

EUCCHARISTIC UNION

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The Chalice of Benediction which we bless, is it not the communion of the Blood of Christ? And the Bread which we break, is it not the partaking of the Body of the Lord? For we, being many, are one bread, one body; all that partake of one bread.
(1 Cor. 10, 16)

THE sacrament of the Eucharist is a sort of recapitulation or condensation of the whole of the Christian life, so that the ancient phrase used to describe it was that of 'the Sacrament of our Redemption'. In the words of the text we have used there is a clear reference to what we call the use of the sacrament, namely, that which we know familiarly as Holy Communion. Their meaning is made clearer by words used by our Blessed Lord when he said, 'He that eateth my flesh and drinketh my blood abideth in me and I in him'. That our Lord abides in us is easy for us to see, because, according to the teaching of faith, we receive him truly, really and in the fullness of both his human and divine nature: it is the whole Christ, God and man whom we receive in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. But how, we may ask, do we abide in him? And it is again our Lord who tells us, saying, 'As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father, so he that eateth me, the same also shall live by me'. (John 6, 58.) We abide in him, we abide in Christ, by being taken up into Christ's life, which is one with that of God his Father. Christ communicates to the souls of those who eat his flesh that same life which he has from the Father; but there is this difference, namely, that Christ has the fullness of that life—he is God; we have a share in that life according to our capacity and to our merits, as indeed St Peter will say in one of the most famous of his phrases—'We are made sharers in the divine nature',—and this, as we know, is the whole meaning of the life of grace, which the sacraments have for their purpose to develop within the soul.

The whole symbolism of the Eucharist is that Christ gives himself to us as food or refreshment for our souls. 'My flesh', he says, 'is meat indeed; my blood is drink indeed. Unless you eat my flesh and drink my blood you shall not have life in you'—namely, you shall not have that sharing in the divine life of which

we have just spoken. Now, clearly, all this is the language of love, for as St Augustine has pointed out, the Eucharist, as a spiritual and divine food, is the opposite in its effects of a human or material food. When we eat ordinary food we change that food into our own bodily substance—we master it, as it were; but the effect of the Eucharist is that it masters us, it transforms us into itself—namely, into Christ—progressively and in proportion as we use it aright. We are transformed into Christ through love of Christ, and is not the abiding of Christ in the soul and the soul in Christ thus clearly seen to be the language of love: the language of union, union of heart and of mind and of soul? Thus progressively through the action of this sacrament we take on the views, judgments and standards of Christ. Love, as we know, necessarily ends in union; Eucharistic love means that we abide in Christ and that Christ abides in us.

There are these further words of St Paul, 'For we, being many, are one bread, one body: all that partake of one bread'. The Eucharist has this added effect, that it makes us not only one with Christ, but one with each other. We are all dimly aware of a certain unity as Catholics and as members of the Church; but this unity one with another created by the Eucharist is much more than the moral unity which is common to all members of any society. Indeed, as members of Christ's Church, which St Paul also calls Christ's Body, there is a deep spiritual unity among us. Now, briefly, what we call 'the Mystical Body of Christ' means that the Church is not merely an external organisation which all men can see, but also is a living spiritual society, which receives its life and is energised by Christ, its head. As life and government in the human body come from the head, or the brain, so life and government in the Church come from Christ. Christ is the head, the energising and ruling force; we are members of that body of which Christ is head, and from him we receive that life which makes us specifically christian. Now it is in the Eucharist that we become one, spiritually and supernaturally, with each other; it is the Eucharist which is the bond and cement of that union with each other in the body of Christ. 'One bread, one body, all that partake of that bread.' As we well know, any union is based on something held in common; here that which is held in common is the complete Christ and grace, which is the principal effect of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

It is of immense consolation to think that we, who are one bread, one body, in the Eucharist, are united with the whole Church. On earth we are united with the saints and the holy ones of the Church, but we are united also with the Church suffering in Purgatory, or triumphant in Heaven. We all seek perpetually a closer unity and understanding with those whom we know and love: it is in the Eucharist that we should seek to deepen and strengthen our love and friendship for others. Those who are separated from us by death—these also we desire to have near us. Let us be assured that we are never nearer to our beloved dead than when we receive Christ, our Lord, in the sacrament of the Eucharist. For of these members of Christ's mystical body, we may say, that whether they are in Purgatory, or whether they now enjoy the vision of God in life eternal, they are one with us and present to us in the bond and presence of Christ in the Eucharist. All that we have so far said might be summed up in the statement that the Eucharist is the sacrament of divine charity, of which charity among men is simply an aspect; for substantially, love of God and love of one's neighbour are one and the same thing. Whether we love Christ or our neighbour it is one and the same thing, for in the love of our neighbour we do but love that which is simply the fullness and, as it were, the extension of Christ himself. Thus we cannot sin against our neighbour without sinning against Christ; for how, says St Augustine, can we fail to be sinning against Christ if we sin against a member of Christ?

Charity is a firm will to share our good with others; it is no mere passing sentiment of tenderness or pity, though in practice it will show all the tenderness and pity that the human heart can desire. Nor is charity to be confused with a natural love of one's fellow men, based on the common humanity which we share with them: charity is based on our oneness in Christ—our union in fact in the body and blood of Christ, given to us in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Only in the light of such a belief and only with the aid of such a force is true charity possible.