It is the Father who gives. He is the origin of the gift: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).⁵

In his encounter with the woman of Samaria, Jesus presents himself as the one who gives living water. God is not a God who asks, but a God who gives. “If you knew the gift of God”, the Lord said to the Samaritan woman, “and who it is who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water” (Jn 4:10).

² Cf. Saint Pierre-Julien Eymard, *Complete Works*, ed. Centro Eucaristico - Nouvelle Cité 2008, PO 30,7.

³ Alain Mattheeuws, *The “gift of self” opens the door to the spouses’ hearts*, in NRT 142 (2020), p. 45.

⁴ In the New Testament we have 377 times the verb “to give” (in Greek “didomi”).

⁵ Saint Pierre-Julien Eymard wrote: “God loved us and gave us all that we have and all that we are. The Father gave his Son. The Son gave himself. The Holy Spirit has become our habitual sanctifier”, *Complete Works*, NR 44, 102. Pope Francis wrote, “In the gift there is the reflection of God’s love, which culminates in the incarnation of the Son Jesus and in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit”, *Message for World Day of the Sick* 2019.

The gift of Jesus, for the one who receives it, does not remain inactive, but sets in motion a dynamic of gift that is repeated over and over again: “Whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst again; and the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water springing up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14).⁶

After the story of the multiplication of the loaves, in the long speech of Jesus in Capernaum, it is a question of the gift of food that remains until eternal life. Jesus announces the gift of the bread from heaven, the true bread, as opposed to the manna. It is a bread given by God, a bread that gives life.⁷

Not only must the bread be given, but we must also be given by the Father to the Son (cf. Jn 6:37, 39, 65). The Father gives men to his Son (“All those whom the Father gives me will come to me”, Jn 6:37), in order to save them (“This is the will of the One who sent me: that I lose none of those whom he has given me, but raise them up on the last day” Jn 6:39).

The bread that Jesus gives is himself, it is his flesh “given for the life of the world” (Jn 6:51).⁸ It is not enough, therefore, to want to receive the life that Christ gives; it is necessary to understand that Christ is not simply the intermediary between God and men, but that he himself is the content of this gift.

Christ, therefore, is not on the margins of faith. He is the very content of it and that is why we must eat this bread given by the Father: the flesh of the Son of Man.

⁶ Jean-Luc Marion (1946 - living), French philosopher and historian, spoke about the cascade effect: “The gift is received only to be, again, given. (...) The gift can be received only if it is given, otherwise it would cease to deserve its name”, J.-L. Marion, *L'idole et la distance*, éd. Grasset et Fasquelle, 1977.

⁷ “In the wilderness our ancestors ate manna; as the scripture says, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. Jesus said to them, Amen, amen, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven, but my Father who gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world” (Jn 6:31-33).

⁸ At the beginning of his gospel, the prologue, Saint John wrote: “And the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14).

In chapter 10 of Saint John's gospel we find a strong insistence on the gift that Jesus makes of his life. He, the good shepherd, the true shepherd, "gives his life for his sheep" (Jn 10:11 and 15); he "gives them eternal life" (Jn 10:28).

This gift of life is an act that Jesus does in complete freedom and at the same time in obedience to the Father's command, in an exchange of love between himself and the Father. Jesus says: "This is why the Father loves me: because I lay down my life, that I may receive it again. No one can take it from me; I give it of myself. I have the power to give it, I also have the power to receive it again: this is the commandment I received from my Father" (Jn 10:17-18).

The gift that Jesus makes of himself is total and becomes the expression of the greatest love, which is also the only love. In this dynamic of giving, Jesus exposes himself to the possibility of being refused; and in chapter 13 of Saint John's gospel this possibility becomes a dramatic reality.

The whole chapter is about giving. Jesus is aware that the Father "has given everything (didomi / to give) into his hands", so everything he gives corresponds to the gift that the Father has given him, that is: everything (cf. Jn 13:3).

The gift that Jesus gives is a gift that increases more and more. We have, first of all, the gift of example at the moment of the washing of the feet: "I have given you an example so that you too may do as I have done for you" (Jn 13:15). Then we have the gift of the morsel to Judas: "Jesus answered him, He is the one to whom I will give the morsel that I will dip in the dish. He dipped the morsel and gave it to Judas, son of Simon Iscariot" (Jn 13:26). Finally, we have the gift of the new commandment, the gift of mutual love: "A new commandment I give you, that you love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another" (Jn 13:34).

The washing of the feet, from the perspective of betrayal, the gift of example, the gift of the bite to Judas, who acts as an enemy, culminate in the gift of love, the gift of a new commandment, which implies reciprocity ("one and another"), based ("as") on Jesus' practice and

love for his own. All these gifts are intended to enable the disciples to love like Jesus, with the same strength, intensity and depth.

Chapter 17 of Saint John's gospel contains an accumulation of gifts.⁹ The Father gave the Son a work to do. For this he gave him all power. The Father gave his Son “power over every creature of the flesh” (Jn 17:2); he also gave “eternal life” (Jn 17:2).

The disciples, but also men in general, are the Father's gift to his Son (“all those whom you have given him”, Jn 17:2, 24; “I have manifested your name to the men whom you have taken from the world to give to me” Jn 17:6).

The Son has received from the Father the gift of his “name” (Jn 17:11,12), of his words (Jn 17:8,14) and of his glory (Jn 17:22,24). In turn, he gives all these gifts to his disciples (“Now they have recognized that everything you have given me is from you, for I have given them the words you gave me: they have received them, and they have truly recognized that I came from you, and they have believed that you sent me”, Jn 17:7-8).

The Father gives friends to his Son and the Son gives his life for those who are given to him. The act of giving is not trivial, secondary or anecdotal; it is fundamentally a new creation; to give is to create a new mode of relationship.

As we conclude this journey through Saint John's gospel, we can see that the gift is related to several elements: water, bread, word, life, love, people. All this shows the vital force of the gift that Jesus is for all humanity.

“On the night he was betrayed, the Lord Jesus took bread...”

At the summit of his life, lived in the total gift of himself, Jesus Christ gives us the Eucharist.¹⁰ It is like a summary of his whole life, the

⁹ In the 26 verses of this chapter, the verb “to give” occurs at least 17 times.

¹⁰ Saint Peter Julien Eymard: “And this is the last action of Our Lord. He had given himself and could do nothing more, he was no longer his, but ours”, April 9, 1868, *Œuvres Complètes*, PP 56,3.

confirmation of all that he was, in other words, it is like “the signature of Christ”.¹¹

To understand the gift that Christ has given us, we must recall the context of the Last Supper.

Saint Paul, who first gave us the account of the institution of the Eucharist, expresses it succinctly but clearly: “The night he was betrayed...” (1 Cor 11:23).¹² The context is dark, full of threats.

That night, Jesus, like an object, is handed over by Judas to the high priests. The latter hand him over to Pilate, Pilate in turn hands him over to the soldiers, and finally Jesus is handed over to death on the cross.

Jesus finds himself isolated in front of the ignominious death that is coming for him. The arrest, the trial, the condemnation and the death show that an inextricable network of violence exists around him and because of him: physical violence, political and judicial violence, psychological violence. Jesus turned this inescapable situation of violence and death around. He turned his death into an act of freedom: he is handed over, but at the same time he gives himself, he is given and at the same time he gives himself.¹³

In this context the gesture that Jesus invents takes on a paradoxical relief, it is astonishing: he takes the bread, he gives thanks, he breaks it and he gives it. He does the same with the cup filled with wine. He makes the total gift of his life, he shows us the love of the Father and his way of acting. By the words he pronounces, Jesus makes explicit the meaning of his death for his disciples and for the world.

Jesus offers everything to God to transform it into a gift, the only way to transform the negative and the bad. In a great act of love, Jesus transforms all the atrocity of the cross into a gift.

¹¹ Etienne Grieu, *Pertinence sociale et politique de l'Eucharistie*, dans *Études*, novembre 2012 – n. 4175, p. 499.

¹² The church does not want to forget this context and has taken up this passage of Saint Paul in the Eucharistic Prayer III.

¹³ We can relate the verb “to deliver” with the verb “to give”, almost as synonyms. The perspective of gift, found in Saint Paul's “*exinanivit*”, is translated in the Eucharistic celebration by the participles “delivered” and “poured”, in relation to body and blood. cf. Frédérique Poulet, *Célébrer l'Eucharistie après Auschwitz*, ed. Cerf, Paris 2015, p. 309.

The power of God's gift takes the Eucharistic form of bread and wine. The Eucharist is the place where the gift that Jesus Christ made of himself continues to be real and effective for all humanity.¹⁴

When Jesus says: "This is my body and I give it to you", he transmits the gift that he is: he, his being, his person, are the gift of the Father. Jesus gives us the gift of his body. The body is the self, the history, the life. What Jesus gives is his humanity, with its possibilities and its limits.

The bread and the cup of wine express the total gift of Jesus, his life given for us. Jesus' existence was an existence lived for man. Throughout his life, he lived this gift. From the incarnation to the cross, Jesus is a gift, he lives the gift of himself, he is the Father's gift of love to humanity.

When Jesus gives himself to us, he does not weigh what he gives, he gives everything. The gift speaks to us of a love without measure.¹⁵

The Eucharist is the *anamnesis* of Christ's gift.¹⁶ Through the elements of bread and wine, the Eucharist reminds us that the gift is made in its

¹⁴ "The bread I will give is my flesh, given that the world may have life" (Jn 6:51). With these words, the Lord reveals the true meaning of the gift of his own life for all people, showing us also the deep compassion he has for every person (...) Every Eucharistic celebration sacramentally actualizes the gift that Jesus made of his life on the cross for us and for the whole world. At the same time, in the Eucharist, Jesus makes us witnesses of God's compassion for each of our brothers and sisters. Thus, around the Eucharistic mystery is born the service of charity towards one's neighbor (...) in the people I approach, I recognize brothers and sisters for whom the Lord gave his life, loving them 'to the end' (Jn 13:1)", SCa 88.

¹⁵ The Son of God, Saint Paul writes, "loved me and gave himself up for me" (Gal 2:20). "Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, offering himself as a sacrifice to God as a sweet-smelling fragrance" (Eph 5:2).

¹⁶ "The sacrament of love, the Holy Eucharist is the gift that Jesus Christ makes of himself, revealing to us the infinite love of God for every person. In this admirable sacrament, the 'greatest' love is manifested, the love that impels one to 'lay down one's life for one's friends' (Jn 15:13). In fact, Jesus "loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). With this expression, the Evangelist introduces the gesture of infinite humility accomplished by Jesus: before dying for us on the cross, he tied a cloth around his waist and washed the feet of his disciples. In the same way, in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus continues to love us 'to the end', to the point of giving his body and blood", SCa 1.

entirety, without repentance and without return. The Eucharist is the gift of someone who has committed himself entirely to his gesture, to the point that the objects Jesus offers are presented as his body and blood. It is the being of Jesus in all its thickness (desire, relational field, memory, history, wounds). Jesus opens a way for us. He allows himself to be reduced to the infra-human, where all the movements of refusal of God and of closure lead humanity; but, accepting to be brought back to this, it is our zones already abandoned to death that he comes to call to life. Inscribed in him, we are welcomed into his Passover, into his wake, and we make the passage with him, who is already on the side of victory. New relationships are made possible. The Eucharist promotes a dynamic of welcoming life as a gift beyond our own closures, as well as the possibility of responding to this gift. For us it is a question of being worked and of allowing ourselves to be worked by the logic that unfolds when we are truly present to what is given in the celebration of the Eucharist.¹⁷

“The love that led him to die for us, wrote Romano Guardini, is the same love that led him to give himself to us as food. He was not content to give us his gifts, his words, his advice, but he even gave himself. You would have to ask a woman, a mother, a lover to find someone capable of understanding this need to give not something, but to give oneself. To give oneself with all one's being. Not only the spirit, not only the fidelity, but his body and his soul, his flesh and his blood: everything. Without doubt, it is the ultimate love to want to feed another with what one is. And the Lord gave himself up to death in order to enter, through his resurrection, into that state in which he wanted to give himself to all and at all times.”¹⁸

The Eucharist is the gift and the giver

“Jesus, in the Eucharist, does not give ‘something’ but gives himself; he offers his body and he pours out his blood. In this way, he gives the

¹⁷ Cf. Etienne Grief, *Pertinence sociale et politique de l'Eucharistie*, dans *Études*, novembre 2012 – n. 4175, p. 500-508.

¹⁸ Romano Guardini, *Jésus-Christ*, éd. Guadarrama, Madrid 1960, p. 123.

totality of his existence, revealing the original source of this love. He is the eternal Son given for us by the Father” (SCa 7).

Jesus can distribute his body, because he really gives himself. In the Eucharist the gift has a unique aspect. “The Eucharist, more than the gift, is the giver”, wrote Father Eymard;¹⁹ indeed, “The heart, the love of Jesus is not content with the gift, it gives the giver.”²⁰ In the Eucharist we have the gift and the giver. The giver comes to us as a gift and the gift is the very One who gives.²¹

The broken bread and the poured wine of the Eucharistic sacrament reveal the giver: Christ; who in turn, in his kenosis, reveals the first giver (the one who is at the origin of everything): the Father. This is the characteristic of God. God does not give something, he gives himself, he can only give the Love that he is. If he gives himself in different ways, these are only different manifestations of a Love that is unique.

In the Eucharist, Christ gives himself entirely.

“The church can celebrate and adore the mystery of Christ present in the Eucharist precisely because Christ himself gave himself first to her in the Sacrifice of the Cross. The church's ability to 'do' the Eucharist is completely rooted in Christ's offering of himself to her. Here too we discover a convincing aspect of Saint John's formula: “He loved us first” (1 Jn 4:19). Thus, in every celebration, we too confess the primacy of Christ's gift. The causal influence of the Eucharist at the origin of the church ultimately reveals the anteriority not only chronologically but also ontologically of the fact that he loved

¹⁹ Eymard, *Œuvres Complètes*, PG 279, 3.

²⁰ Eymard, *Œuvres Complètes*, PO 7, 15.

²¹ “The sacrament of love, the Holy Eucharist is the gift that Jesus Christ makes of himself, revealing to us the infinite love of God for every person. In this admirable sacrament, the ‘greatest’ love is manifested, the love that impels one to ‘lay down one's life for one's friends’ (Jn 15:13). In fact, Jesus “loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1). With this expression, the Evangelist introduces the gesture of infinite humility accomplished by Jesus: before dying for us on the cross, he tied a cloth around his waist and washed the feet of his disciples. In the same way, in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus continues to love us ‘to the end’, to the point of giving his body and blood”, SCa, 1.

us ‘first’. He is for all eternity the one who loves us first” (SCa, 14).

The Eucharist has all the qualities of a true gift.

It is a free, unselfish, sincere gift, made without reservation, without calculation;²² it is a concrete and incarnate gift;²³ it is a total and eternal gift, a complete and perpetual gift;²⁴ it is a gift that is always available, to which we can have access; it is a gift that gives us life;²⁵ it is a gift that is offered as nourishment, it is a gift that can be eaten, that builds relationships.²⁶

A life lived in the gift of self

The Second Vatican Council affirmed the link between the human person and his or her fulfillment through the gift of self: “Humanity, the only creature on earth whom God willed for his own sake, can fully find himself only through the selfless gift of himself” (GS 24).²⁷ This

²² Jesus does not look at whether the people he gives himself to are worthy or not, what is their moral situation or their intellectual capacity and understanding. His act of love is free, expecting nothing in return. “Jesus Christ (...) communicates to us in the Eucharistic gift the divine life itself. It is an absolutely free gift.” SCa, 8.

²³ Jesus did not give his thoughts, but his being, himself. What Jesus gives us, in the bread and wine, is his concrete existence.

²⁴ In the Eucharist, Jesus is fully there, with all his love and all his life, for all men and women, all of it for each and every one. He gives himself to the end, to the point of abandonment.

²⁵ In the Eucharist we have the life of God, the life of the Trinity, which takes us totally and makes us enter into the new life beyond death. “In the bread and wine, under the appearances of which Christ gives himself to us at the Passover meal (cf. Lk 22:14-20; 1 Cor 11:23-26), it is the whole divine life that reaches us and participates in us in the form of the Sacrament.” SCa, 8.

²⁶ In the Eucharist, Jesus becomes bread to penetrate all, to ‘become one’ with all. The gift of the Eucharist is accessible to all, and all can learn to give and receive, to give and welcome. The Eucharist, which makes us “one body” (cf. 1 Cor 10:16-17; Eph 4:15-16), presents itself as a profound dynamism of reciprocal love, of intimate and profound communion, of unity in a “multiform harmony that attracts”. EG, 117.

²⁷ “Humanity, created in the image of God and for communion with Christ, can only find himself fully through the selfless gift of himself (GS 24). The fulfillment of his

statement shows in an essential way what it means to be human: to give oneself totally and freely.

Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “The human being is made for giving; it is the gift that expresses and realizes his dimension of transcendence.”²⁸

The gift of self is at the summit of the path of human and spiritual maturation of every human person. A path that has as its point of arrival an existence capable of loving with and like Christ, to the point of giving one's life. “He gave his life for us” (1 Jn 3:16), says Saint John.

To follow Christ, to love Christ and to imitate Christ, is to enter into the logic of the gift and the gift that he made of himself. The gift of ourselves orients our life and is the reference point for its construction. We must be aware that a new, paschal freedom is accomplished in the daily gift of ourselves.²⁹ It is man as a free being who finds himself in giving himself. Freedom is indispensable for us to be able to “give ourself”, to become a gift for others.³⁰

Jesus reveals, by his very life and not only by his words, that freedom is accomplished in love, that is, in the gift of self. Jesus who said: “There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for those one loves” (Jn 15:13) walks freely towards his Passion and, in obedience to the Father, he gives his life on the Cross for all (cf. Phil 2:6-11).

person passes through this gift of himself which means openness to the other, acceptance and respect for life”, *The Eucharist, Gift of God for the Life of the World*, Basic Theological Document for the International Eucharistic Congress of Quebec City, June 2008. The gift has been a central concept in the thinking of John Paul II, cf. Pascal Ide, *A Theology of the Gift*. Les occurrences de *Gaudium et spes*, 24 § 3 chez Jean Paul II, in *Anthropotes*, 17/1 (2001), pp. 149-178. Pope Francis has taken up this idea in his encyclical *Fratelli tutti* (FT): “A human being is made in such a way that they can only realize themselves, develop themselves and reach their fullness through the selfless gift of themselves. We cannot even come to recognize our own truth except in the encounter with others.” FT, 87.

²⁸ Benedict XVI, *Love in Truth*, 34.

²⁹ Final Document of the XV Ordinary General Assembly on *Youth, Faith and Vocational Discernment*, 2018, 76.

³⁰ John Paul II wrote: “Freedom is accomplished in love, that is, in the gift of self”, *Veritatis Splendor*, 87.

Contemplation of Jesus crucified is therefore the royal road on which the church must advance every day if she wants to understand the full meaning of freedom: the gift of self in the service of God and of her brothers and sisters. And communion with the crucified and risen Lord is the inexhaustible source from which the church draws unceasingly to live freely, to give herself and to serve.³¹

The Eucharist makes us meet Christ, puts us in direct contact with his love, and makes us capable in turn of loving as Christ loves us, to the extreme of charity (cf. Jn 13:1). The grace of the Eucharist is intended to lead the Christian to the perfection of love: to the gift of self.³² The Eucharist leads us to the full realization of ourselves because it makes us enter into the logic of giving and teaches us to give ourselves.

a) *The Eucharist fascinates us, attracts us and makes us enter into the logic of giving*

The celebration of the Eucharist puts us in direct contact with the depth of the love of Jesus Christ and, through his gift in bread and wine, with the love of the Trinity. As Benedict XVI has said:

“In the liturgy the Paschal Mystery shines forth, through which Christ himself draws us to himself and calls us to communion. (...) the truth of God's love, manifested in Christ, reaches out to us, fascinates us and carries us away, drawing us out of ourselves and towards our true vocation: love” (SCa, 35).

Pope Francis, in his apostolic letter *Desiderio Desideravi* (DD),³³ insists on the dimension of wonder. He invites us to allow ourselves to be attracted, fascinated by the gift of Christ in the Eucharist. He wrote: “The disproportion between the immensity of the gift and the smallness of the recipient is infinite and cannot fail to surprise us” (DD, 3).

³¹ Cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*. 87.

³² The gift of self is love in the full sense of the word. To truly love is to give oneself. Our freedom is accomplished in love, that is, in the gift of self.

³³ Francis, *Desiderio Desideravi* (DD), apostolic letter, June 29, 2022.

At the Last Supper, “no one had earned a place at the meal. Everyone was invited. Or rather: all were attracted by the ardent desire that Jesus had to eat this Passover with them” (DD, 4).

When we participate in the Eucharist, “we are drawn by his desire for us. On our part, the possible response - which is also the most demanding asceticism - is, as always, that of abandoning ourselves to his love, of letting ourselves be drawn to him” (DD, 6).

The attitude of wonder can never fail. Unfortunately, it can happen that we escape the fascination of the beauty of Christ's gift.

“If our wonder at the paschal mystery made present in the concreteness of the sacramental signs were to be lacking, we would run the real risk of being impervious to the ocean of grace that floods every celebration. (...) The encounter with God is not the fruit of an individual interior search, but a given event: we can encounter God through the new fact of the Incarnation who, in the Last Supper, goes so far as to desire to be eaten by us” (DD, 24).

When we become capable of marveling at the gift that God has given us in Christ, our existence receives

“a new dynamism that commits us to being witnesses of his love. We become witnesses when, through our actions, our words and our behavior, an Other shows up and communicates himself. We can say that witnessing is the means by which the truth of God's love reaches man in history, inviting him to freely welcome this radical newness. (...) Witnessing to the point of self-giving, to the point of martyrdom, has always been considered in the history of the church as the summit of the new spiritual cult: ‘Offer your bodies’ (Rom 12:1). Let us think, for example, of the account of the martyrdom of Saint Polycarp of Smyrna, a disciple of Saint John: the whole dramatic course is described as a liturgy, and even as the fact that the martyr himself wanted to become Eucharist. Let us also think of the Eucharistic consciousness that Saint Ignatius of Antioch expresses in view of his martyrdom: he considers himself to be ‘the wheat of God’ and he desires to become in

martyrdom the ‘pure bread of Christ’. The Christian who offers his life in martyrdom enters into full communion with the Passover of Jesus Christ and thus becomes himself Eucharist with him” (SCa, 85).

It is the celebration of the Eucharist that makes us enter into the logic of the gift that structures every human life.³⁴ The Eucharist does not give us a model of life to imitate. It makes the Eucharistic man come to life in us. Because it is a question of becoming what we already are in Christ, the celebration of the Eucharist becomes essential to our Christian life because, in it, our profound identity is experienced, defined by our attitude of receiving the very life of God, and of becoming alive according to the only modality that is valid, that of gift for love.³⁵

The “Eucharistic Body” is first of all a body given, and from this it follows that our body, nourished by the Body of Christ, must also give itself.³⁶ Jesus makes us a sign “in” the bread and wine, and also “through” this bread and wine. The bread is the body given up, the wine is the blood shed, the life given. In the Eucharist Christ is present as the One who gives his Body and pours out his Blood, in his Passover, which is the gift of his life.

Through this bread Jesus invites us to become one with him, to enter with him into his intention on the eve of his Passion, the night he was handed over, and to commune with each other through our participation in this intention to give his life.

The Eucharist invites us to participate more deeply in the paschal mystery, to offer our whole life to the Father with Christ in the Holy Spirit.

³⁴ Cf. *Vie reçue, vie donnée*. L'offrande eucharistique, Service National de la Pastorale Liturgique et Sacramentelle, Mame, Paris 2019, p. 41.

³⁵ *Vie reçue, vie donnée*, p. 19.

³⁶ Cf. Emmanuel Falque, *Les Noces de l'Agneau*, éditions du Cerf, Paris 2011, p. 227.

b) *The Eucharist teaches us to make ourselves a gift for others*

The awareness that in Jesus Christ, God himself gave himself for us to the point of death, should lead us to live no longer for ourselves, but for him and with him for others.³⁷

“This is how we have recognized love: he, Jesus, gave his life for us. We too must lay down our lives for our brothers” (1 Jn 3:16). We Christians have recognized the love of Jesus Christ for us through his existence, his way of acting, speaking, relating to the people he met, especially because, in the paschal mystery, he gave his life for us. Our love to the point of giving our lives for our brothers and sisters is rooted in the example and grace of Jesus Christ.

In this verse from the first letter of Saint John we have these correspondences: “him/us”, “he gave/we must give”, “for us/for our brothers and sisters”. Christ gives himself to us so that we too, united to Christ, may give ourselves to our others.³⁸ The gift calls for the gift, the totality calls for the totality. “Life is a gift that is received by giving itself”³⁹.

We have said that the gift of self is at the summit of the path of human and spiritual maturation; therefore, living according to the Eucharist is the only way to live and realize our human existence.⁴⁰

The “memorial”, constantly renewed and deepened, of God's gift, makes the possibility of self-giving spring up as the most adequate response. The one who benefits from the gift is moved to risk himself and to give himself.

³⁷ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas est*, 33.

³⁸ Cf. Giuseppe Crocetti, *Dare la vita per i fratelli*, in *Il Cenacolo*, agosto-settembre 2022, n. 6, p. 25-26.

³⁹ Francis, *Homélie dimanche des rameaux*, 5 April 2020.

⁴⁰ “To give oneself means to let all the power of love, which is the Spirit of God, act in oneself and thus make room for its creative force. And to give oneself even in the most difficult moments, like Jesus' Holy Thursday, when he knew how betrayals and intrigues were being played out, but he gave himself and his project of salvation to us all the same. In giving himself, man finds himself with a true identity as a son of God, similar to the Father and, like him, a giver of life, a brother of Jesus, to whom he gives witness”, Pope Francis, *Homily at Mass*, Quito, Ecuador, July 7, 2015.

The Eucharist is the sacrament that leads to union, to transformation in Christ, to the mutual inhabitation that makes the whole of life a Eucharistic life (cf. Jn 6:56-57).

The celebrated Eucharist makes present the one who is to be imitated; in it Christ is present in his offering to God and to men, in his attitude of humility, service, dedication and love. The gift of self leads to belonging totally to Christ in order to live according to his way of life, to refer one's whole life to Jesus Christ in order to be in the world like Christ.

“To progress in the virtues”, wrote Saint Peter Julien Eymard, “the Christian needs to have his model always present, an ever-growing strength, a love that sustains him. Now, it is only in the most holy Eucharist that he finds these three goods perfectly.”⁴¹ And he adds: “The Christian learns to give themselves in this way through Holy Communion, where Jesus gives himself entirely and personally to them.”

Christ in his Eucharist teaches us to say “yes” to the cross; Christ teaches us that this death is a death lived in love and in giving, and for this reason it becomes a death that brings life.⁴² The Eucharist breaks down our egoism and frees our capacity for love, a love stronger than death (cf. Song of Songs 8:6).

Having become a member of the Body of Christ through baptism, the Christian, through the Eucharist, learns to live life as a gift. We live according to the logic of a Eucharistic life, that is, the logic of a life given, to give one's time and energy, Making gestures of generosity, of service, sometimes in silence. Giving means dying to ourselves and

⁴¹ Eymard, *Œuvres Complètes*, RA 17,14.

⁴² “It is the movement that passes through the YES of the cross, that is to say, through total obedience and disownership... we must participate with him in this story of fidelity, of Love given and received, by accepting to share in his 'sacrifice', that is to say, in the act by which he freely exposes himself to death by placing everything on the support of his Father... Only the Holy Spirit is capable of making our relationship with Christ this interior relationship, of making us configured to Christ”, Mgr Claude Dagens, *Le sacrement du sacrifice*, in *Christus* 242, p. 159.

living only for others, even to the point of giving our lives.⁴³ The goal is to live a life, more and more identical to the life of Jesus: life given for the world.⁴⁴

“The Eucharist calls us to let go of ourselves, to give ourselves. There is no Eucharist authentically worthy of Christ without a commitment to sharing, forgiveness and reconciliation. The ‘sacrament of sacrifice’, which actualizes in us the gift of Christ, thus reveals humanity to ourself: our ultimate vocation, which resists everything that can destroy or divide us, is not to conquer and dominate, but to receive and give ourselves, to learn, day after day, to lead a Eucharistic existence. All that we live in love given and received, even the wounds caused by the violence of the world, can be recapitulated by Christ in the Eucharist.”⁴⁵

It is a question then, for the one who has become a member of Christ, the Body of Christ, of becoming “life given”, in all the modalities, forms and expressions of love lived by Christ. The gift of self says more than just giving.⁴⁶ It is not simply a matter of giving something, but of giving oneself. In another sense, it is not a matter of giving what one has, but of giving what one is: “true wealth”,

⁴³ The clearest example is the gesture of Jesus, during the Last Supper, when he washed the feet of his disciples (cf. Jn 13:1-15).

⁴⁴ The Eucharist makes us enter into the dynamism of the paschal mystery in its totality. That is why it is impossible for us to celebrate the Eucharist in truth without the free and voluntary acceptance of living in our daily lives the content of Christ's death for all men. When we receive communion, we receive the mystery of his self-emptying, his annihilation, through which he became one of us, our slave, going so far as to wash our feet and give his life on a cross for us (cf. Phil 2:6-9). “The kenotic dimension is constitutive of the institution of the Eucharist”, F. Poulet, *Célébrer l'Eucharistie après Auschwitz*, p. 17.

⁴⁵ Mgr Claude Dagens, *Le sacrement du sacrifice*, in *Christus* n. 242, p. 164.

⁴⁶ “The gift of self is that which establishes the interpersonal relationship that is not generated by giving ‘things’, but by giving oneself. In every gift, the very person is offered”, Pope Francis, *Homily at Mass*, Quito, Ecuador, July 7, 2015.

said Pope Saint John Paul II, “does not consist in having something and giving something, but in the capacity to give oneself.”⁴⁷

“Our communities, when they celebrate the Eucharist, must become ever more aware that Christ's sacrifice is for all, and that the Eucharist then urges everyone who believes in Him to become ‘broken bread’ for others and thus to commit themselves to a more just and fraternal world. Thinking of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, we must recognize that Christ, even today, continues to urge his disciples to commit themselves personally: ‘Give them something to eat yourselves’ (Mt 14:16). The vocation of each of us truly consists in being, with Jesus, bread broken for the life of the world” (SCa, 88).

Pope Francis emphasized the strength of giving oneself to others, which comes precisely from the Eucharist:

“How many mothers and fathers, with the daily bread cut from the table at home, have broken their hearts to help their children grow, and to help them grow well! How many Christians, as responsible citizens, have broken their own lives to defend the dignity of all, especially the poorest, the excluded and the discriminated! Where do they find the strength to do all this? Precisely in the Eucharist: in the power of love of the Risen Lord, who today also breaks bread for us and repeats: “Do this in memory of me”. ”⁴⁸

“Faced with evil, suffering, and sin, the only possible response for the disciple of Jesus is the gift of self, including life, in imitation of Christ.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ John Paul II, *Address to religious women*, Cathedral of Our Lord in La Paz, 10-5-1988, n. 7.

⁴⁸ Francis, *Corpus Domini Homily*, May 26, 2016..

⁴⁹ Francis, *Address at the Way of the Cross with Young People*, on the occasion of the XXXI World Youth Day, Poland, July 29, 2016.

Giving oneself, then, also means accepting to lose oneself, through a generous gift, in a free and oblation love.⁵⁰ To give oneself sincerely is to offer oneself without expecting any reward, in other words, without any condition or limit and for ever.

To give oneself is to see the other as a human being and to commit oneself to building the human family;⁵¹ the gift of oneself is also the basis of forgiveness and the refusal of hatred and injustice.⁵²

The gift of self does not find its end in itself but in communion;⁵³ indeed, the end of giving is communion and friendship with God, and communion with others.

Only communion concretizes this desire, in the reciprocal gift. The model *par excellence* of self-giving is the intra-trinitarian life, the communion between the divine Persons, where giving and receiving are total without introducing inequality, which constitutes the deepest mystery.

We are made for giving, but even more for communion. If communion is the point of arrival, the way to get there is the sincere gift of oneself; it is there that the relationship of communion is born. "Communion always and inseparably has a vertical and horizontal connotation:

⁵⁰ Saint Paul, in the first letter to the Corinthians, wrote: "I may distribute all my wealth to the hungry, I may be burned alive, but if I lack love, it is of no use to me" (1 Cor 13:3).

⁵¹ "The love of friendship is called 'charity' when we grasp and appreciate the 'great value' of the other. Beauty - the 'great value' of the other person that does not coincide with his or her physical or psychological attractions - allows us to experience the sacredness of his or her person, without the imperative need to possess it. (...) The love of the other implies this taste to contemplate and to value the beauty and the sacredness of his personal being, which exists beyond my necessities. This allows me to seek his good when I know that he cannot be mine or when he has become physically ugly, aggressive or annoying. This is why it is because we love a person that we give him or her something", Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, 127.

⁵² "Through the memorial of his sacrifice, he strengthens communion among the brethren and, in particular, urges those in conflict to hasten their reconciliation by opening themselves to dialogue and commitment to justice", SCa 89.

⁵³ "Freedom is inalienable self-possession and at the same time universal openness to all that exists, by going out of oneself towards the knowledge and love of others. It is therefore rooted in the truth of humanity and has communion as its end", John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 86.

communion with God and communion with our brothers and sisters. The two dimensions meet mysteriously in the Eucharistic gift” (SCa n. 76).⁵⁴

Conclusion

The Eucharist operates in us a very deep transformation. It is the life of Christ, a life given, that shines in us. Father Eymard said:

“A crystal, put it in the night, it is a stone, put it in a small light, it becomes transparent, put it in the sun, one cannot look at it any more, it is like the sun, here is Our Lord, he rises, he goes up, when he is at his noon the soul becomes transparent in true love. Little by little, by degrees, Our Lord then dwells in us, but in order to be able to give Himself, He must give Himself according to our correspondence, by degrees, like the ore to free itself, to purify itself, each degree removes an alloy. The more deeply we enter into Our Lord, the more holy we become, (...) the holiness of the chosen ones is only achieved when they are transparent, when Jesus is in their hearts, and when they no longer appear to be anything but appearances. Jesus Christ is in us, we must not diminish Christ, we must put Christ into action.”⁵⁵



⁵⁴ “Where communion with God, which is communion with the Father, with the Son and with the Holy Spirit, is destroyed, so is the root and source of communion among us. And where communion among us is not lived, neither is communion with the Triune God alive and true”, Benedict XVI, *General Audience*, March 29, 2006.

⁵⁵ Eymard, *Œuvres Complètes*, PS 211, 6.