

# From the Heart of the Church

## A Personal Message from Our Holy Father

by Archbishop John F. Donoghue

*The following excerpt is from a presentation to members of Catholics United for the Faith's St. John Neumann Chapter at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, September 25, 2004.*

Along with all practicing Catholics, I know we are deeply grateful for the ministry of Pope John Paul II. In the 25-plus years of his pontificate, enhanced by the power of his personal presence in more places than any pope before, we have the added treasure of his writings—a *cursus*, a direction for the Church as she enters the third millennium. Like all bishops, I have always eagerly anticipated and then explored the messages he has brought before our minds. But the letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, holds a special place. For without a doubt, it is the most direct and personal of all the Holy Father's letters.

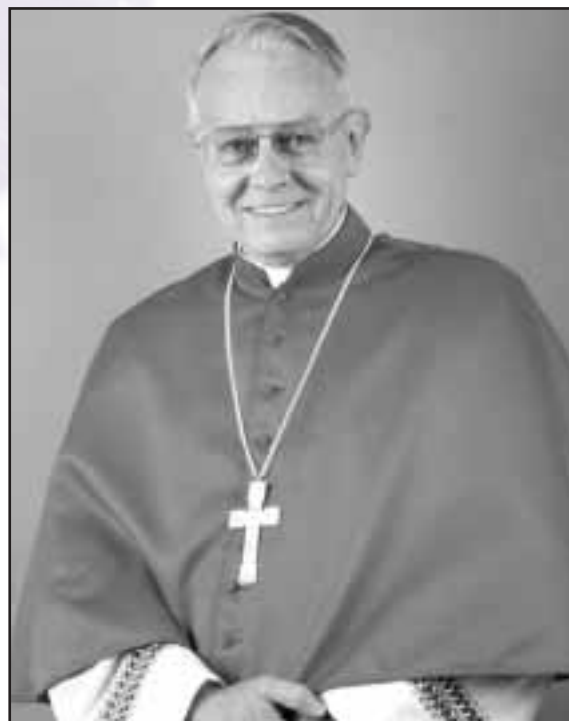
For this letter actually *reads* like a letter, or like a sermon written personally for the reader. As such, it is a gift of unparalleled friendship to the world from one of the great minds and souls of our age.

The Holy Father's desire to make direct contact with us first appears in section two of the letter, when he recounts a memorable visit to Jerusalem where he was able to celebrate Mass in the Upper Room, and as he remembers, "to repeat in that same place, in obedience to (the Lord's) command: 'Do this in memory of me,'

the words which he spoke two thousand years ago."

This personal contact is most strongly felt in section eight of the letter, which begins with these moving words: "When I think of the Eucharist, and look at my life as a priest . . ." Like an elder of our family, sitting at the table, recounting his experiences, the Holy Father continues in poetic language that verges on the ecstatic: "I have been able to celebrate Holy Mass in chapels built along mountain paths, on lakeshores and seacoasts; I have celebrated it on altars built in stadiums and in city squares . . . This varied scenario of celebrations of the

Eucharist has given me a powerful experience of its universal and, so to speak, cosmic character. Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, 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 . . . 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."



Atlanta Archbishop Emeritus John F. Donoghue

Now, Pope John Paul II, like a good teacher, pulls us back to the present, back to reality, by stating the purpose of his writing—statements like these: "I would like to *rekindle* this Eucharistic 'amazement' by the present Encyclical Letter . . ." or "This year, the twenty-fifth of my Pontificate, I wish to *involve* the Church more *fully* in . . . Eucharistic reflection . . ." or "It is my hope that the present encyclical letter will effectively help to banish the dark clouds . . . so that the Eucharist will . . . shine forth in all its radiant mystery."

“I would like to rekindle . . . I wish to involve . . . it is my hope . . .”—these are the supplications of one who loves us, who wants us to be moved by the depth of his own personal experience, and who wishes to bring about a renewal in the Church, not by academic words, but by moving us to express in our lives what he expresses in his teaching—the unending, timeless mystery of the Presence of Jesus Christ among us.

Throughout the encyclical, Pope John Paul II, sometimes explicitly and sometimes more subtly, reminds us that the Church grows as we enter into communion with Christ, that the Church is truly His Mystical Body, and that its fruition is not so much the addition of our individual selves, but how Christ’s love is able to flow more freely within those who seek His love, making us one in Him. And following from that is the truth that the genuine growth of the Church, while it may coincide with both expansion or contraction, is actually a matter of Christ growing in us—of how we receive the grace that flows from communion, and then, by charity, release that most miraculous, most powerful of true magic upon the world.

These corrections to our perception are neatly summed up in a formula of Pope Innocent III, that great pontiff of the 12th and 13th centuries, to whom St. Francis and St. Dominic presented their plans for the reformation of the world, seeking his wise approval. This giant of a man wrote of the Eucharist, “the form is bread and wine, the truth is the Body and Blood, and *the power is unity and charity.*”

### **Eucharist: Builder of the Church**

Two aspects of the Holy Father’s letter are the focus of remarks today, the first being, *The Eucharist as Builder of the Church*. In tracing the actual power of the Eucharist to bring about a strengthening of the Church, and magnification of God’s love through our increased participation, Pope John Paul II specifies, above all, these two as the greatest fruits of the Sacrament,

**“ . . . 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 . . . 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.”**

quoting *Lumen Gentium*, “a sacrament for humanity, a sign and instrument of the salvation achieved by Christ, the light of the world and the salt of the earth, for the redemption of all.” And second, an increase of ecclesial communion—that is, a perfecting of what we have each received in Baptism, the love of God, and the impetus by which, as the Holy Father puts it, “Christ presses us toward charity, inside and outside the Church.”

Following fast upon the miracles of our absorption into the person of Christ Himself, and the mystic magnetism which then draws us, one to another, into a closer and more fruitful Church, are four more gifts that make us, individually, champions of the sanctity we have received. These four gifts are: separation from sin, a commitment toward the poor, an increase of grace, and the pledge of eternal life.

Section 25 deals with the worship of the Eucharist outside Mass, and as has been his policy from the beginning, our Holy Father is most eloquent in urging the Church to practice devotion before the Eucharist in repose. He speaks of how this kind of devotion supports, extends, and even enhances the grace and faith we receive in Holy Communion. And once again, Pope John Paul II blesses our ears with one of those personal asides which make this encyclical such a precious testimony, when he writes:

“If in our time Christians must be distinguished above all by the ‘art of prayer,’ how can we not feel a renewed need to spend time in spiritual converse, in silent adoration, in heartfelt love before Christ present in the Most Holy Sacrament? How often, dear brothers and sisters, have I experienced

this, and drawn from it strength, consolation, and support!”

With equal feeling, I can easily say that of the practices I have fostered throughout my entire life as a priest and bishop, two stand out—and they are linked to this practice of devotion before the Eucharist outside the celebration of Mass.

The first is that I have been able to establish in many places the practice of Perpetual Adoration. And the second is that I have supported the custom of having annual gatherings of Catholics for the Feast of Corpus Christi, in the form of local Eucharistic congresses. I am very moved and encouraged by these two things, because of St. John’s words telling us that we must believe—that we must believe in Him and in the One who sent Him. Belief, after all, is the capstone of the Eucharistic arch. It requires of us acceptance of a miracle invisible to our eyes and baffling to our minds. For we must believe, that, without seeing it, a miracle of transformation occurs at the moment of consecration. It is one thing to say in our minds we do believe, but it is a great help, almost a relief—and certainly a buttress in support of our faith—when publicly we can stand with our brethren and acclaim Christ’s Holy Presence.

We do this in private by a commitment to adoration—and we do it in public when we participate in Benediction, in the Forty Hours, or in processions and novenas devoted to our belief. We are but human, and to fully express our humanity we must show our feelings—to Him and to one another. I am grateful that I have been able in these ways, to provide public opportunities for my people to show their belief, and I believe their enthusi-

*continued. . .*

astic reception of these practices also shows the strength and certitude of what our Holy Father teaches in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*.

### Dignity of Eucharistic Celebration

The second focus of my remarks is Pope John Paul II's concern with *The Dignity of the Eucharistic Celebration*, and in this area, the letter is not without its darker moments. The Holy Father has disappointment as well as hope—disappointment which he expresses, sorrowfully, and with a certain sternness of admonition. This occurs in section 10, in the final paragraphs of the Introduction.

In Chapter V of the encyclical, entitled “The Dignity of the Eucharistic Celebration,” Pope John Paul II makes what will probably be his final appeal that the Church rid herself of the abuses and liberties that have come to confuse and darken her liturgies, especially the Mass, in the years following the Council.

As we attempt to carry out the intentions of Pope Paul VI and the Fathers of the Council, like any initiative of the Holy Spirit expressed by the Church, we cannot escape the weakness of human nature or the assaults of the Prince of Lies. We are still involved in realizing the wishes of the Council, and in my opinion, while we have incorporated to a very successful degree the doctrinal substance of conciliar theology, we have yet to establish equal success in the area of liturgical worship.

Our Holy Father discusses the elements which lend dignity to the Mass—architecture, sculpture, painting, and especially music—then teaches, from the lesson of the woman's anointing of Jesus with precious oil, that nothing can be too good for the adornment of that holy action by which Christ's sacrifice lives before our eyes. Pope John Paul II then announces in the final paragraph of this chapter of the encyclical, in section 52:

“I consider it my duty, therefore to appeal urgently that the liturgical norms for the celebration of the Eucharist be observed with great

fidelity . . . Liturgy is never anyone's private property . . . liturgical norms are a reflection of . . . the one Universal Church made present in every celebration of the Eucharist.”

He then concludes, “I have asked the competent offices of the Roman Curia to prepare a more specific document . . . on this very important subject. No one is permitted to undervalue the mystery entrusted to our hands: It is too great for anyone to feel free to treat it lightly and with disregard for its sacredness and its universality.”

As you know, the “more specific document” called for by the Holy Father is the recently issued Instruction, *Redemptionis Sacramentum*. This Instruction, in conjunction with the new *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, and the overarching theology present in the letter we are considering, provide the blueprints and the roadmap for the liturgical reformation, or as some would prefer to say, the liturgical *restoration*, that all of us eagerly desire.

I have great hopes that this restoration is not only a possibility, but that it is actually happening. I say this, because over the past four years, I have made specific efforts, at the appearance of each of the above mentioned documents, to impress on my priests and deacons the vital necessity of studying their content and applying their rules to every Eucharistic celebration that occurs within my own diocese. Especially among the younger priests, priests I have ordained in the last 10 years, I have noticed a deep and fervent desire to restore the liturgy—to resituate the tabernacles in our churches in those places of prominence where previously they presided—to build new churches that reflect, not the existential questioning and meandering of recent faith-confused decades, but the traditional, time-tested, and result-oriented architecture of our older churches, where answers were visible in shapes and images, and where the faith grew because it was proclaimed and seen, and not debated and abstracted.

I spoke of being encouraged, because of the fervor of young priests, who have caught this same fever for putting things right that has taken hold

of me, not as a young man, but as one advanced on the roads of experience. And more than an exegesis on the theology of the Holy Father's letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, I realize, that today, I have offered you more, a reflection on how his ideas, his expressions of timeless and unchanging truth, have coincided and mingled with the experiences *I* have lived, and which I now offer to *you*, in sharing my thoughts.

But my reason for doing this is more than to present you with a reflection that I hope might be remembered as interesting, if not particularly profound. My reason is to say, that along with the fervor of young priests, the most heartening reaction I have received with regard to the restoration of Eucharistic dignity, and of liturgical propriety, is that which has come from the faithful. Not only from the hundreds who have hastened to offer their guardianship to churches with Perpetual Adoration, not only from the thousands who have faithfully traveled each year to be a part of our Eucharistic Congresses, not only from the hundreds of thousands who, as St. Ignatius wrote, “live according to Sunday,” and who orient their lives around the Eucharist, the pivotal event of their every week—not only in these crowds of the faithful, these “clouds of witnesses”—but also in the messages that I receive, continuously, from men and women, with real names and real faces, who write and call and fax and email, to thank me for what I have done, to thank me for helping to restore their faith in the Eucharist.

Well, it is nothing I have done, it is nothing really that the Holy Father has done. It is what *Jesus Christ*, our only Lord and Savior has done, by the power of the Holy Spirit—working to move, to change, to fill the hearts of people, like you, like me, like our beloved Holy Father, with this desire to do what is right, to do what is good, and to be fitting in all things, as we approach our one Lord, the One who gave everything for our pitiful sake. ■

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