

Pray More Advent Retreat - Transcript

St. John Paul II and the Holy Eucharist

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Hello, and welcome to our talk on St. John Paul II and the Holy Eucharist. Before we begin, I'd like to start with prayer.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of the Holy Eucharist. We pray that we develop a deeper and greater love of this beautiful sacrament. And we also ask that our Heavenly Mother may guide us to a deeper understanding of the Holy Eucharist and to her Son as we pray. Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the truth of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Holy Eucharist is my all-time favorite topic. It is the very center of our lives as Christians and as Catholics, it's the very center of the church, and it is the greatest mystery and the most profound gift that we've been given on this side of the veil from our Lord. And here, we're going to look at an encyclical written by St. John Paul II on this sacrament. He himself had a great devotion to the Holy Eucharist. It could be seen in the masses that he celebrated how much he revered and loved our Lord, how much he truly loved to do the mass, how much he respected our Lord's presence in the Holy Eucharist, and just his own intense love and joy towards this sacrament. And in fact, many people who went to his masses observed his profound joy and devotion to the mass and to the sacrament of Holy Communion. In his book, *St. John Paul the Great: His Five Loves*, Jason Evert noted from a mass he attended, which St. John Paul II celebrated. He says "He lingered lovingly over every syllable that recalled the last supper as if the words were new to him."

So, as St. John Paul II went through the motions of the mass, as he did the Eucharistic prayers, it was very evident that he truly entered into the mystery and the great charity at work in the Last Supper. In fact, it was the Eucharistic presence and the holy sacrifice of the mass that really centered St. John Paul II as a priest, and he said "For me, the mass constitutes the center of my life and my every day. Nothing means more to me, or gives me greater joy, than to celebrate mass every day, and to serve God's people in the church." And really, for the hierarchical priesthood, the centering aspect is the mass, and it's part of that... part of being a priest is to bring the Eucharistic presence to the people of God, who is the church. So, it shouldn't surprise any of us that St. John Paul II ended up writing a rather

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lengthy encyclical on the Holy Eucharist, and his encyclical centers on the church's relationship and the mystery of the church in relation to the Holy Eucharist, and that encyclical was promulgated on April 17th, 2003, and it is entitled *Ecclesia De Eucharistia*, on the Eucharist and his relationship to the church.

I highly recommend and encourage that you get a copy of this encyclical. You can find the encyclical on the Vatican website for free, and it is an encyclical worth taking to prayer and contemplation. It would be wonderful to read at Eucharistic Adoration, and it's just something that Catholics should read in order to come to a deeper understanding of the Holy Eucharist. The church offers such a great breadth and depth and wealth of information and teaching that we couldn't even get through in a lifetime, but this is an encyclical worth taking to prayer, so that we can grow in a deeper understanding of the Holy Eucharist.

So I really encourage you to go to the Vatican's website. You can either type it in English or Latin, and the encyclical will come right up. You can even just type it in Google and it will come right up, so you can take it to prayer and contemplation. I'll only be able to cover a very small part, because it is such a beautiful and lengthy discussion of the Holy Eucharist and the church. The encyclical begins with the following: "The church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates the heart of the mystery of the church. In a variety of ways, she joyfully experiences the constant fulfillment of the promise: 'Lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age', Matthew 28:20. But in the Holy Eucharist, through the changing of bread and wine into the body and blood of our Lord, she rejoices in this presence with unique intensity.

So, John Paul II is beginning his encyclical by drawing attention to the mystery of the Holy Eucharist in relation to the church. And he looks at Matthew 28:20, where before our Lord ascends to His Heavenly Father, He tells us that He will be with us until the end of the age. Essentially, He is telling us that He will be present to us in a tangible way until the Parousia, or until the Second Coming. And so St. John Paul II is telling us that this tangible presence is the Holy Eucharist, because our Lord is present to us, the church, in the body, blood, soul, and divinity of the Holy Eucharist. So, Christ is with us, truly present to us, until the end of time, until the Second Coming. So John Paul II wants to draw our attention to this great mystery so that we understand that when we go to mass, we are entering into the fulfillment of Christ to His apostles that He is with us. So, Christ is not some abstraction out somewhere in heaven; Christ is actually bodily present to us, and we can go to Him

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for spiritual nourishment. And He constantly feeds the church through the power of the Holy Spirit. So, the Holy Eucharist is where we truly come to tangibly meet our lord.

John Paul II also goes on to discuss how, since Jesus Christ is the very center of our lives, He's the very reason for our faith, it is in the Holy Eucharist that we truly enter into that mystery of Christ begin the very center of our faith, because it is where Christ is tangibly manifested in his full presence in the Holy Eucharist. And he also goes on to quote *Lumen Gentium*, another important and amazing and beautiful document, this time from Vatican II, in which it states "For the most Holy Eucharist contains the church's entire spiritual wealth, Christ himself. Our Passover and living bread. Through His own flesh, now made living and life-giving by their Holy Spirit, he offers life to men." So not only is salvation achieved through the Paschal mystery, but Christ reaches out to us and offers us life through the Holy Eucharist. He's giving us food, He's giving us sanctifying grace, and He is providing us nourishment on the spiritual journey. He's truly uniting himself to us. His body and soul to our body and soul, so that we can progress in holiness, and we can come into a deeper communion with him. I can't imagine any other way on this side of eternity where we can enter into a deeper communion with God. He's literally united to us fully in our reception of the Holy Eucharist. And He's also fully present to the whole church.

The church is a communion, and it's a mystery that we enter into a baptism, and one of the great mysteries of the church is really under, theologically, what is referred to as solidarity. And it's a great mystery because it goes to how human beings are intimately linked to one another. So it could be confusing at times when we discuss the nature of Original Sin, "Well, I didn't want to be born with Original Sin. Why am I born with Original Sin?" Well, it has to point to the mystery of human nature. So when Adam and Eve sinned, that sin entered into human nature, and our human nature is the unification of body and soul. "We are embodied spirits", to quote St. Thomas Aquinas, and all of us have this nature. And at the ontological level, which is the deepest levels of being, we are all united in this nature. It's one of the mysteries of the way God created us. We are truly united to our neighbor because we share the same nature.

So, when sin entered into our nature, every single one of us is now born with sin. But, in God's great plan, through the God man, through Jesus Christ, we're able to also be redeemed because our nature, because of that solidarity and that connection that we all have to one another. So, through the Incarnation, Christ, the Word became man, He then died on the cross and rose again. And through that mystery

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of solidarity, through that mystery of human nature, we are all now able to enter into redemption and salvation because Jesus took on our flesh, He took on our human nature, He was able through that mystery of solidarity to offer salvation to all of mankind. And so when we go to mass, we also enter into that solidarity and that communion through what we refer to as “The Mystical Body of the church.” We are all united together in a profound way. When one member is hurting, all of us hurt. It’s just a part of human nature and solidarity in being a member of not only the church, but in being a human being. So when we go to mass, we enter into this communion together, and we also are fully brought present with our Lord through the Holy Eucharist, and we also as individuals are nourished and as a body. As a communion, the Mystical Body, we are nourished through the Eucharistic sacrifice.

Another way that we can enter deeper into our understanding of the Holy Eucharist through this encyclical is by looking to Mary. If anyone understands or understood the Eucharistic presence while she was here on earth, it is our Heavenly Mother. And St. John Paul II takes great pains to discuss this great mystery that Mary experienced, because he was also very Marian. He had a great devotion to Mary, he also wrote an encyclical on the holy Rosary which is worth reading. But he really turned to her to understand the Holy Eucharist, and to help bring us into a deeper understanding as the church and as individuals, the Holy Eucharist. And he says “In a certain sense, Mary lived her Eucharistic faith even before the institution of the Eucharist, by the very fact that she offered her virginal womb for the incarnation of God’s word. The Eucharist, while commemorating the passion and resurrection, is also in continuity with the incarnation. At the enunciation, Mary conceived the Son of God in the physical reality of His body and blood, thus anticipating within herself what, to some degree, happens sacramentally in every believer who receives under the signs of bread and wine the Lord’s body and blood.”

I remember the first time I read this passage I was blown away by its depth and beauty, because it’s not a way that I had contemplated the enunciation and the incarnation before. But when we think about it, and especially when we look at the biological and spiritual realities of motherhood, we understand that Mary really did enter into a very... Into the Eucharistic presence before anyone else because of the incarnation. So, when she said yes to St. Gabriel, when she said yes to God, she allowed the Holy Spirit to overshadow her, and then Jesus grew in her womb. And every mother knows that when you are carrying a child, both body and blood mingle to one another. So while Mary nurtured our Lord, our Lord was also... His body and blood was being mingled with her own, and she was being united to Him.

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And since there is also a transcendent dimension to her carrying our Lord, we know that she was also united to Him through her soul. So body and soul that she was united, and entered into that Eucharistic presence.

So, even before our Lord established and instituted the whole Eucharist of the Last Supper, Mary had already experienced this great unification, body and soul, to her Son and to our Lord and God Jesus Christ. And so if anyone can help us to understand the Eucharist in a deeper manner, it is our Lady. And since she wants to guide every single one of us to her Son, she is an example and someone to turn to help us in understanding. So we can constantly turn to her and reflect on this passage and the great beauty and amazing experience that she must have gone through those 9 months of carrying our Lord to term, and the spiritual aspects also going on, not just the biological development as the Word took on human flesh, but the spiritual dimensions of what our Heavenly Mother experienced in that unification between her and her Son.

So, St. John Paul II wants us to turn to our Mother, and also to come into a deeper understanding of the Eucharist in relation to the church and ourselves. And, as I said earlier, this encyclical is quite long. It's amazing in its depth and beauty. It's worth taking a look at. Unfortunately, I don't have time to cover the whole thing because it is a bit lengthy, but we have been able to take a look at how we can enter into a greater understanding of the Holy Eucharist. And also, in getting a deeper understanding and trying to enter more into the mystery of the Holy Eucharist, hopefully it will help us to predispose ourselves to be prepared when we receive the Holy Eucharist. The greatest mistake we can make as Catholics at mass is in going up to receive Holy Communion without any thought, making it habitual to the point where we ignore what's truly happening. In a way, we almost take away our own understanding and our own will within the sacrament. So we want to make sure that we can grow in a greater understanding, so that when we go to receive Holy Communion, we approach in great humility, reverence, and charity, because we are receiving the creator of the universe into ourselves. He has condescended to make himself food for us on the journey, so that we can be made more in confirmation and communion with him, because that's the very meaning of our lives.

So I hope that in examining St. John Paul II's Eucharistic encyclical, we can start to get an even deeper understanding and continue in our love and devotion of the Holy Eucharist, and also that we can begin to focus in an even greater manner on the profundity of this sacrament, so that when we go to present ourselves that we're focusing on the great mystery, and also the love and humility that we should

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be exercising in relation to this beautiful sacrament. I pray that during this advent season you develop a greater love for the Holy Eucharist, and also for our Heavenly Mother, that she may walk with all of us always and point us towards her Son, and thank you very much. God bless.