

Eucharist ~ Love's Source and Summit

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The Church calls the Eucharist the *source and summit* of the Christian life. At Eucharist, we encounter the crucified and risen Jesus who has given us new life at Baptism, who feeds us with his word and his body and blood, and is constantly interceding on our behalf before the Father. At Eucharist, we offer our praise and thanksgiving to the Father who gives us all that is good through Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Our thanksgiving and praise return to the Father through Christ, in the power of the Spirit, as expressed at the end of the Eucharistic prayer:

Through him, with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours Almighty Father, forever and ever.

Pope John Paul sums up the Church's understanding of Eucharist as *source and summit* of our Christian life in the following quote:

The Second Vatican Council rightly proclaimed that the Eucharistic sacrifice is "the source and summit of the Christian life." 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 the Holy Spirit, he offers life to [humankind]".² Consequently the gaze of the Church is constantly turned to her Lord, present in the Sacrament of the Altar, in which she discovers the full manifestation of his boundless love. (John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucaristia*, No. 1)

In his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est (God is Love)*, Pope Benedict XVI speaks of two aspects of love found in God's love for us. These are *eros* and *agape*. Let me start with a few stories to illustrate the meaning of these two forms of love.

Eros

My sixteen year old daughter is dating a local boy from another high school. She doesn't see him during the day, so she meets him after school and on weekends. My daughter sometimes has a hard time getting ready for school in morning, but she'll get herself out the door for 6AM to go work out with her boyfriend at the gym before school. If she could spend all her time with him, she probably would; if he could spend all his time with her, he probably would. This is *eros*. *Eros* is about being enraptured by the other, wanting to possess the other...

Think about a time when you fell in love... Think about the time you spent thinking about being with the person you had fallen in love with: -the time you spent on the phone, the sleep you gave up just to be with that person evenings and weekends, the

money you spent on gas to see them, the money you spent on dinners and dates... This too is part of *eros*.

From *Eros* to *Agape*

If *eros* is about being enraptured by the other, wanting to possess the other, ... *agape* is about self-giving, at times self-emptying love. *Eros*, if it is authentic, leads us to *agape*. Think about your children... Remember what it was like when they were born, and when they arrived home. Remember the wonder and awe you experienced as they came into the world? You hold this little miracle in your hands; you're high as a kite for about a week, and overcome with love. You and everyone else falls in love with that little person, and wants to hold your baby, to be close ... this is *eros*, but it leads us as parents to *agape*.

Think of the night feedings... Think about the times when you got up dead-tired in the middle of the night and held that infant in your arms: you looking down at your child in the dark; your child looking up at you. At that moment, your heart melts; love takes precedence over the need for sleep, and for the next 20 minutes you simply gaze with love into each other's eyes. At that moment, *eros* (the love that seeks out and wants to possess the other) and *agape* (self-giving love) become one.

The teenage years have their own challenges, and often require a great deal of parental *agape* as children test their boundaries, grow emotionally and mature. Even amid the struggles of parenting adolescent children, we can still find ourselves falling in love with our children. The wonder and awe returns, and you're in love with them again... Even in the adolescent years, *eros* and *agape* can become one.

San Salvador, 1980: A Story About *Agape*

There was a movie made in the 1980s called *Salvador*. The film opened with actual footage of Salvadoran government troops firing into a crowd of demonstrators in San Salvador in front of the state legislature, following the death of Archbishop Romero. As the bullets begin to fly, you see parents grab their children and pull them to the ground, shielding them from the bullets with their own bodies. God forbid that this should ever happen to us, but if it did, wouldn't you do the same? There's something in our very nature that moves us to put the needs of those we love before our own, even if it might cost us our life. This is *agape* in its fullest. Deeply in love with our children or spouses, when a crisis comes, we don't think twice about looking after their well-being.

+Think of a time when you had to look after a sick child, a spouse or a parent...

- the time you spent without sleep
- the stress of worrying about how you're going to get everything done....
- maybe you would have been glad to take on their suffering if you could...
- how many of us has sat beside a hospital bed, just to be there for the other?
- how many of us has spent the better part of the night looking after a sick family member, then going to work the next day, and no one has any idea that your tank is completely empty? You wonder how you did it, but you know that you couldn't *not* do any different. -It's who you are as a parent,

spouse or caregiver.

-how many of us remembers what it's like to be visited when you were sick, to have someone put a cool face cloth on your forehead, or bring you a glass of water and Tylenol when you were burning up in bed?

+This too is *agape*.

The Look of Love

-Children know when they are loved. They see the way we look at them, and they are happy and secure.

-Think about the teachers who really made a positive impact on your life...

Chances are, you felt secure and relaxed and accepted for who you were in their classes. Perhaps they even would have gone to bat for you if you were in trouble...

-Chapter 10 of Mark's Gospel tells the story of the Rich Young Man who kneels down before Jesus and asks him 'what must I do to inherit eternal life?' The man tells Jesus he has kept all the commandments. Mark tells us that Jesus looked at him, loved him and then, told him to give his riches to the poor and to "come follow me." (Mk 10, 21) The word is given in love. It's not given to coerce or to force him to change. This is love's true nature; this is the context for Jesus' message; it *is* Jesus' message; it is Jesus himself: the word made flesh, spoken by love, given in love, out of love, Love.

The word is spoken always in love, freely given in love. Jesus, the divine Word of Love, spoken from all eternity by the Father, *seeks out* and embraces all of our humanity, drawing all peoples in all times into his divine nature. He takes on our greatness, made in the divine image and likeness; he unites himself with us in our brokenness, our shame, our fears, our wounds, our sin and its consequences, taking it to the cross and subjecting it to death. Recall the Salvadoran parents who shielded their own flesh and blood with their bodies, bearing the bullets of an evil regime, facing death so that their children can live. This is what Jesus has done for us by taking on our human nature and bringing it all to the cross, and rising with a restored and glorified humanity to new life.

Eucharist and Love:

What does all this mean in terms of Eucharist? In Jesus, we find God who seeks us out (this is *eros*), who embraces our humanity with all its beauty and all its burdens and sorrows, and brings it to the cross. He takes to himself all that separates us from God, and submits it to the power of death, by pouring out his own innocent life on our behalf, that we might be restored to fullness of communion with God and neighbour and empowered to live the Gospel –this is *agape* at its fullest.

Eucharist, then, is the Church's prayer of praise and thanksgiving to the Father's continuous *eros* and *agape* for us through Christ. Christ feeds us with his word of love and his body and blood, broken and poured out for us with a lover's love that *seeks us out* as the beloved (the *bride*, the *Church*) and *pours out* his life for us, that we might have life to the full.

At Eucharist all our thanksgiving, our joys, concerns, our fears, our needs, and the needs of those we love are united with the crucified and risen Jesus on the altar. Our entire

lives, united with Christ, are then re-presented to the Father on our behalf. Can the Father refuse the Son? *Can a mother forget her baby?* (Is 49, 15)

Inviting God's Eros and Agape into our Lives

There is no part of our humanity, therefore, that Jesus has not entered and taken to himself, and there is no burden that he is not willing to bear for us. As we prepare for Eucharist, I would invite you to do two things:

1. Consider one part of your life where you struggle to let the healing love of Jesus enter. Perhaps it's a painful memory from your past. Perhaps it's an ongoing struggle known only to you. It may be a hurt or lack of forgiveness that keeps you from being free... Accept that Jesus has already embraced this part of your life and taken it to the cross... As you come to the offertory, I would invite you to turn this part of your life over to him, and ask him for what you need to be free to love as he intended.

2. Think of some part of your life where you have poured yourself out for someone else –this is *agape*- and find yourself emptied. Perhaps it's with one of your own children whose needs and demands seem greater than what you have to give. Perhaps you're caring for to a sick spouse or parent whose needs require a lot of you, in addition to your other responsibilities; perhaps this is a kind of cross that very few people know about, one which you bear every day as you continue in your regular working life. Perhaps it's a difficult student or a colleague who tests your patience each and every day. Perhaps it's your own struggle with the demands of a family member who is an addict or is mentally ill. I would invite you to bring your own emptiness to Christ at the altar, and ask him to fill it with his capacity to love.

Jesus, the great Lover of humanity, seeks us out without rest, and invites us to make the Eucharist *source and summit* of our lives. He invites us to come to the Eucharist, and to bring not only our accomplishments and good deeds, but also our burdens, our struggles and our pain. He invites us to hear his word of love, to unite our lives to his self-offering to the Father, and be nourished by his own flesh, that we might love fully as he loves us, with passionate self-giving love.