

# **Eucharist and moral life in the teaching of Benedict XVI**

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The Eucharist is *sacramentum caritatis*<sup>1</sup>: efficacious sign of the love of God for us in Christ. First of all, it is love on the level of being, so as to be constituted in love. From this level to that of action, so we are called and enabled to live this love. The Eucharist gives the form of *agape* to the Christian life. Here, we wish to analyze the dynamic, operative, and active aspects of the Eucharist: so that we might see how the Eucharist becomes the principle of moral life, of “moral transformation”. The Pope tells us how the charity, that the Eucharist signifies, is the same charity which it calls forth and enables us to live<sup>2</sup>.

For a complete analysis of Pope Benedict XVI’s line of teaching regarding this sacrament, it is necessary to complete the teaching found in the Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum caritatis* with the teaching of the Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*, in which the Pope first traced the ethical-operative implications of the Eucharist.

## ***From the beauty of the celebrated mystery to the goodness of the lived mystery***

Beauty marks the first line of ethical implications regarding the Eucharist. This dimension of beauty was neglected, if not altogether lost, in the theology and spirituality of the last centuries. However, beauty was decisively revalued by Benedict XVI, especially in connection with the liturgy, with “the wonder for the mystery of God,” which the liturgy is capable of arousing and cultivating. “The liturgy, in fact, is inherently linked to beauty [...], the concrete way in which the truth of God's love in Christ encounters us, attracts us and delights us, enabling us to emerge from ourselves and drawing us towards our true vocation, which is love. [...] The truest beauty is the love of God, who definitively revealed himself to us in the Paschal Mystery. The beauty of the liturgy is part of this mystery; it is a sublime expression of God's glory and, in a certain sense, a glimpse of heaven on earth”<sup>3</sup>. Beauty is the main road to approach the mystery of God and his love: mystery of truth and goodness, to which a knowing which is neither abstract or detached, much less instrumental and calculated, introduces us. To this mystery we are introduced by the participative and contemplative knowledge of beauty, which the sacramental symbol bears and the liturgy activates and expresses. Through beauty, the experiential and

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<sup>1</sup> Cf Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 73, a.3.

<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum caritatis*, Postsynodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Eucharist, source and summit of the life and mission of the Church (from now on *SC*), February 22, 2007, 82.

<sup>3</sup> *SC* 35.



communal knowledge proper to biblical semantics is established, in particular in the New Testament and in the Johannine writings which value the profound and global cognitive valency of interpersonal knowledge. St. Thomas speaks about this knowing as the *cognitio per connaturalitatem*<sup>4</sup>: a knowing relationship between the knower and the known through immediate identification. It is a knowing that involves the knower, who is able, in this way, to penetrate the signs and open himself, amazed and full of admiration, for the mystery, which is otherwise unreachable.

Jesus is strongly aware of the cognitive capacity that symbols (which theological language calls sacraments) carry; above all when we speak of God, He who is invisible and ineffable. The possibility we have to know him are in the signs by which He reveals himself to us. The ultimate sign of God – the greatest sacrament – is Jesus Himself, his humanity and the work which he accomplished even until to the end on the Cross. From the singular and unique sacramentality of his life flows the sacramentality of the Church and other particular symbols –first of all baptism and above all Eucharist – which the liturgy celebrates, actualizing them in the “today” of the Church and Christian life. The Church takes great care of their celebration, in the awareness that the language of beauty and its capacity of drawing minds and making hearts vibrate is the fruit of this care (*ars celebrandi*)<sup>5</sup>.

The Eucharist is the singular and eminent sacramental sign, to which Jesus bonded himself, his presence and his self-offering on the cross. “Jesus gave this act of oblation – we read in the encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* – an enduring presence through his institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. He anticipated his death and resurrection by giving his disciples, in the bread and wine, his very self, his body and blood as the new manna (cf. *Jn* 6:31-33), The ancient world had dimly perceived that man’s real food – what truly nourishes him as man – is ultimately the *Logos*, eternal wisdom: this same *Logos* now truly becomes food for us – as love. The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation. More than statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving”<sup>6</sup>.

“The Eucharist attracts us,” “we are involved”: it is the efficacy itself of *beauty*. This beauty doesn't speak to us through inductive or deductive speech, but by the strength of persuasion of the participative relationship that beauty establishes between the knower and the known, where the knower is the Christian and the known is Christ. This relationship of participation, which is strongest in the Eucharist, is a relationship of identification – “you in me and I in you” (*Jn* 14:20; 15:4-5) – of the Christian with Christ<sup>7</sup>. In this way Christ claims authority of the mind and heart of the Christian. In this way, beauty discovers the face of truth and goodness, within the reciprocal implication of the triad (*pulchrum, verum, et bonum convertuntur*). Intelligence is conquered by the truth

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<sup>4</sup> Cf, for example, *Summa Theologiae*, II-II, q. 45, a. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Cf *SC* 38-42.

<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, *Deus caritas est*, encyclical letter on Christian love (from now on *DCE*), December 25, 2005, 13.

<sup>7</sup> “The imagery of marriage between God and Israel is now realized in a way previously inconceivable; it had meant standing in God's presence, but now it becomes union with God through sharing in Jesus' self-gift, sharing in his body and blood. (*DCE*, 13)”

and will by the goodness of the mystery: mystery of charity, love that illuminates the intellect and moves the will to the dynamism of donation, of reception and communion, which the mystery signifies. From the celebrated mystery, freedom is lead into a lived experience, as the continuity of the mystery of love in life.

### ***The Eucharist, fount of “moral energy”***

Beauty, full of truth and goodness, passes from celebration into action: it becomes a fount of knowledge and moral conduct. “In discovering the beauty of the Eucharistic form of the Christian life, we are also led to reflect on the moral energy it provides for sustaining the authentic freedom of the children of God. Here I wish to take up a discussion that took place during the Synod about the connection between the *Eucharistic form of life* and *moral transformation*”<sup>8</sup>. The beauty of the Eucharist, celebrated and received, gives “Eucharistic form” to Christian existence. It is not a static and conventional form, that is distinguished by mere identity and membership; but rather a dynamic and moving form which is a fount of “moral energy”. The “eucharistic form” that the sacrament imparts in Christian existence is a principle of “moral transformation”. To speak of “transformation” is to speak of a radical and total effect of an event that converts and innovates Christian freedom, giving it the features of the “authentic freedom of the children of God.” The “freedom of the children of God” (Rm 8:21) is the ethical correlative, the moral transliteration, of the “eucharistic form” of Christian existence. It is a freedom that is free from every self-reference and self-centered act. It has grace and the “moral energies” of intelligence and will of grace as its origin.

The Eucharist is the source of “moral energy”. This fount belongs first of all to the normative order. Rediscovering the sacraments as a source of moral life, the sacrament of Eucharist primarily, in the beginning of the 1970’s, in the post-conciliar times, in a theological-moral “background” marked by a trend of jusnaturalism, Father B. Häring repeated: “The sacraments teach us the law of Christ”<sup>9</sup>. This is to say that the Christian obtains the moral norm from the celebrated mysteries. This happens in the context of the rediscovery of the unity between Word and Sacraments, in a manner that the sacraments become a living announcement of the Word. The Word is heard and received in an economy of grace, which is the celebrated sacrament; in a special way Eucharist in its daily and Sunday celebration. In this economy we perceive the light and strength of the Word, of its performative character<sup>10</sup>; we have a living experience of the Word, which is not merely “letter” but “spirit and life” (Jn 6:63). The value of the Word gives efficacy to everything, also to moral action; so that we don’t perceive law as a mere precept, that is an expression of a divine will, which dictates to us the salvific conditions of acting; but rather as a task of grace which arouses operative fidelity.

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<sup>8</sup> SC 82.

<sup>9</sup> Cf B. Häring, *Morale e sacramenti. Spiritualità sacramentale*, Ed. Paoline, Bari, 1976.

<sup>10</sup> Benedict XVI wrote of this performative character in the encyclical letter *Spe Salvi* on Christian hope, November 30, 2007, 2, 4, 10.

The sacraments, each in their own way, and the Eucharist as the fulcrum and summit, are at the origin of a morality of the vocation, through which goodness, rather than being an expression of adapting to the law, becomes a response to one's call<sup>11</sup>. It is a response full of praise and gratitude, that gives a liturgical character to moral action, a character that is appropriately doxological (a response of praise) and Eucharistic (a response of gratitude). In this regard, Benedict XVI recalls the teaching of John Paul II, "who writes in the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* that the moral life «has the value of *spiritual worship* (Rom 12:1; cf. Phil 3:3), flowing from and nourished by that inexhaustible source of holiness and glorification of God which is found in the sacraments, especially in the Eucharist»"<sup>12</sup>. The sacraments give a liturgical impression to all Christian living. This is the reason for which St. Augustine considers and persuades us to live the Christian life as *bonus Dei cultus*<sup>13</sup>: a living liturgy, which surpasses the rite and becomes active, operative in the lived moral experience. It stands to signify not only the liturgical value of moral living, but also and even before the moral fruitfulness of the liturgy and particularly of the Eucharist, from which the liturgy is given its prime and permanent expression.

To say that the Eucharist is the fount of "moral energy" is to refer to even more than its normative strength. It is to speak of its active efficacy. Within the Eucharist itself lies its own proper efficacy of sacramental grace. It is the grace which sanctifies Christian being and enables him to achieve in conformity with being: sanctifying grace and at the same time an enabling grace. As an enabling grace it is an enlightening and moving grace: it is a grace which enlightens the rational faculties (conscience and intelligence) and moves the appetitive faculties (will and the passions). Through it, the "you must" – an expression of the radical Gospel ethic, that values the total accomplishment of the moral task as referred to by Jesus – receives the strength of the "you can". As such, the moral good is not a mere law, but grace. It does not have its active principle in the weakness of man, but in the "extraordinary richness of grace" (Eph 2:7), through which the accomplishment of the moral good in all that we owe, is not only dutiful but also possible. The sacraments are the principle and fount of a morality of grace. The law that the sacraments teach us is the "law of the Spirit" (Rm 8:2): the law that the Holy Spirit writes in our hearts (cf 2 Cor 3:3), which "is not content to say that what must be done, but also gives the power «to do what is true» (Jn 3:21)"<sup>14</sup>; it does not limit itself to note the *bonum faciendum* (the good to do), but activates the strength of the conviction, of the desire and of the actuation of the good<sup>15</sup>. It is more than a law. It is *habitus*, which marks itself not by the strength of duty but by that of power.

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<sup>11</sup> Cf DCE 1 17.

<sup>12</sup> SC 82.

<sup>13</sup> Cf S. Agostino, *Enchiridion ad Laurentium seu de fide, spe, et caritate*, PL 40, 231-290.

<sup>14</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, doc. cit., 24.

<sup>15</sup> "The law of the Spirit, that gives the life in Jesus Christ (Rm 8:2), "in the moment itself in which it shows, gives also the capacity of adhesion and, while it poses its exigency, gives the strength to comply. While he reveals himself, God also gives in order that the eyes may see the truth; the courage to dare with him; love that transcends right to him (R. Guardini, *Libertà Grazia Destino*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2000 82).

## *The efficacy of Eucharist love*

What is the efficacy of enabling grace which is proper to the Eucharist? The Eucharist's efficacy relates to its dynamism, which is charity; love-*karis* (grace): "God's love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rm 5:5) and that makes us subjects of love. The Eucharist is the *sacramentum caritatis*: efficacious sign of the love which it signifies. As such, the charity of the Cross that the Eucharist sacramentally actualizes in the today of the Christian, passes in our life, enabling us to translate it into the lived experience of love. "The Eucharist – the Holy Father said to us – draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation": by it "we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving"<sup>16</sup>. "By sharing in the sacrifice of the Cross – Benedict XVI says to us, quoting John Paul II – "the Christian partakes of Christ's self-giving love and is equipped and committed to live this same charity in all his thoughts and deeds."<sup>17</sup> From the Eucharist, the Christian is personally "drawn," "involved" in the charity of Christ, and in this way "enabled" and "engaged" to translate it into life with one's own actions.

One is enabled to love by the gift of love. One is not educated to love through theoretical and abstract teaching, but by giving love and by making the other feel that he is loved. It is this, in effect, the divine pedagogy of love, which the Eucharist reproduces. In fact, "worship itself, Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn"<sup>18</sup>. In the Eucharist we have the living experience of a loved received, which is the principle of the love given. Lovers – John says to us – because we are loved: "We love, because he first loved us" (1 Jn 4:19). The ethics of charity proceed, operative and concrete, by the sacramental experience of the love of God in Christ Jesus. The Eucharist is this experience. Through it the Christian can say with Paul, "I live in the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). It is a lived ethics of love, effusion of love received: "Faith working through love" (Gal 5:6). At the beginning of the ethics of charity there is no commandment but grace: "The «commandment» of love is only possible because it is more than a requirement. Love can be «commanded» because it has first been given"<sup>19</sup>. "Since he has «loved us first», love can also blossom as a response within us"<sup>20</sup>. We find ourselves in the ethics of grace and at the same time of vocation: "Since God has first loved us (cf. 1 Jn 4:10), love is now no longer a mere «command»; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us"<sup>21</sup>.

Here is "the moral value of spiritual worship"<sup>22</sup>. This spiritual worship is "the joy-filled discovery of love at work in the hearts of those who accept the Lord's gift, abandon themselves to him and thus find true freedom. The moral transformation implicit in the new worship instituted by Christ is a heartfelt yearning to respond to the Lord's love with

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<sup>16</sup> Cf DCE 13.

<sup>17</sup> SC 82. The passage is taken from John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, *doc. cit.*, 107.

<sup>18</sup> SC 82; DCE 14.

<sup>19</sup> DCE 14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ivi*, 17.

<sup>21</sup> *Ivi*, 1.

<sup>22</sup> SC 82.

one's whole being, while remaining ever conscious of one's own weakness"<sup>23</sup>. The experience of Zacchaeus, recounted in the Gospel (cf. Lk 19:1-10), is here particularly significant: "After welcoming Jesus to his home, the tax collector is completely changed: he decides to give half of his possessions to the poor and to repay fourfold those whom he had defrauded"<sup>24</sup>. Being recognized and preceded by Jesus, being overwhelmingly loved by him, is an ethically transforming and decisive event: "The moral urgency born of welcoming Jesus into our lives is the fruit of gratitude for having experienced the Lord's unmerited closeness"<sup>25</sup>.

### ***Eucharistic consistency***

The Eucharist is the principle of "eucharistic consistency," an expression of the operative relapse regarding the moral fidelity aroused by the Eucharist. One can not celebrate or receive the Eucharist without recognizing and assuming the demands of love that the gift signifies. The Eucharist stopped in the celebrative act, which does not pass the threshold of the temple, is a shattered Eucharist, split within itself: it is an unbalanced Eucharist in its ritual form of worship, which is incapable of enlivening and animating life. "A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented"<sup>26</sup>. The "consistency" aroused by the Eucharist is the love that the Eucharist indivisibly signifies as gift and as task. It is a gift-task that flows from the dynamic of communion which the Eucharist carries within itself: communion with Christ and with all those who share the same gift of Christ Himself. "In sacramental communion I become one with the Lord like all the other communicants: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread— St. Paul says (1 Cor 10:17). Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself. I belong to him only in so far as I am in union with all those who have become or will become his own. Communion draws me out of myself towards him and, thus, also towards unity with all Christians. We become «one body», completely joined in a single existence"<sup>27</sup>. In the Eucharist one fastens, as such, the bond between love of God and love of neighbor, established by Jesus. The Eucharist is the sacrament of the one love, which is indivisible for God and neighbor: "Love of God and love of neighbor are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself. We can thus understand how *agape* also became a term for the Eucharist: there God's own *agape* comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us"<sup>28</sup>.

It is a public and social work, because the Eucharist is the fount of a global love, capable of weaving all relationships: from the micro to the macro-relations, from the more intense to those more extensive, from the ecclesial and religious sphere to the political and secular of human living together; a love which knows no barriers, tearing down all walls

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<sup>23</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>25</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>26</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>27</sup> DCE 14.

<sup>28</sup> *Ivi.*

of division, a love that brings us to the frontier of charity. “This sacramental mysticism is social in character”<sup>29</sup>: it contests all forms of evasion and privatism, devotionism and cultic spiritualism. Moreover, it denies and overcomes every narrow, elite, sectarian and purely emotive vision of love. “Worship pleasing to God can never be a purely private matter, without consequences for our relationships with others: it demands a public witness to our faith”<sup>30</sup>. The Eucharist “draws me outside of myself”<sup>31</sup>, in a process of public exposition (*ex-positio*), that makes of charity a witness before men, in the city of men: it is the “social charity” of which *Deus caritas est* speaks<sup>32</sup>.

This – the Holy Father specifies in *Sacramentum caritatis* – “is true for all the baptized, yet it is especially incumbent upon those who, by virtue of their social or political position, must make decisions regarding fundamental values”<sup>33</sup>. In a cultural and historical mediation of “eucharistic consistency”, the Holy Father further explains these values. They are the values that have become most felt today, because of a slackening in ethical sense on the level of conscience and in prevalent practices. These are values which risk being disowned not only individually by people, but even more publicly by culture and institutions. The values at risk are, in particular, “respect for human life, its defense from conception to natural death, the family built upon marriage between a man and a woman, the freedom to educate one's children and the promotion of the common good in all its forms. These values are not negotiable. Consequently, Catholic politicians and legislators, conscious of their grave responsibility before society, must feel particularly bound, on the basis of a properly formed conscience, to introduce and support laws inspired by values grounded in human nature”<sup>34</sup>. “There is – the Pope adds – “an objective connection here with the Eucharist (cf. 1 Cor 11:27-29)”<sup>35</sup>. Nothing is considered outside of the provoking power of the Eucharist. Secular responsibilities too, such as the political and institutional protection and promotion of moral values, are expressions of “eucharistic consistency,” of ethical fidelity rooted in the sacrament. The Eucharist descends from the height of the rite to the streets of social and political responsibility. It makes itself history in the moral freedom that it provokes.

## ***Conclusion***

The Eucharist is the sacrament of charity which pervades and activates moral freedom in its entirety, from freedom for God to freedom for neighbor, to freedom for the values in which love for God and for neighbor makes itself concrete and efficacious. We rediscover the strict connection between the sacraments and morals, liturgy and ethics, celebration and action. The Gospel is not just a moral nor is the liturgy a cult completely cut off from life. The Gospel of charity makes itself sacrament in the Eucharist and the sacrament of charity has its meaningful principle in the Gospel. The point of

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<sup>29</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>30</sup> *SC* 83.

<sup>31</sup> *DCE* 14.

<sup>32</sup> *DCE* 29. Cf *ivi*, 26-29.

<sup>33</sup> *SC*, 83.

<sup>34</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>35</sup> *Ivi.*

convergence is Christ, of whom the Gospel and the Eucharist are proclamation and presence. The Gospel narrates the event of Christ and the Eucharist actualizes it in the life of the Christian and of the Church, “Only by keeping in mind this Christological and sacramental basis can we correctly understand Jesus' teaching on love. The transition which he makes from the Law and the Prophets to the twofold commandment of love of God and of neighbor, and his grounding the whole life of faith on this central precept, is not simply a matter of morality – something that could exist autonomously alongside faith in Christ and its sacramental re-actualization. Faith, worship and ethics are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God's agape”<sup>36</sup>.

The conclusion is theologically remarkable: “The usual contraposition between worship and ethics simply falls apart”<sup>37</sup>. Between worship and ethics there is the continuity of the love of Christ received and given: in the Eucharist, “God's own *agape* comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us”<sup>38</sup>. The Eucharist celebrated is the principle of the moral life and the moral life is the Eucharist lived.

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#### **Abstract**

L'efficacia sacramentale dell'Eucaristia non è solo al livello ontologico dell'essere: segno efficace della comunione con Cristo e con coloro che sono di Cristo. Lo è anche a livello etico dell'agire. L'Eucaristia – ci dice Benedetto XVI – è principio di “trasformazione morale”, di una “coerenza eucaristica”. *Sacramentum caritatis*, l'Eucaristia dà forma agapica alla vita cristiana. In essa “l'*agape* di Dio viene a noi corporalmente per continuare il suo operare in noi e attraverso di noi”. L'Eucaristia celebrata è fonte di vita morale e la vita morale è Eucaristia vissuta. E' così ritrovata la continuità di celebrazione e azione, liturgia e vita, sacramenti e morale.

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<sup>36</sup> DCE 14.

<sup>37</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ivi.*