



From A Bishop's Journal (756)

A Taste for the Eucharist (2)

On May 11 of this year I published my fifteenth pastoral letter for Pentecost, on the sacrament of the Eucharist and on adoration.

The Gospels tell us how the first disciples were chosen and sent out as apostles: Jesus had long prepared them for the Last Supper. All we need do is read Jesus' discourse on the bread of life, and about the Transfiguration, for proof of this. Saint John the Evangelist recorded the calling of Andrew and Simon Peter, of James, John and Nathanael. He also recorded the first "miracle" of Jesus, the transformation of water into wine, an indication of other transformations to come. Matthew, Luke and Mark reported the great phenomenon of the Transfiguration, a precursor of what was to occur shortly in the lives of the Apostles. All of them talked about the Eucharist and passed on to us the words of Jesus over the bread and wine. However, John prefers to relate how Jesus "greatly desired to eat the Passover" with his disciples, and he writes about the washing of the feet as an example of kindness and service in the lives of Christ's disciples. Saint Luke records the meeting at Emmaus: during the meal Jesus showed himself to the disciples. They exclaimed: "Were not our hearts burning inside us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us?" There is no record of any particular rites for the "first communicants" who naturally joined the other Christians who celebrated the breaking of the bread or the Day of the Lord. The Acts of the Apostles spontaneously tell us that the disciples had gathered together at Troas on the first day of the week: Paul talked on and on – until the middle of the night – to the people gathered in the upper room that was hung with many lamps. A certain young lad named Eutychus, seated on the windowsill became drowsier and drowsier. He finally went sound asleep during Paul's discourse, and fell from the third story to the ground. When they picked him up he was dead. Paul hurried down immediately and threw himself on him, clutching the boy to himself. "Don't be alarmed!" he said to them, "There is life in him." Afterward Paul went upstairs again, broke bread, and ate. Then he talked for a long time – until his departure at dawn. To the great comfort of the people, they were able to take the boy away alive.

Very Few Special Ceremonies

It seems that up until the 12th century or so a child was given first communion at baptism, and this is still the practice in the Eastern Churches. The baby's lips are wet with the consecrated wine. In 1212, Lateran Council IV decided that first communion would be given to children between the ages of 12 and 14. Until the sixteenth century this communion was not marked by any special ceremony,

according to documents of the Church at Nanterre, France. From the seventeenth century on, first communion in France took the form of a solemn ceremony at the end of catechism, and then in the nineteenth century it became a rite of passage from childhood to the adult life.

Challenging First Communions

I would like to recall here three persons who left their mark on the Church and who had a great yearning for the Eucharist: the holy Curé of Ars Saint John Mary Vianney, Saint Bernadette Soubirous, and Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus. Even if they lived in different times and situations, these three people who were marked by their own social background can still show us how a “taste for the Eucharist” can be passed on in families despite wars, persecution, scoffing, and indifference. During the French Revolution, persecution of the Church broke out in France, and hundreds of priests were killed in the Carmelite Monastery in Paris and the horrible pontoons at Rochefort, the Isle of Ré and at Oléron, as well as in French Guyana. Four of my Eudist confreres were martyred, at the time, the Blessed François Hébert, François Lefranc, Pierre-Claude Pottier, and Simon Mannoury. Even Pope Pius VI did not escape the general fury and died in prison at Valence, August 29, 1799. John Mary would be unable to satisfy his craving for the Eucharist for a long time because the last wave of bloody repression had forced the Lyonnais missionaries to stop all ministry and go into hiding. John Mary was no longer able to assist at a clandestine Mass held in the now-empty barns of Écully, as he used to before going to work. Would this stifle his faith? “He already knew that the celebration of Mass was the spiritual summit of the paschal mystery and that the Eucharist offers us the most intense and perfect presence of the living God.”

First Communion of Saint John Mary Vianney (1786-1859)

It was in May of 1798 that John Mary, accompanied by his mother and fifteen other companions, made his first communion following a catechism course and a retreat. Vowed to secrecy and stationed at the windows of the place reserved for them, hay wagons had been placed to fool the “enemy;” the wagons were slowly unloaded by the men keeping watch during the ceremony. Everything had to be done clandestinely: Father Groboz who had not joined those priests who had sworn allegiance to the country’s new constitution, had prepared the children very well for their First Communion. Françoise Bouchard writes: “Imagine John Mary’s joy in this catacomb atmosphere where his impression of full union with the God he had just received was heightened: ‘Oh! My First Communion day was such a beautiful day,’ he would later tell his listeners, ‘Good Father Groboz was such a good teacher! The day of my First Communion was the most beautiful day of my life, and I will never forget it!’”

First Communion of Saint Bernadette Soubirous (1844-1879)

I would also like to recall the First Communion of two other saints, different from one another as are all the young people who make their First Communion. Their characters and way of expressing themselves are different, and their concerns are different, too. Bernadette Soubirous was born in Lourdes, France, a poor, sickly, asthmatic girl. She lived on and off with an aunt and with her parents in a “dungeon.” She was a shepherd girl, watching over the flock. On February 11, 1858 in the grotto of Massabielle she came across a woman who smiled at her. From then until July 18, Bernadette would see “the lady of the grotto” eighteen times; she was dressed all in white, holding a rosary, with two yellow roses on her bare feet. It was only on March 25, 1858 that the lady spoke to her in her native dialect, “*Que soy era Immaculada Concepciou,*” “I am the Immaculate Conception.”

Bernadette repeated this sentence all the way to the rectory, words whose meaning she could not understand. She was fourteen, and she wanted to prepare during the next three months to make her First Communion, scheduled for June 3, 1858, but she can neither read nor write. She could not keep the people from being sceptical and questioning her. On April 7, 1858 the “miracle of the candle” took place: Bernadette remained insensitive to the burning flame, during that day’s silent apparition. While all around her were talking about the marvel to which she was a witness, she alone kept silent, speaking only when questioned, without pretension and with a touching simplicity; she gave clear answers with grave conviction to the many questions that were asked.

At her First Communion on June 3, 1858, she welcomed in her heart the Immaculate Conception’s beloved Son who had been revealed to her on March 25. Very happy to have made “her First Communion,” all she said, the following day, to one who asked her, “What has made you the happiest, your First Communion or the apparitions?” was: “The two go together, but they cannot be compared. I was very happy in both cases.” People would come at every hour of the day to her parents’ home, to see her, listen to her, ask questions, and raise objections. Her answers were to the point, short, and quick. To the unbelievers in her apparitions, her only answer was: “I have not been charged with making you believe them. I am charged with telling you.” Violent asthmatic attacks often kept her in bed, and the suffering kept her aware of her limitations. “Perhaps I need to suffer,” she would say. “It seemed impossible that she could ever become a nun; her father could not afford the dowry, she was often sick; she was “good for nothing.” and was “ignorant.” After receiving the religious habit in 1866, she said: “I came to Nevers to hide.” It was in peace and humility, prayer and suffering that she lived the last thirteen years of her life.

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07-02-08