



III

THE EUCHARIST: FOUNDATION OF OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

From the Gospel according to John (6: 51-58)

Jesus said to them: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh".

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink.

Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me.

This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like the bread the fathers ate, and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever.

The crowds around Jesus witness a miracle, that is the multiplication of the loaves of bread and the few fish. It is a grandiose miracle that creates awe, and generates the reaction among people to want to proclaim Jesus as their king. In fact even though they had witnessed a shocking deed, those present understood very little of his mission. They were shaken by his refusal, and they tried to provoke him: «What sign can you make so that we can see and believe you? What work do you do? Our fathers ate manna in the desert, as it is written: He gave them bread from heaven to eat" (Jn 6:30).

Jesus accepts the provocation, and promises a bread "which gives life to the world" (Jn 6:33). He shows them the shape and the face of that bread: it is His flesh and his blood. Only the Christian community, being a witness of the Resurrection, can fully understand the importance of that gift and can recognize it in the breaking of the bread (cf. Lk 24). From that moment, every man in search of the truth about himself, all those who feel the weight and the disappointment along their path in life, those who need the words of the journey of eternal life, all believers in Christ, will be able to find and meet him in the celebration of the Eucharist which gives bodily substance to the life of the spirit. The decorum of the Eucharistic celebrations, the silence and adoration in visiting our churches, the attention and active participation in the Holy Mass, are part of the mission of our Prayer Groups. The monthly adoration, which is one of the essential elements of our spirituality, may have different forms and times, but it must increasingly become the place where we repeat with humility and faith: "Give us today our daily bread and let us eat your bread and drink your blood so that we can live forever ».

From a letter from Padre Pio to Giuseppina Morgera

Not only did Jesus want those present to participate in such a great gift, but also all his followers in the centuries to come. He was mindful of the sweet promise he had made a little earlier with those tender words: "Do not be troubled in your heart and do not fear, because I will not leave you orphans, but I will be with you until the end of the centuries". He also was aware of those other memorable words: "Come to me all of you who labour and are tired, and I



will give you rest". I think that he is still mindful up to the present hour of the promises of love he made before leaving the Upper Room to go to the Garden of Olives. At that time he transmitted the fullness of priesthood onto the Apostles, which would be conferred through sacred ordination to all their followers until the end of the centuries.

His words: "Do this in memory of me" ensured the universality of the gift across all places and all times. At the same time He gave fulfilment to the loving desires of his most Holy Heart, which found his delight in being with the children of men.

My dear daughter, I trust you will agree, like I do, with the beloved Apostle, who lost in admiration for Him, proclaims the access of the charity of this divine Redeemer for men "in finem dilexit eos" The most sacred Eucharist is in itself a reward that contains all sorts of Grace.

We could even say that the Most Holy Eucharist is not only a compendium of all of his other gifts, but it is a very singular new gift from his immense charity for us because Jesus gives himself as food and drink to humanity, and thus identifies himself with all human beings through the most perfect union that may be realized between the creature and the Creator. Together with the most holy humanity, He gives men and women the infinite merits acquired on this earth; He gives all humans His own divinity with the immense treasures of his Wisdom, his Power, his Goodness.

An irresistible fire

In Padre Pio's letters, the Eucharist is described as the privileged place in which he experiences the effects of his life in union with the Lord. Faced with the temptation to neglect daily communion, on the 20th of June 1910, Padre Pio writes: "And how then, my father, could I live without receiving Jesus even for just one morning? " (Letters I, p. 185). In March 1911, he confessed that he went to celebrate Mass even when he had high temperature: «I am so hungry and thirsty before I receive Him, that I feel as if I am about to die out of breath. I cannot help but be one with Him, and this is why I sometimes go and eat his meat despite having high temperature " (Letters I, p. 216).

In the Eucharist Jesus is the lover who opens a deep wound (see Letters I, p. 316) in the heart of Padre Pio, his heart feels attracted by a superior strength, and burns with an irresistible fire; at the same time he is also the comforter and the defender. The presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is a source of serenity and balance: "All the ugly ghosts that the devil is introducing into my mind disappear when I confidently abandon myself in the arms of Jesus. So if I am with Jesus on the cross, that is, if I meditate on his worries, I come to suffer immensely. However this is a pain that does me a lot of good. I enjoy a sense of peace and tranquillity that cannot be explained" (Letters I, p. 216).

The same mystical gifts, received by Padre Pio at this time, show how the Lord uses the sacrament of the Eucharist precisely as the place of his most important and intimate manifestations, such as the exchange of hearts, the ecstasy, and the stigmatization, which took place precisely during thanksgiving after the Holy Mass.

At some point however, a change is perceived: Jesus is no longer the consoler, but the one who asks to be consoled. Padre Pio becomes one in His love and in his immolation for the whole of humanity

Victim for love during Mass

In his Letters, Padre Pio offers himself as a victim eight times, with different intentions: for sinners, for the souls in purgatory, for the needs of his geographical area, for his spiritual directors, for the end of the Second World War ...



We can understand how serious this kind of offer was for him, if we consider an excerpt from a letter to one of his spiritual daughters, who had asked him to offer herself as a victim for sinners: "Regarding the permission you asked me to offer yourself as a victim for your brothers and sisters, I cannot allow it by any means. Ask me again in the future, and then we will see what can be done in the Lord " (Letters III, p. 247).

In the light of such strict answer, we can thus perceive what high conception an offer as a victim implied. Let us try to understand this even further. It is a fact that in line with the mentality of his time, Padre Pio offered himself as a victim in the context of his illness: during his stay with his family, he was expecting to die. This led him to give a profound meaning to his sufferings and to join them with those of Christ's. We can thus see that the deep love for Christ Crucified is transformed into a feeling of solidarity with him, particularly with his redemptive mission, and it is for this reason that the first time he offered himself as a victim, he did it for sinners and for all the souls in purgatory.

With time, however, his offer as a victim evolved. True suffering would no longer be only physical, but mainly consisted of that phase of purification-isolation, which is characteristic of the desolation of the mystics, who on one hand feel the strong attraction towards God and on the other hand seem to be refusing Him.

God's initiative is not perceived only as an intervention of grace, but becomes a pedagogical intervention, it is Jesus who guides Padre Pio in the mystery of his offering as a victim. We could even say that this offering has a very specific rituality. It is Jesus who gives Padre Pio the possibility of becoming a victim and Jesus again who makes the Eucharistic celebration the place for this offering to happen.

With the expression "to resemble Christ", Padre Pio summarizes the whole attitude of the victim who is at the same time following Christ in His immolation, but also in the isolation of the Cross, which makes him cry "My God, my God why have you forsaken me" .

The icon of this offer is the stigmatization: according to what he wrote in the letter dated 22nd October 1918, the stigmata caused him a much deeper wound than those he had in his body. The mysterious character "follows his operation relentlessly, with superlative torment of the soul". Padre Pio feels all the strength of this God who loves him and pushes him away from himself and shouts: «O Lord,! your punishment is just and your judgment is right, but have mercy on me! " (Letters. I).

Again, in a letter to Giuseppina Morgera, Padre Pio better describes this action of God: "May Jesus bless you, may him always be the Supreme King of your heart and treat you as He pleases, supporting your soul in the most harsh spiritual trials, which, although afflictive, are loving and not vindictive trials, because nothing has [to] avenge the Lord in you, but in the others for whom you offered yourself as a victim! " (Dolcissimo Iddio. Letters to Giuseppina Morgera p.181).

The centre of life in our groups

When someone went to visit Padre Pio, he would recommend that they should leave after the morning Eucharistic celebration. Holy Mass truly was for him the centre and the height of his existence, his entire day was oriented by the celebration of the morning.

Saint John Chrysostom said: "It is Christ's work to free men from the corruption of sin, but it is down to the care and the efforts of the apostles to prevent them from falling back into the previous state of misery". In fact, the value of mass for Padre Pio was so that the faithful could become one with Christ, and through the prayer of the Church the grace of God's mercy would descend upon the world. Right from the start, participation in the monthly mass and Eucharistic adoration were at the core of the Prayer Groups and this is still very much the case today. The image of the prayerful attitude of Padre Pio taken up in many photographs during the afternoon Eucharistic blessing is still quite clear in our eyes. Padre Pio's words to Blessed Maria Gargani come to mind, which constitute a



rigorous programme for her Eucharistic life: "My daughter, have no fear and keep yourself immersed in this mystery of love and pain, as long as Jesus will allow it to last. This state is always temporary: divine consolation will soon supersede, and it shall be complete, and all encompassing. My good daughter, when in this state of affliction you will pray for everyone, especially for sinners, so as to compensate for so many offenses that are done to the divine Heart. It seems to me that one day you offered yourself as a victim for sinners: Jesus answered your prayer, accepted your offer. Jesus gave you the grace to bear the sacrifice. Well, take this courage a little further: the reward is not far off ».

Pope Francis states: "The encounter with Jesus in the Scriptures leads us to the Eucharist, where the same Word reaches its maximum efficacy, because it is the real presence of the One who is the living Word. There the Absolute one receives the greatest adoration that can be given to him in this world, because Christ himself offers His all being for us. When we receive Him in communion, we renew our covenant with him and allow him to carry out his transforming action again and again. "(GE, n. 155).

The Eucharist is Easter, as it renews the offering and the covenant with God, but at the same time it is also Christmas, as it makes us bearers of the face of Jesus who is the Living One. It lets us immerse in his weakness, just as he chose to share in our misery so that we may become strong and generous in him. The Eucharist gets us to share with him the words of the psalm: « Sacrifice and offering you do not desire, but you have given me an open ear. Burnt offering and sin offering you have not required. Then I said, "Here I am; in the scroll of the book it is written of me. I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart" (Ps.40, 6-7).

Adoration through the night

Father Pellegrino Funicelli, who had just arrived in San Giovanni Rotondo as a young priest, was intrigued by the things that were said about Padre Pio. He waited for the right opportunity to witness some vision or ecstasy of Padre Pio's. Thus, during the night, just before the holy friar went to the choir for prayer, he would hide among the choir stalls in the dark, but he was regularly discovered and sent back to bed by Padre Pio. After some failed attempts, he was caught off guard: "You would like to have a vision of Jesus, right? Then place yourself in contemplation before the Tabernacle together with me ». As the minutes passed, and nothing happened, the darkness of the church together with his tiredness and the lack of habit for such a prolonged nocturnal prayer did the rest: his eyes closed and, first his head and then his legs began to give way "until - the story continues - I fell like a heap of debris on the plank of the floor, too soft for my hard and tired bones ». Smiling, Padre Pio sent him back to bed and reassured him that it is not that easy to see God in visions and ecstasies. Rather one should stay on his knees, in silence and prepare to receive him in the Eucharist

Padre Pio's Mass

Those who went to San Giovanni Rotondo to attend his Mass, to ask him for advice or to go to confession, could see the living image of the suffering and risen Christ in him. The light of the resurrection shone on Padre Pio's face. His body was wounded by the "stigmata" and this showed the intimate connection between death and resurrection, which characterizes the mystery of Easter. For the Saint from Pietrelcina the sharing in Jesus' Passion was particularly intense: the singular gifts that were granted to him and the inner and mystical sufferings that accompanied them allowed him to live an engaging and constant experience of the Lord's sufferings, in the awareness that "Calvary is the Mount of Saints" (JOHN PAUL II, Homily Beatification of Padre Pio, May 2 1999).