

The EUCHARIST **A Mystery of God's infinite, saving Love**

A synthetic View of Pope John Paul II's Teaching on the Eucharist

Resumo

Neste artigo, o autor propõe-se dar uma visão sintética da teologia e espiritualidade eucarísticas do Papa João Paulo II. Na introdução, ele considera a vida do servo de Deus tão profundamente marcada pelo Mistério Eucarístico. Para João Paulo II, a celebração da Santa Missa era – como ele mesmo disse – o centro absoluto da sua vida e de cada dia da sua vida. No seu grande amor para com Jesus Eucarístico, ele nunca deixava de dedicar diariamente um bom tempo à adoração eucarística. A sua encíclica sobre a Eucaristia bem como a iniciativa do Ano Eucarístico brotaram da grande admiração que ele tinha diante deste grande mistério. Deus, na sua amorosa providência, chamou-o desta vida na oitava da Páscoa, precisamente no meio do Ano Eucarístico que, segundo ele, constituiu o ápice do programa pastoral do seu pontificado. Ele certamente será lembrado na história como um Papa da Eucaristia.

*Na parte central do artigo, o autor consta primeiro que para João Paulo II a Eucaristia era sobretudo um grande mistério. Em seguida, ele resume o pensamento eucarístico dele em nove pontos que constituem os aspectos essenciais deste mistério. A Eucaristia é primeiramente *mysterium fidei* (1), um mistério que supera os nossos pensamentos e só pode ser aceito pela fé. É o mistério central da nossa fé (2), porque contém a plenitude do mistério de Cristo. Por ser um mistério divino, é um mistério insondável e inefável (3). Desenvolvendo o ensinamento do Concílio Vaticano II, João Paulo II considera a Eucaristia particularmente no seu relacionamento com a Igreja. A sua encíclica *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* é o fruto maduro da sua reflexão teológica sobre o vínculo estreitíssimo que existe entre estes dois misté-*

rios, a Eucaristia e a Igreja (4). Além disso, ele aponta a última fonte da Eucaristia, que é o amor da SS. Trindade (5). Em relação à história da salvação, a Eucaristia constitui o resumo de tudo aquilo que Deus Pai, Filho e Espírito Santo fez para a humanidade (6). Profundamente marcado pelo mistério da SS. Trindade, a Eucaristia tem três dimensões complementares: é ao mesmo tempo o sacramento da presença escondida de Deus, do sacrifício redentor e da comunhão (7). João Paulo II enfatiza também a dimensão pessoal e interior da Eucaristia como o mistério do encontro mais íntimo entre Deus e homem (8). Por fim, ele considera a Eucaristia como mistério da luz que brilha mais claramente em Maria, a mulher eucarística, que é o modelo para a Igreja no seu relacionamento com Jesus Eucarístico.

Tendo considerado os vários aspectos do mistério eucarístico, o autor conclui que todos estes se resumem em um só: a Eucaristia é o mistério do amor infinito de Deus, mistério de misericórdia. Isto constitui o coração da teologia e espiritualidade eucarísticas de João Paulo II. Devemos ser gratos pela visão tão ampla e sublime do mistério eucarístico que este grande Papa deixou à Igreja e que nos pode ajudar a abrir-nos cada vez mais às dimensões divinas deste grande mistério.

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I. Introduction

John Paul II, the Pope of the Eucharist

Saint John Bosco once had a prophetic vision. He saw the Church as a great ship being attacked by the enemy fleet but it was securely anchored by the steersman, the Pope, onto two columns, one of the Eucharist and the other of the Immaculate.¹ This vision is an image of the pontificate of John Paul II. He will go down into history both as a Marian Pope and as a Pope of the Eucharist for he bore such a fervent witness to “these two

¹ This vision was given to St. John Bosco in a dream on May 30, 1882 and is recounted in his *Memoirs*, VII, 107-108.

marvels of God's love, the Eucharist and Mary's virginal motherhood" which "fill the path of the pilgrim Church with light and life."²

"Mary guides the faithful to the Eucharist,"³ declares Pope John Paul.

The virgin teaches us to approach the Eucharistic mystery with faith, purity of heart, respect and reverence; she invites us to contemplate the mystery of Christ's presence and sacrifice with the same sentiments of adoration and thanksgiving with which she contemplated the mystery of her Son.⁴

Since John Paul II was "*totus tuus*" he also was totally oriented towards the Eucharist. Thus, during the Year of the Rosary he issued the Encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* to invite the whole Church to contemplate with Mary more intensely the Eucharistic face of Jesus. Addressing a gathering of priests, he gave this moving testimony of his great love for the Eucharist:

The priest is a man of the Eucharist. In the span of nearly 50 years of priesthood, what is still the most important and the most sacred moment for me is the celebration of the Eucharist. My awareness of celebrating *in persona Christi* at the altar prevails. Never in the course of these years have I failed to celebrate the Most Holy Sacrifice. If this has occurred, it has been due entirely to reasons independent of my will. *Holy Mass is the absolute center of my life and of every day of my life.*⁵

"With how much devotion he celebrated Holy Mass, the center of each one of his days! How much time he spent in adoring and silent prayer before the tabernacle!"⁶ testifies Pope Benedict XVI who was one of his closest cooperators. His life was like an extended Mass; a life in, through and for the Eucharist. "To live the life of the Eucharist is to exit completely from the small circle of one's own life and to grow into the infinity of the life of Christ."⁷ These words of Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross

² Address to Lay missionaries in Lima (Peru) on May 27, 1988, in: *L'Osservatore Romano*. English weekly edition (=ORE) June 20, 1988, p. 15.

³ *Redemptoris Mater*, n. 44.

⁴ Address to Lay missionaries on May 27, 1988, in: *ORE* June 20, 1988, p. 15.

⁵ JOHN PAUL II, Address to symposium on the 30th anniversary of the pastoral constitution *Presbyterorum Ordinis* on Oct. 27, 1995, in: *ORE* Nov. 15, 1995, p. 7.

⁶ BENEDICT XVI, Angelus of Sept. 4, 2005, in: *ORE* Sept.7, 2005, p.1

⁷ EDITH STEIN, *Autobiography*, translated by Sr. Immaculata Adamsda OCD, in: *Swiatlose w ciemnosci* I, 1977, p. 243, quoted by John Paul II in his address to contemplative Nuns on June 8, 1987, *ORE* July 6, 1987, p. 4.

define, in a certain sense, the life of John Paul II. He forgot himself to the point of entering into the universality of the love of Christ present and active in the Eucharist. Nourishing himself with the Body and Blood of the crucified and risen Lord, he offered himself for the Church and the whole of humanity becoming, like Christ, “bread broken” for the life of the world.

He was convinced that “to live the Eucharist it is necessary [...] to spend much time in adoration in front of the Blessed Sacrament,”⁸ something which he himself experienced every day, drawing from it strength, consolation and assistance.⁹ “Whoever was able to share closely the Pope’s daily activity witnessed his profound love for the Eucharist,” said Archbishop Leandro Sandri, a friend of John Paul II. “Before making important decisions he spent much time before the Blessed Sacrament, taking to his private Chapel the documents he had to study and reserving for himself a time of reflection and prayer before the tabernacle.”¹⁰

John Paul II desired the first Encyclical of the Third Millenium to be on the Eucharist and then, as the crowning and synthesis of his pontificate, so to speak, “*the highpoint of a journey in progress*,”¹¹ he proclaimed the year of the Eucharist.¹² Both his Encyclical on the Eucharist (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*) and the initiative of the Year of the Eucharist sprung from the amazement which he constantly experienced before this great Mystery.¹³ Divine Providence disposed that his earthly existence would come to a close in the Easter octave, precisely in the heart of the Eucharistic year. Can we not see in this a divine affirmation of his great love for Jesus really present in the Eucharist?

As his whole life was deeply marked by the Paschal Mystery, celebrated and actualized in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, so was his death. “In the last month, his illness assimilated him ever more with the suffering Christ. It is moving to know that at the hour of his death he united the giving up of his

⁸ JOHN PAUL II, Message for World Mission Sunday 2004, *ORE* May 12, 2004, p. 7.

⁹ Cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 25.

¹⁰ Archbishop LEANDRO SANDRI, Homily for the sixth of the novemdiales Masses for the soul of John Paul II, in: *ORE* April 20, 2005, p. 14.

¹¹ *Mane nobiscum Domine*, n. 10.

¹² In his homily on the feast of Corpus Christi on June 10, 2004, John Paul II said: “I wished to dedicate to the Eucharist the first Encyclical of the new millenium and I am now happy to announce a special year of the Eucharist.” (*ORE* June 16, 2004, p.7)

¹³ Cf. *Mane nobiscum Domine*, 29.

life with that of Christ in the Mass that was celebrated next to his bed.”¹⁴ Recalling the beautiful testimony the servant of God, Pope John Paul II, gave at the close of his life, Pope Benedict XVI observed:

The light and strength of the risen Lord were irradiated in the Church in that sort of “last Mass” that he celebrated in his agony, culminating in the “amen” of a life totally given, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, for the salvation of the world.¹⁵

The great example of love for the Eucharist that John Paul II leaves to each one of us is a stimulus “to establish an ever more profound communion with Christ by sharing daily in the sacrament which makes him present, in the sacrifice which actualizes the gift of his love on Golgotha, the banquet which nourishes and sustains God’s pilgrim people.”¹⁶ It is our duty to safeguard the spiritual legacy left by this great Pope, particularly his Eucharistic teachings, “so that the Eucharist will continue to shine forth in all its radiant mystery.”¹⁷

If we wish to get an idea of the Eucharistic magisterium of Pope John Paul II, all we have to do is to explore the extremely rich content of his principal writings on the Eucharist: *Dominicae coenae* (1980), *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003) and *Mane nobiscum Domine* (2004). Moreover, there is a good number of catechesis, homilies, addresses and messages referring to this great mystery of our faith. It is evident that a small article like this cannot adequately expose the richness of the Pope’s teachings. Its scope is limited to giving a synthetic view of his Eucharistic theology and spirituality.

II. The Eucharist: A great Mystery of the faith and the life of the Church

“The Eucharist is a great mystery!”¹⁸ This affirmation is at the heart of Pope John Paul II’s Eucharistic theology and spirituality. For him, the

¹⁴ BENEDICT XVI, Angelus on Sept. 4, 2005, in: *ORE* Sept.7, 2005, p.1.

¹⁵ BENEDICT XVI, Address to cardinals on April 22, 2005, in: *ORE* Apr. 27, 2005, p. 5.

¹⁶ JOHN PAUL II, Special message for World day of Consecrated Life, Febr. 2, 2005, in: *ORE* Febr. 9, 2005, p. 7.

¹⁷ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 10.

¹⁸ *Mane nobiscum Domine*, 17.

Eucharist is above all a *Mystery*, “a great *Mystery* of the faith and the life of the Church.”¹⁹ As a rule, he does not simply speak of the “Eucharist,” but prefers to use the term: the “Eucharistic mystery” or simply “this great *Mystery*.” As a matter of fact, in his Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, the word “mystery” appears more than sixty times and, in his Apostolic Letter *Mane nobiscum Domine*, twenty two times in relationship to the Most Holy Sacrament.

The Eucharist is indeed a great and transcendent mystery, the mystery of God’s infinite saving love, “that sums up all the marvels wrought by God for our salvation.”²⁰ Therefore, stresses the Pope, “it is important that no dimension of this sacrament should be neglected. We are constantly tempted to reduce the Eucharist to our own dimensions, while in reality *it is we who must open ourselves up to the dimensions of the Mystery*.”²¹ Let us therefore contemplate with Pope John Paul II the manifold dimensions of the *Eucharistic mystery*!

1. *Mysterium fidei*

“The Eucharist is a *mysterium fidei*, a mystery which surpasses our understanding and can only be received in faith,”²² notes the Pope,

a great and transcendent mystery, indeed, and one that taxes our mind’s ability to pass beyond the appearance. Here our senses fail us: *visus, tactus, gustus in the fallitur*, in the words of the hymn *Adoro Te Devote*; yet faith alone, rooted in the word of Christ handed down to us by the Apostles, is sufficient for us.²³

Whoever comes before the Eucharist with faith can only prostrate himself in adoration, making his own the words of St. Thomas the Apostle: “*My Lord and my God!*” (*Jn 20,28*) and those of the Saint Thomas Aquinas: “*Tibi se cor meum totum subicit quia te contemplant, totum deficit*” (My whole heart submits to you and in contemplating you it surrenders itself completely). The human intellect is powerless before the

¹⁹ General audience of June 13, 1979, in: *ORE* June 18, 1979, p. 1.

²⁰ Cf. St. THOMAS AQUINAS, *De sacr. Euch.*, chap. I, quoted by John Paul II in his homily on June 25, 2000, in: *ORE* June 28, 2000, p. 3.

²¹ *Mane nobiscum Domine*, 14.

²² *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 59.

Eucharistic mystery “*totum deficit*.”²⁴ The truth of the Eucharist “cannot be grasped with the senses, but only with faith, which is based on the authority of God” (*Summa Theologiae* III, q. 75 a. 1).

When Jesus revealed himself as the true bread of life - “My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink” (*Jn* 6,55) - most of his followers did not accept this teaching. Their outlook was too material for them to grasp what Jesus really meant. “This is a hard saying who can listen to it” (*Jn* 6,60), they countered. In fact, the mystery of the “*real*” presence of Christ under the appearances of bread and wine makes a great demand on our faith.²⁵ The contrast between what is visible in the bread and wine offered on the altar, and what is invisibly present, the body and blood of Christ, requires from us an ever renewed “leap of faith.” It is a matter of overcoming the distance between what we perceive with our senses and what Jesus tells us: “This is my body - this is my blood” (cf. *Mt* 26,26.28).

For the believer, even if nothing has changed outwardly, the bread is no longer what it was before: it has become the Body of Christ. Its profound being - its substance - is changed. Bread remains food and wine drink, but Christ is there to communicate himself as food and drink. “We are facing Christ really present under the veil of ordinary and material appearances. *Christ-Bread, Christ-Wine*: real food and real drink for whoever hungers and thirsts for the infinite.”²⁶ John Paul II professes:

Behold the bread which man earns with his own work, bread without which man cannot live or sustain his strength: this bread has become the living and real testimony of the loving presence of God who saves us. In this bread, the Almighty, the Eternal, the thrice Holy has made himself close to us, has become “God with us,” Emmanuel. By eating this bread each one can have the pledge of immortal life.²⁷

It is only in an attitude of deep faith and humble adoration that we can approach the Eucharist: “We kneel in adoration before the consecrated Bread and Wine, because beyond the perceptible species, *the eyes of faith* and *the affection of love* see the real presence of ‘Emmanuel,’ ‘God-with-us’.”²⁸

²⁴ Cf. Message for closing Mass of National Eucharistic Congress in Siena on June 5, 1994, in: *ORE* June 15, 1994, p. 5.

²⁵ Cf. *Mane nobiscum Domine*, 16.

²⁶ Homily in Orvieto on June 17, 1990, in: *ORE* June 25, 1990, p. 7.

²⁷ Homily on June 2, 1983, in: *ORE* June 13, 1983, p. 1.

The Eucharist is not so much a mystery for our mind that will never understand it, but a mystery for our heart, since it is a mystery of love. Hence,

to explore the fascinating depths of Christ's presence under the "signs" of the bread and the wine, faith is necessary, or rather *faith animated by love*. Only those who believe and love can understand something of this ineffable mystery through which God draws close to our littleness, seeks to save our weakness, and reveals himself for what he is: *infinite, saving love*.²⁹

John Paul II exclaims in Eucharistic amazement:

How admirable is our God! He whom no intellect is able to embrace and worship in accordance with his holiness. He whom no heart is able to love in accordance with his love. How wondrous he is when he wishes us to embrace him, love him and worship him, according to the human dimension of our faith, under the species of Bread and Wine!³⁰

2. Central Mystery of our faith

Mysterium fidei! - The mystery of Faith! When the priest recites or chants these words, all present acclaim: We announce your death, O Lord, and we proclaim your resurrection, until you come in glory.³¹ "*These words contain the very essence of the Eucharistic mystery,*" notes the Pope.

In them we find what we bear witness to and share in every day as we celebrate and receive the Eucharist. In the Upper Room Jesus effects the consecration. By virtue of his words, the bread - while keeping the external appearance of bread - becomes his Body, and the wine - while maintaining the external appearance of wine - becomes his Blood. This is the *great mystery of faith*.³²

And he explains that celebrating this mystery, we not only renew what Christ did in the Upper Room, but we also enter into the mystery of his death and resurrection.

We are sharers in the saving mystery of Christ and we await his coming in

²⁸ Address to Clergy, Religious and Laity in Teramo (Italy) on June 30, 1985; *Insegnamenti* Vol. VIII/1 (1985) 2045-2050.

²⁹ Angelus on June 2, 2002, in: *ORE* June 5, 2002, p. 2.

³⁰ Homily of Corpus Christ on June 17, 1979, in: *ORE* June 26, 1979, p. 6.

³¹ Cf. *Ecclesia de Eucaristia*, 5.

³² Homily on June 1, 1997, in: *ORE* June 4, 1997, p. 2.

glory. Through the institution of the Eucharist we have entered the end times, the time of awaiting Christ's second and definitive coming, when the world will be judged and at the same time the work of redemption will be brought to completion. The Eucharist does not merely speak of all this. In the Eucharist all this is celebrated - in it all this is fulfilled. Truly the Eucharist is the great sacrament of the Church.³³

Consequently, the Eucharist is not one mystery among so many others, it is the mystery of faith *par excellence*, "the central mystery of our faith."³⁴

When Christ's disciples had gone away, one after the other, and at the end only a tiny group of his most faithful disciples remained, Jesus is ready to lose even those: "Will you also go away?" (*Jn 6,67*). With regard to the "bread of life" Jesus does not back down. He was even prepared to let his last followers leave unless they had believed in the Eucharist.³⁵ It is evident, then, that it is not possible to follow Jesus without believing in the Eucharist. *Christian faith* can only be a *Eucharistic faith*. We cannot accept Christ without accepting the Eucharist in which, as the Council recalls, "is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself our Pasch."³⁶ In it "Jesus *condensed his entire Gospel of love*."³⁷

The Eucharist contains "the full depths of the mystery of Christ,"³⁸ notes John Paul II, for

in the silence of the white Host [...] are all his words, there is his whole life given in offering to the Father for each of us; there is also the glory of the glorified body, which started in the resurrection, and still continues in heavenly union.³⁹

For this reason, it is

the center of the Christian message and the life of the Church. The Eucharist is the *mystery of mysteries*, since its acceptance means welcoming completely the message of Christ and of the Church, from the introduction to faith to the doctrine of redemption, to the concept of sacrifice and the con-

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Homily at closing Mass of National Eucharistic Congress in Bologna on Sept. 28, 1997, in: *ORE* Oct. 1, 1997, p. 2.

³⁵ Cf. Homily at World Youth Day on Aug. 20, 2000, in: *ORE* Aug. 23, 2000, p. 1.

³⁶ *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 5.

³⁷ Homily of Corpus Christ on May 30, 2002, in: *ORE* June 5, 2002, p. 1.

³⁸ Homily of Corpus Christi on June 14, 2001, in: *ORE* June 20, 2001, p. 1.

³⁹ Angelus on June 17, 1979, in: *ORE* June 25, 1979, p. 6.

secrated priesthood, to the dogma of “transubstantiation,” to the value of legislation in liturgical matters.⁴⁰

The Catechism of the Catholic Church rightly states that the Eucharist is “the sum and summary of our faith.”⁴¹ Truly, “for us Christians the Eucharist is our all: it is the *center of our faith and the source of all our spiritual life*.”⁴² Conscious of the centrality of the Eucharist for Christian life, the Pope declares:

Today it is necessary above all to *bring back to their correct central position the Eucharist* and the priesthood, to evaluate Holy Mass and Communion in their correct meaning, to return to the eucharistic pedagogy, a source of priestly and religious vocations, and an interior force to practice Christian virtues, particularly charity, humility, and chastity. Today is a time for reflection, meditation and prayer to restore to Christians the sense of worship and fervor.⁴³

3. An ineffable Mystery

Pope John Paul II introduces his first catechesis on the Eucharist with these words:

It is possible to speak of the Eucharist in different ways. In the course of history people have already spoken of it in different ways. It is difficult to say something that has not been said already. And at the same time, whatever we may say, from whatever direction we approach this great Mystery of the faith and the life of the Church, we always discover something new.⁴⁴

In what does this newness consist? The Pope responds that it is not our words that reveal this new element. It is the fact that the Eucharist is a unfathomable Mystery itself. It is as inexhaustible as God himself because it is a divine mystery. It is a mystery that one never finishes understanding. “Any attempt to live with it in the spirit of faith, brings with it new light, new amazement and new joy.”⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Address to pilgrims from Milan on Nov. 14, 1981, in: *ORE* Nov. 30, 1981, p. 3.

⁴¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n.1327

⁴² Letter to Archbishop Carlo Ghidelli of Lanciano-Ortona, Oct. 4, 2004, in: *ORE* Dec. 15, p. 10

⁴³ Address to pilgrims from Milan on Nov. 14, 1981, in: *ORE* Nov. 30, 1981, p. 3.

⁴⁴ General audience of June 13, 1979, *ORE* June 18, 1979, p. 1.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

The stupendous content and meaning of the Eucharist have often been expressed in the Church's Magisterium from the most distant times down to our own days. However, one has to ask with the Holy Father: "Has human language sufficient words to express what the Eucharist is? A truly indescribable mystery! Simple with the greatest simplicity! Rich with supreme richness!"⁴⁶ Pope John Paul II perceived that, although the Church's teaching on the Eucharist

is sustained by the acuteness of theologians, by men of deep faith and prayer, and by ascetics and mystics, in complete fidelity to the Eucharistic mystery, it still reaches no more than the threshold, since it is incapable of grasping and translating into words what the Eucharist is in all its fullness, what is expressed by it and what is actuated by it. Indeed, *the Eucharist is the ineffable Sacrament!*⁴⁷

Ineffable, however, does not mean that we cannot speak about the Eucharist, but that human language cannot express in words what the Eucharist is in all its fullness. In fact, one can speak of the Eucharistic Mystery in different ways such as, "in the *precise language of the exegetes and theologians*, which the Church will never be able to give up. But one can also use the *language of the heart, of wonder, and of love* [...]; the language of the Holy Spirit, [...] the language of contemplation."⁴⁸ When Pope John Paul II speaks of the Eucharist, he brings together both of these languages: the most lucid theology of his brilliant mind is coupled with the wonder and awe of his believing and loving heart.

Like a good housefather "who brings from his storeroom both the old and the new" (*Mt* 13,52) he faithfully interprets the deposit of Eucharistic faith, particularly the teachings of the Council of Trent (1545) and of Vatican II (1962-1965). Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who leads the Church into the fullness of truth (cf. *Jo* 16,13) he has lead the Church to a deeper understanding and more joyful living of the Eucharistic mystery ever mindful that "only from the Eucharist, deeply known, loved and lived, can we expect that unity in truth and in charity willed by Christ and advocated by the Second Vatican Council."⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Homily at Mass in Reggio Calabria on June 12, 1988, in: *ORE* Aug. 29, 1988, p. 4.

⁴⁷ *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 20.

⁴⁸ Cardinal G. DANEELS, *Ouverture à Eucharistie*, in: *Encyclopédie de l'Eucharistie*, edited by M. Brouard, Paris 2002, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Address to pilgrims from Milan on Nov. 14, 1981, in: *ORE* Nov. 30, 1981, p. 3.

4. A Mystery at the heart of the Church

Various Popes have made notable contributions to a better understanding of the mystery of the Eucharist. John Paul II has enriched the Church with important documents on the Eucharist such as the Encyclical letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* and the Apostolic Letter *Mane Nobiscum Domine*. As heir to the Second Vatican Council John Paul II has shown a special interest in the intimate connection between the Eucharist and the mystery of the Church.

The Eucharist is, - he summarized -, the sacrament which the Church celebrates and through which she is built up (cf. Apostolic Letter *Dominicae Coenae*, n. 4). It is the source, center, and summit of the Church's life and her greatest treasure (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11; *Christus Dominus*, n. 30; *Ad Gentes*, n. 9). It is the sacrament which contains all the spiritual good which the Church has received from Christ (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 5); the sacrament in which the Paschal Mystery remains without interruption; the sacrament in which the Church unceasingly proclaims her thanks for the mighty works of God (cf. *Acts* 2,11).⁵⁰

Pope John Paul II deeply reflected on the Eucharist in its relationship with the Church. His Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* ("The Church lives from the Eucharist") is as it were the summary and mature fruit of his theological and pastoral reflections on this relationship.

The Pope is fully aware that the renewal of the Church envisioned by the Second Vatican Council can only come from the Eucharist for "from the Eucharistic altar, *beating heart of the Church*, constantly comes the evangelizing flow of the word and charity."⁵¹ "The encouragement and the deepening of Eucharistic worship," he asserts, "are proofs of that *authentic renewal* which the Council set itself as an aim and of which they are the central point."⁵² For this reason, the pastoral program of his Pontificate was centered on the Eucharist and culminated in the proclamation of the year of the Eucharist.⁵³ Since the beginning of his Pontificate he had stressed that:

The Eucharist is the *vital center*, it is the *heart of the Church* which unceasingly draws from it the faith, the grace, the energy that are necessary

⁵⁰ Homily on June 12, 1988, in: *ORE* Aug. 29, 1988, p. 4.

⁵¹ Homily at Seville on June 13, 1993, in: *ORE* June 16, p. 2.

⁵² *Dominicae coenae*, n. 3.

⁵³ Cf. *Mane nobiscum Domine*, chap. I.

for her journey through history. *Where Eucharistic life flourishes, there the ecclesial life flourishes*: this, brothers, is an axiom whose validity not only touches theological doctrine but also teaches and must reach the existential dimension on the community and personal level. Therefore, it is necessary to see to it that the Eucharistic mystery, perpetual memorial of Easter and Redemption, always has in each of our communities—parishes, families, religious houses, seminaries, associations—that *central position* which fully and rightfully belongs to it.⁵⁴

5. A Trinitarian Mystery

What Pope John Paul II said and wrote on the Eucharist in its relationship with the Church certainly can be considered an inestimable contribution. However, he has still contributed in another way to the deposit of Eucharistic faith: it is his *Trinitarian vision of the Eucharistic Mystery*. He sees not only a profound relationship between the Eucharist and the Church, but also between the Eucharist and the Most Holy Trinity. Thus his vision of the Church is, “as in Rublev’s famous depiction of the Trinity, a *profoundly Eucharistic Church* in which the *presence of Christ in the broken bread* is as it were *immersed in the ineffable unity of the three divine Persons*, making of the Church herself an icon of the Trinity.”⁵⁵ It is only through “the Eucharist, the *true and living presence of the love of the Trinity*,”⁵⁶ that the Church becomes “a people made one by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁷

It was for this reason, that he wanted the great Jubilee Year 2000, which was dedicated to the mystery of the Trinity, to be at the same time an “intensely Eucharistic”⁵⁸ year. He affirms that there is only one “way,” one “door” to the mystery of the Trinity, from whom everything in the world and in history comes and to whom everything returns: Jesus Christ, who before dying on the Cross as a victim of expiation for our sins, left to the Church the memorial of his redeeming sacrifice: *the sacrament of the Eucharist*.⁵⁹

⁵⁴ Address to clergy and religious in Siena on Sept. 14, 1980, in: *ORE* Sept. 29, 1980, p. 9.

⁵⁵ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 50.

⁵⁶ Homily on Aug. 20, 2000, in: *ORE* Aug. 23, 2000, p. 2.

⁵⁷ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 4.

⁵⁸ *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 55.

⁵⁹ Cf. Angelus on June 18, 2000 where he also stated: “In the space of a week we are

In his Apostolic letter *Mane nobiscum Domine* John Paul II writes: “By a happy intuition, Rublev’s celebrated icon of the Trinity places *the Eucharist at the center of the life of the Trinity*.”⁶⁰ Indeed, in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, “*the very mystery of the Trinity is present in the most profound way*,”⁶¹ for

the measure of that Sacrifice is the *love of God the Father*; and the grace (the *redemptive love*) of the *Son* - our Lord Jesus Christ; and the *gift of self of the Holy Spirit*. The Eucharist is the Sacrament of *sacrifice and communion*. All of us who participate in it as Sacrifice receive it as Communion. At the same time, we receive God’s gift of himself in the Holy Spirit, whom Christ merited for us through his passion.⁶²

As an assembly in the name of the Most Holy Trinity, every holy Mass opens with a Trinitarian salutation like the one of St. Paul: “The love of God the Father, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (cf. *2Cor* 13,13) be with you all!” And

in these words, - notes the Pope - we find a concise expression of the inscrutable mystery of God, the Trinity. At the same time we find there the *synthesis of that which is the Eucharist*, the sacrament of Christ, of his death and resurrection. His love “until the end” through which the world is definitively and irrevocably restored to God, and man, every person, is embraced by the salvific force of reconciliation with his Creator and Father in the Holy Spirit.⁶³

6. A Mystery that sums up the whole history of salvation

Guided by his Trinitarian vision, Pope John Paul II has a lively awareness of the central place the Eucharist occupies in the history of salvation. In fact, the Eucharist commemorates and sums up all that God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - has done for humanity, from the act of creation to

celebrating two solemnities: the *Holy Trinity* and *Corpus Christi* that fully manifest the nature of this Holy Year, which is both *Trinitarian* and *Eucharistic*” (*ORE* June 21, 2000, p. 2).

⁶⁰ *Mane nobiscum Domine*, 11.

⁶¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Gift and Mystery*, Paulines - Pasay City 1997, p. 87.

⁶² Homily for the sick during Radio broadcast of Sunday Mass on June 14, 1987, in: *ORE* Aug. 10, 1987, p. 4.

⁶³ Homily at the close of Eucharistic Congress in Warsaw (Poland) on June 14, 1987, in: *ORE* Aug. 10, 1987, p. 6.

the recapitulation of all things in Christ. In the Eucharist is *present the entire history of salvation*, the great works of God: creation, redemption and sanctification.⁶⁴ The Pope explains:

God, who is Truth and Love, manifested himself in the history of creation and in the history of salvation. He *re-proposes this history by means of this redeeming sacrifice*, which he handed down to us in the sacramental sign, in order that we may not only think of it again in memory, but also *renew it and celebrate it again*.⁶⁵

The Pope considers the history of salvation an *itinerarium salvificum*, a progressive journey towards salvation at whose center is Christ. It is God's journey in Christ towards man and, at the same time, man's journey in Christ towards God. It is "a history written simultaneously from the very beginning by God and by man. [...] The Eucharist, the sacrament of the Lord's death and resurrection, represents the *heart* of this spiritual, eschatological *itinerarium*."⁶⁶ It is

the sacrament of the path Christ traversed in coming to us from the Father; and it is the path along which he returns to the Father, leading us as participants in the eternal redemption. Each time we gather to participate in the Eucharist of Christ, we walk the same path with him. This is the path of the sacrifice that seals the new and everlasting Covenant of God with man and of man with God.⁶⁷

Hence, the Body and Blood of Christ, present under the Eucharistic species, are the *living synthesis of the whole history of salvation*. In the Eucharist which makes present the paschal event throughout the centuries, "there is a truly enormous capacity which *embraces all of history* as the recipient of the grace of redemption,"⁶⁸ for "in penetrating the hearts of men, the Body and Blood of the Lord intimately purifies the realities of this world, renewing them by the power of the Spirit, and *sums up the whole course of human history*, leading it to its eschatological plenitude."⁶⁹ In

⁶⁴ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1328.

⁶⁵ Homily at Mass on Nov. 19, 1978, in: *ORE* Nov. 30, 1978, p. 7.

⁶⁶ Homily on June 11, 1998, in: *ORE* June 17, 1998, p. 1.

⁶⁷ Homily in Piacenza on June 5, 1988, in: *ORE* Aug. 8-15, 1988, p. 12.

⁶⁸ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 5.

⁶⁹ Address to Clergy, Religious and Laity in Teramo on June 30, 1985; *Insegnamenti* Vol. VIII/1 (1985) 2045-2050.

his Encyclical on the Eucharist, the Pope points out this universal, yes, cosmic dimension of the Eucharist:

The Eucharist is always in some way celebrated *on the altar of the world*. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation. The Son of God became man in order to restore all creation, in one supreme act of praise, to the One who made it from nothing. He, the Eternal High Priest who by the blood of his Cross entered the eternal sanctuary, thus gives back to the Creator and Father all creation redeemed. He does so through the priestly ministry of the Church, to the glory of the Most Holy Trinity. Truly this is the *mysterium fidei* which is accomplished in the Eucharist: the world which came forth from the hands of God the Creator now returns to him redeemed by Christ.⁷⁰

7. The total Mystery of the Eucharist: Presence, Sacrifice, Communion

Since the early Christian centuries there have been different and complementary views of the Eucharist: above all the “Pauline perspective” that emphasizes the idea of sacrifice and immolation, centered on the Paschal mystery, and the “Johannine perspective” centered on the incarnation of the Word. One explains the Eucharist from the paschal mystery, the other from the incarnation. In more recent times, a particular emphasis has been placed on the Eucharist as a fraternal banquet. In John Paul II’s Eucharistic theology, not only are the two dimensions of the Eucharist, as sacrifice and sacrament, perfectly reconciled and harmonized, but also its communitarian aspect is fully integrated.

Mindful of the Trinitarian character of the Eucharist, the Pope presents the Eucharist as a *sacrament with three dimensions*: “It is at one and the same time a *Sacrifice-Sacrament*, a *Communion-Sacrament*, and a *Presence-Sacrament*.”⁷¹ In fact, the divine Body and Blood of Christ, “which after the consecration is *present* on the altar, is *offered to the Father*, and becomes *Communion* of love for everyone, by *consolidating us in the unity of the Spirit* in order to found the Church.”⁷² These three dimensions of presence, sacrifice and communion are related to the great works of the Trinity: Incarnation, Redemption and Sanctification. The

⁷⁰ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 8.

⁷¹ *Redemptor Hominis*, 20.

⁷² Angelus June 5, 1983, in: *ORE* June 13, 1983, p. 2.

sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ is at one and the same time:

- the sacrament of the abiding presence of Jesus Christ, of his body and blood which he received from the Virgin Mary; thus it is the sacrament of the Incarnation,
- the sacrament of the Sacrifice, of the Body given up and the Blood poured out for our salvation, the sacrament of the Redemption, and
- the sacrament of Communion, the sacrament of the Eucharistic Body of Christ that sustains and builds his Mystical Body, the Church.

In his homily in the Cenacle during the Holy Land pilgrimage, John Paul II stressed these three dimension:

“This is my Body.” These are “words, which emerge from the depths of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God [...] In the Incarnation, the Son of God, of one being with the Father, became Man and received a body from the Virgin Mary.

“This is the cup of my Blood, the Blood of the new and everlasting covenant; it will be shed for you and for all, for the forgiveness of sins.” These are “words, which rise from the depths of the mystery of the Redemption [...]” Christ “used these words to proclaim the saving mystery of his Passion and Death. Under the appearances of bread and wine he instituted the sacramental signs of the Sacrifice of his Body and Blood” [...]

“Wherever the words *“This is my Body”* and the invocation of the Holy Spirit are pronounced, the Church is strengthened in the faith of the Apostles and in the unity which has the Holy Spirit as its origin and bond.” Hence, these words signify and realize “also a mystery of spiritual communion in the Church [...] Through the Eucharist, Christ builds the Church.”⁷³

John Paul II’s Trinitarian vision of the Eucharist as the sacrament of God’s presence, of the sacrifice and of communion offers thus a *marvelous synthesis of its various dimensions*. It is, at the same time, an antidote against a reductive understanding of the Eucharistic mystery. The Pope observes: “At times one encounters an extremely reductive understanding of the Eucharistic mystery. Stripped of its sacrificial meaning, it is celebrated as if it were simply a fraternal banquet.”⁷⁴ Therefore “it is

⁷³ Homily on March 23, 2000, in: *ORE* March 29, 2000, p. 6.

⁷⁴ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 10

important for us to live and teach others how to live the *total mystery of the Eucharist*: the sacrament of the *sacrifice*, of the *Banquet* and of the abiding *presence* of Jesus Christ the Savior.”⁷⁵

Though the Eucharist is essentially one and the same sacrament, we experience it in three distinct ways - Presence, Sacrifice, Communion.⁷⁶ As a consequence,

the mystery of the Eucharist - *sacrifice, presence, banquet*, [...] must be experienced and lived *in its integrity*, both in its celebration and in the intimate converse with Jesus which takes place after receiving communion or in a prayerful moment of Eucharistic adoration apart from Mass.⁷⁷

We should indeed establish an ever more profound communion with Christ by sharing “in the Sacrament which makes him *present*, in the *sacrifice* which actualizes the gift of his love on Golgotha, the *banquet* which nourishes and sustains God’s pilgrim people.”⁷⁸

8. A most interior and deeply personal Mystery

The Eucharist, the mystery of God’s infinite love, has not only a universal dimension that embraces all of history and all of creation, but also a most interior and deeply personal dimension. Against the danger to de-personalize the Eucharist, reducing it solely to the communal and objective dimension, the Pope insists on the *personal encounter with Jesus* in the Eucharist as our Lord and God.

In fact, our Lord Jesus Christ instituted the Eucharist in the intimacy of the Last Supper as his personal gift of love for his friends. “*Who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him*” (Jn 15,4).

We can say, - notes the Pope, - not only that *each of us receives Christ*, but

⁷⁵ Homily in Seville on June 12, 1993, in: *ORE* June 23, 1993, p. 4.

⁷⁶ John Paul II does not always present the three essential dimensions of the Eucharist - presence, sacrifice, communion - in the same sequence. Although he affirms that the dimension of presence is the most fundamental (cf. *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 16), he places it at times second or third, signifying that the Eucharistic presence of Jesus is the fruit of the Eucharistic sacrifice or his presence in us the fruit of Eucharistic communion.

⁷⁷ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 61.

⁷⁸ *Vita Consacrata*, n. 95; the Catechism of Catholic Church considers the sacramental sacrifice likewise in a Trinitarian perspective. Cf. n. 1358: “We must therefore consider the Eucharist as thanksgiving and praise to the *Father*, the sacrificial memorial of *Christ* and his Body; the presence of Christ by the power of his word and his *Spirit*.”

also that *Christ receives each of us*. He enters into *friendship* with us: “You are my friends” (*Jn 15,14*). Indeed, it is because of him that we have life: “He who eats me will live because of me” (*Jn 6,57*). Eucharistic communion brings about in a sublime way the mutual “abiding” of Christ and each of his followers: “Abide in me, and I in you” (*Jn 15,4*).⁷⁹

The Eucharist establishes thus a relationship of mutual interiority.

“*As I live by the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will live by me*” (*Jn 6,57*). The Eucharist is the “place” of the *most intimate encounter between God and man*. Through Christ, who draws his life from the Father we are introduced into the most profound mystery of God who is communion of love, perfect unity in Trinity. At the Eucharistic table we can experience “*the overflowing love of the Trinity*.”⁸⁰ When we abide in Christ, in the Son, we ourselves live, through Him, that life which constitutes the union of the Son with the Father in the Holy Spirit: we live, as it were, the life of the “intimacy” of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit. And this mystery of God-Love is radiated in our hearts:

By means of the Body and Blood of Christ, there remains in us a fuller reflection of the Most Holy Trinity, in such a way that the Divine Life is participated, in this sacrament, by our souls. This is the *deepest, most interior mystery*, which we assume with our whole heart, with our whole interior “self.” We live it in concealment, in the deepest meditation, without finding either the right words or suitable gestures to respond to it. The best words seem, perhaps, to be the following: “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof ...” (*Mt 8,8*), together with an attitude of deep adoration.⁸¹

9. A Mystery of light shining forth in Mary

“*The Eucharist is a mystery of light!* What does this mean, and what are the implications for Christian life and spirituality?” asks Pope John Paul II.

Jesus describes himself as “the light of the world” (*Jn 8,12*), and this quality clearly appears at those moments in his life, like the Transfiguration and the Resurrection, in which his divine glory shines forth brightly.⁸²

⁷⁹ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 22.

⁸⁰ Homily on June 20, 1992, in: *ORE* July 8, 1992, p. 8.

⁸¹ Homily on June 8, 1980, in: *ORE* June 30, 1980, p. 19; John Paul II sees a profound theological reason that the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ is celebrated on the Thursday after the Blessed Trinity: it is to highlight precisely that the Life which the Eucharist gives us is the life of the Trinity.

Though his glory remains veiled in the Eucharist, through the mystery of his hidden presence, the light of Christ shines forth and transforms those who approach him as believers. In the Old Testament, every time Moses met God on Mount Sinai or in the tent of the revelation, his face became shining with the radiance of God (cf. *Ex* 34, 27-35). More so every encounter with Christ who is present among us in various ways leaves a deep mark, but the *deepest and most transforming encounter* is the meeting at the table of the Eucharistic mystery.⁸³

Of all persons it was the Blessed Virgin Mary who most deeply experienced the transforming power of the Eucharist. In her, “the mystery of the Eucharist appears, more than in anyone else, as a *mystery of light*,” notes John Paul II. “Gazing upon her we come to know the *transforming power* present in the Eucharist. In her we see the world renewed in love.”⁸⁴

What made her experience the fullness of the transforming power of the Eucharist? “*He has looked with favor upon the lowliness of his handmaid!*” (*Lk* 1,48), proclaims Mary. She acknowledged that everything in her was grace, that is, a gracious gift of God. In her humility she opened herself to God and accepted his gift with her whole heart. It was due to her humility: the humility of her faith and love - that the Eucharist could penetrate and transform her with the full force of its sanctifying power. In fact, it is in proportion to our humility that God can love and sanctify us for he “resists the proud and gives grace to the humble” (*Jm* 4,6). When Mary received the Eucharist, she presented to God a heart that was empty of herself; thus her “nothing” was filled by Him who is “everything.”⁸⁵

When John Paul II considers Mary’s intimate relationship with the Eucharist, he not only points out the fact that the Eucharist originated, in a certain sense, from Mary since the Body of Christ present under the Eucharistic species is the same body that was born of her, but rather proposes Mary as the *model of a profoundly Eucharistic attitude*. Because of her interior dispositions of humble faith and loving surrender, “*she is a*

⁸² *Mane nobiscum Domine*, 11.

⁸³ Cf. Homily on July 9, 1980, in: *ORE* Aug. 11, 1980, p. 7.

⁸⁴ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 62.

⁸⁵ Cf. Address to priest and religious in Montenero on March 19, 1982, in: *ORE* April 5-12, 1982, p. 12 and homily on Nov. 1, 2000, in: *ORE* Nov. 8, 2000, p. 5.

woman of the Eucharist in her whole life,” declares the Pope. Hence, “the Church, which looks to Mary as a model, is also called to *imitate her in her relationship with this most holy mystery.*”⁸⁶

So we have to ask ourselves how is our relationship with the Eucharist? Do we have the same dispositions as Mary when we receive the greatest gift of God? It has been observed that nowadays Catholics more frequently receive communion than in former times. However, what might be the reason that the Eucharist, though it contains Christ himself, the source of all holiness, oftentimes does not produce the fruits of holiness one would expect? The Pope points to the lack of the necessary interior dispositions, particularly when the communicants are not concerned about the purity of heart, the reverence, faith and love due to Jesus, present in the Blessed Sacrament.⁸⁷ He invites each one of us and the whole Church to *learn at the school of Mary*, the Eucharistic Woman, the dispositions required for a fruitful reception of the Eucharist so that “*the humility of the Bride [may] cause to shine forth still more brightly the glory and power of the Eucharist, which she celebrates and treasures in her heart.*”⁸⁸

May we then all learn from the Virgin Mary how to approach the Eucharist, the greatest treasure of the Church! The Pope proposes her as our model and teacher of the Eucharistic faith and love:

Humanity pauses before the greatest of marvels: the God who becomes food, under the appearances of bread and wine, to feed the whole world. Where his senses and reason cannot reach, it is *faith* that supports man in approaching this mystery. The creature that is the *greatest teacher of faith* is Mary Most Holy. *Before the abyss of God's Love, she teaches us trusting abandonment; before her crucified and risen Son, she invites us to be in communion with him.*⁸⁹

⁸⁶*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 53.

⁸⁷ Cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, 20; General audience of June 15, 1983 (*ORE* June 20, 1983, p. 3) and of April 18, 1984 (*ORE* April 24, 1984, p. 5).

⁸⁸ *Incarnationis Mysterium*, 11.

⁸⁹ Angelus on June 18, 2000, in: *ORE* June 21, 2000, p. 2.

III. Conclusion

The Eucharist: a Mystery of God's infinite, saving love

The Eucharist has various dimensions as we have seen. It is a great mystery which is intimately related to the Church, to the Trinity, to the history of salvation, to each believer, particularly to Mary, the woman of the Eucharist. All these dimensions come together in one: the Eucharist is the *supreme expression of God's infinite, saving love*.⁹⁰

In his reflections on the Eucharist, Pope John Paul II builds upon the fact that “*God is love*” (1Jn 4,9). He explains that “the world has its beginning from this Love. Here begins a process between God and the world which goes beyond the mystery of creation: “*God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son*” (Jn 3,16). This process, between God and the world, in a certain sense, *finds its final word in the Eucharist*. For “the Son, given by the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he *loved them unto the end*” (cf. Jn 13,1).”⁹¹

During the last Supper, that ineffable moment in which God was found so close to man, Christ revealed the “*incredible*” dimension of God's boundless love, in the *total gift of self*:⁹² “This is my Body, which is given for you.” Precisely this is love “*unto the end*.” Christ made this love the sacrament of his Church as her greatest treasure. The full saving power of the love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,⁹³ is present and active in it. The Eucharist is the sacrament of this *infinite, saving love*. Only love saves. Love never ends and never gives up. Everything and everybody has once and for all been embraced by *the love of him who loved unto the end*. The universe and man in the world are constantly walking towards the end. Love alone knows no end. It knows only fullness. This fullness is God. The Eucharist contains this fullness and through it God makes the whole creation share in his fullness.⁹⁴

The awareness that, in the Eucharist, God loves us “*to the end*” has had a deep impact on John Paul II's Eucharistic thought. “Who could have

⁹⁰ Cf. Angelus on June 2, 2002, in: *ORE* June 5, 2002, p. 2.

⁹¹ Homily on June 14, 1987, in: *ORE* Aug. 10, 1987, p. 5.

⁹² Cf. Homily on June 2, 1983, in: *ORE* June 13, 1983, p. 1.

⁹³ Cf. Angelus on June 14, 1998, in: *ORE* June 17, 1998, p. 1.

⁹⁴ Cf. Homily on June 14, 1987, in: *ORE* Aug. 10, 1987, p. 5.

invented a greater sign of love?"⁹⁵ asks the Pope. "What more could Jesus have done for us? Truly, in the Eucharist, he shows us a *love which goes to the end* (cf. *Jn 13,1*), a love which knows no measure."⁹⁶ One time he forcefully expressed this as if conjuring us in the name of God who is love:

Allow me to be Gift. Love is greater than all that you, man, can conceive. Love prompted "the Father to send his Son into the world" (cf. *Gal 4,4*), so that none of us would be lost. Instead, the Son "lost" his life on the Cross: he gave his life; he rose: "he loved us to the end." Allow me finally to be Eucharist! That this love with which the Son "*loved to the end*" may continue! That it may traverse man's history as sacrament! That it may be the spiritual food and drink of human hearts! [...] Receive God, who is Love.⁹⁷

In summary, for John Paul II, the Eucharist is above all the *Sacrament of God's infinite, saving love, a great mystery of mercy*.⁹⁸ This is the heart of his Eucharistic theology and spirituality: "The Eucharist is the *infinite gift of love*: under the signs of bread and wine we acknowledge and adore the perfect sacrifice of Christ offered for our salvation and that for all humanity."⁹⁹ The Church adoring Christ, the Incarnate Word, present in the Eucharist, "discovers in him the ultimate and unifying meaning of all the mysteries of faith: the *love of God that gives life*."¹⁰⁰

The Pope's grandiose and profound vision of the Eucharist thus spurs us not to succumb to the temptation to reduce this divine Mystery to our own human dimensions, but rather to grow in our understanding of "the *breadth and length and height and depth*" of God's love and "to *know the love of Christ* which surpasses knowledge, that [we] may *be filled with all the fullness of God*" (Eph 3,18-19). In fact, nowhere but in the mystery of the Eucharist shines forth more brightly the greatness of God's infinite love and it is only through the Eucharist that we and the whole universe are filled with the fullness of God's love. Of this infinite love present and active in the Eucharist, Pope John Paul II has been one of the

⁹⁵ Message for 20th World Youth Day, dated Aug. 6, 2004, in: *ORE* Sept.1, 2004, p. 6-7.

⁹⁶ Cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 11.

⁹⁷ Homily in Gdansk on June 12, 1987, in: *ORE* Aug. 3, 1987, p. 3.

⁹⁸ Cf. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 11.

⁹⁹ Homily on June 25, 2000, in: *ORE* June 28, 2000, p. 3.

¹⁰⁰ Angelus on Nov. 28, 2004, in: *ORE* Dec.1, 2004, p.4

greatest witnesses and prophets of our times. Together with him, let us give homage to the Eucharistic mystery:

Adoro te devote, latens Deitas!

We adore you,

O wonderful Sacrament of the presence of the One who loved his own “to the end”.

We thank you, O Lord, who edifies, gathers together and gives life to the Church.

O divine Eucharist, flame of Christ’s love that burns on the altar of the world, make the Church, comforted by you, ever more caring in wiping away the tears of the suffering and in sustaining the efforts of all who yearn for justice and peace.

And you, Mary, “Eucharistic” Woman who offered your virginal womb for the incarnation of the Word of God, help us to live the Eucharistic Mystery in the spirit of the “Magnificat.” May our lives be a never-ending praise of the Almighty who concealed himself beneath the humility of the Eucharistic signs.

Adoro te devote, latens Deitas ...

Adoro te ... adiuva me!¹⁰¹

Fidelis Stöckl ORC

¹⁰¹ Homily on April 17, 2003, in: *ORE* April 23, 2003, p. 5.