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## Penance and the Eucharist in the mystery of Redemption

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WACŁAW ŚWIERZAWSKI, KRAKÓW

### **PENANCE AND THE EUCHARIST IN THE MYSTERY OF REDEMPTION\***

The life and teaching of John Paul II are, as it were, a commentary on the Second Vatican Council, the great work of his predecessors, John XXIII and Paul VI. In his Introduction to the Polish version of the Council's Constitutions, Decrees and Declarations, Cardinal Karol Wojtyła wrote, "Thanks to the Council the Church has entered, it seems, a new phase in her faithfulness to Christ's universal mission and in her love for the Divine works of creation, redemption and sanctification". His first encyclical, at the very start of the new pontificate, is yet another act of this testimony and loyalty.

In my presentation of John Paul II's exposition of Penance and the Eucharist I cannot omit the context of the whole document, including its title. The title is clearly Christocentric, though with a subdominant of anthropology and personalism. The Christology of the encyclical is universalist: it describes the act of redemption in relation to creation and sanctification. It emphasises the task and the achievement — the achievement of Christ and the tasks of mankind. Both are subject to the predominance of redemption, the Divine act, intervention by the power of God breaking our chains and leading us to the Kingdom of the Divine Promise, to communion with God and to salvation. These objective events require a subjective resonance, a response from human beings whose answer to the proposed act of covenant is to maintain, through their own cooperation, a communion whose chief and principal initiator is God acting through Jesus Christ (the Redeemer) and the Holy Spirit (the Sanctifier). This communion is the Church instituted through the Eucharist.

Although the doctrine of Penance and the Eucharist comprises quantitatively only a small part of the encyclical, it is of fundamental importance for its full understanding. John Paul II makes it clear that his thoughts and reflections on Jesus and the mystery of redemption are put forward through the film of the Eucharist. He perceives Jesus Christ not only in the light of His

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\* An essay based on the encyclical of Pope John Paul II *Redemptor hominis*.

death and resurrection, but also through the mystery of the incarnation, which is a source of great value in the understanding of theological anthropology and which provides an appropriate framework for the theses of the theology of temporal reality. And finally the Pope's perspective extends to the parousia — the Second Coming to judgement when man shall render account of his stewardship. The wide range of this approach is made possible by the „here and now" eucharistic presence in the liturgy of "the whole Christ", Christ in all His mysteries, as is expressly recorded in some of the anamnestic formulae which mention the mysteries of the life of Jesus Christ, from His birth, through His death, resurrection and ascension, Pentecost, to the parousia. But when we say "the whole Christ" we also mean Christ living in His Church. For it is here that the fullness of the redemptive dynamism of the Son of God is revealed. Christ not only lives in the Eucharist, He is still active, and through the Eucharist ruling the Church and the world. The dynamism of the sacramental Eucharist is the ferment of the „Church of God's Mission".

Just after the close of the Second Vatican Council the question was raised what the Council had introduced to the theology of the Eucharist. The same question is still being asked. It was posed again after the promulgation of *Redemptor Hominis* and yet again, more emphatically, after the issue of John Paul II's Letter on the mystery and cult of the Eucharist (24 February, 1980). In answer to this question it is not enough to say (as is self-apparent to all readers of both those documents) that the Eucharist occupies a central position in the Church and that it has a distinctly ecclesial (and also ecumenical) note, that it is linked to the whole of Christian life, being its life-giving spring, and that it is the soul of apostolic love and devotion. An adequate answer to this question requires the precedence in the reply of the principal theme, which is the exposition of the presence of the risen Christ in the whole of the liturgy and celebration of the Eucharist. In celebration of the Eucharist there appears the mysterious presence of the Lord for His people, the Bridegroom for the Bride. This presence is expressed through the liturgy of assembly (Christ present in the community), in the liturgy of the Word (Christ present in His own words) and in the liturgy of the transubstantiation of the gifts (Christ present in the species of Bread and Wine). Finally, thanks to the presence of Christ through the priest celebrating the Eucharist, the above ways in which the Lord is present are connected by a specific, dynamic link, constituting a continuous and progressive chain. This dynamism supplies as it were a creative inspiration which brings new life not only to the minister of the liturgy, but also to those participating and coming in faith and love to meet the revelation of Love.

The Body of the risen Lord, the eucharistic Bread, the Bread of redemption and salvation carrying with it the sanctifying dynamism of the Holy Spirit, this sacramental repast in a mysterious way transforms those taking part in it with faith. Thanks to it, day by day the community is brought deeper and deeper into the realm of the Kingdom. Each day the world becomes more cleansed of sin, for penance and its offering up are an indispensable condition for fruitful participation in the Eucharist and the Covenant. Thus the Church becomes not only the salt of the earth, but also the ferment bringing new life to the world. She is made aware of this through her own identity and through her mission, through the concrete nature of her task.

It is in this extended context that John Paul II's statement in *Redemptor Hominis* on the Eucharist and Penance must be understood. If the document is read from this viewpoint, certain aspects become more apparent in it leading to further thought. A highly telling and significant point is the fact that from the very wide range of theological aspects of the Eucharist the Pope chose only one, the Eucharist and Penance. This is a very important point. To draw attention to one aspect only in this relationship, the indissolubility of the link between the sacrament of the Eucharist and the sacrament of Penance, which symbolises the link between Christ (the Eucharist) and His Church (Penance) is to contribute an extremely valuable inspiration for further study.

## I. The Eucharist

### 1. The Christocentrism of the eucharistic sacrifice

We all remember well that the abandoning of the centuries-old tradition of the Eucharist celebrated by a priest facing the same direction as the congregation, in other words facing the wall (or rather the retable of the altar) and its replacement by the new "Conciliar" altar was a severe shock to many. Although the liturgists admonished us not to regard the question as a choice between alternatives, with the altar being either a table of sacrifice or a banqueting table, nevertheless the fact is that since the Second Vatican Council there has been a shift in accent in the explanation of the essence of the Holy Mass, from the Sacrifice to the community repast. As a result there has been a rise in the importance of the liturgical assembly, which in many countries has offered an opportunity for the manifestation and celebration of the brotherhood of man, linked with the joyous meeting with the risen Lord in the Eucharist, and which has become the focal point of Christian life. The practice of trans-

ferring the tabernacle from its central position to a side chapel is a phenomenon strictly connected with this trend.

All this is true. For the life of the Christian community is healthy when it has the life-giving presence of the Lord and is aware of the presence of the risen Christ in its midst. It is the Kyrios who by His presence gives a special power to the faithful's liturgical signs and the words of its proclamations. For the Lord wants to make use of His presence within His community to achieve His epiphany through word and sign. After Easter it was during a meal that He appeared and the disciples recognised their Lord (Mk 16:14; Lk 24:30—32; J 20:19—29; Acts 10:41). Christ's presence then was an active presence. In their holy assembly the disciples experienced the truth of His promise: where two or three are gathered in the name of Jesus, there He Himself is in their midst (see Mt 18:20).

But we must never forget the first part of the drama. The Eucharist is not only a continuation of the communion, of the meal shared by the risen Christ with His disciples, it is also the presence in the Church of His sacrifice on the cross. There is no contradiction to this in the fact that the sacrament of the Eucharist was instituted during the Last Supper. It would be a mistake to claim that the repast is the essence or fundamental quality in the celebration of the Eucharist, for though the Mass may be called a sacrifice with the nature of a meal (*Mahl*) because its fulfilment and culmination comes with a community meal, it cannot, however, be termed a sacrificial meal (*Opfermahl*), since the sacrificial meal is only a constituent part, and not the most important or fundamental aspect, of the whole (J.A. Jungmann). Neither is it enough to say that the Sacrifice is a representation of the Meal, since then the Mass would not be a visible sacrifice, as it is described by the Council of Trent (Sess. XXII, Can. 2) and the whole of Tradition. It is worth noting that until the Reformation in the 16th century the Eucharist was never referred to merely as a meal.

We read in John Paul II's text, "In the sacrament of the Eucharist the mystery is continuously renewed, by the will of Christ, of the sacrifice which He made of Himself to the Father on the altar of the cross, of the sacrifice which the Father accepted, returning the unlimited gift of His Son, who had become obedient even unto death, with His Paternal gift, the gift of a new eternal life in the resurrection, for the Father has always been the prime Source and Donor of life. This new life, comprising the exultation of the Body of the crucified Christ, has become the effective sign of the new gift to mankind of the Holy Spirit, the gift whereby the Divine Life existing in the Father and given by Him to the Son is partaken of by all who are united in Christ. The Eucharist is the most holy sacrament of this Union".

The commemoration of the Sacrifice as the dominant feature in the Eucharist is at the same time an indication of how the foundations of a healthy communion and permanent community are to be laid. Obviously enough, it gives us in a nutshell the encyclical's integral thesis, as expressed in the very title *Redemptor Hominis*. Although the main attention seems to be focused on man, although man is the chief subject of theological anthropology, nevertheless the real centre is always Jesus Christ. Man's dignity is his dignity in Christ. The Pope's words, "Without Christ man does not know himself", echoes this truth.

Thanks to our participation in the Eucharist and, on a wider scale, thanks to our participation in the "royal priesthood" through which "we all simultaneously become »the Kingdom and its priests«", we participate in the „unique and irreversible offering of mankind and the whole world to the Father Himself, the offering which He, the »eternal Son« and, at the same time, the true Man, has made once and for all time". Thus the Eucharist is the most specific function of Christ the King, the function of establishing "the eternal and universal kingdom: the kingdom of truth and life, the kingdom of holiness and grace, the kingdom of justice, love and peace" (the Preface). The Sacrifice brings about unity; the Sacrifice establishes communion. Its first fruit is the Church.

## 2. The Eucharist builds the Church

This thesis, reiterated by the Second Vatican Council, has deep roots in the tradition of the Church. To find the real sense of the liturgical communion and to discover the true dimensions of every Christian communion (whether liturgical, in the family, in marriage or in friendship), it must always "be built and renewed on the salvatory foundation of Christ's sacrifice". The words of the Consecration, repeated by priests in the form of the ceremonial proclamation about the "Body which has been given up" and the "Blood which has been shed" for the "remission of sins" are a continual reminder of this. The thesis that the Eucharist establishes and builds the Church is also a reminder that the Church lives through the Eucharist. It is thanks to the Sacrifice — the sacrifice which is offered up and which is accepted, the sacrifice of Christ and the sacrifice of the Church — that the communion between the Father and the Church is consolidated by Christ through the Holy Spirit. There also takes place the bringing together of the People of God through mutual love. Their shared brotherly meal acquires a special sense. As during the Last Supper, so now too, when the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the ingredients of the meal (bread and wine) comprise the sacrifice of Christ's life, and they also comprise the Father's acceptance of this sacrifice, attested by the miracle of the resurrec-

tion. This sacrifice is a reality which has the nature of a source; for it is from it that the community of the faithful draws new life.

The Pope reminds us that "our basic task and, above all, the visible grace and source of the Church's supernatural power as the People of God, is to persevere and make continual progress in the eucharistic life and in eucharistic piety, and to develop spiritually in the climate of the Eucharist". In this way he approaches a particularly important but also immensely difficult pastoral problem. The attitude of those who call themselves „believing but not practising Catholics" is well-known. The concern of priests anxious about methods by which to bring their Sunday Mass congregations into the heart of the eucharistic Mystery and to familiarise them with the idea of frequent or daily Holy Communion is also well-known. The requirement of a mature form of catechetical instruction for adults as an introduction to the rich reality of the Eucharist acquires, in this context, the importance of a highly responsible task. Here it is precisely the aspect of the Eucharist in its perspective as „the Sacrament of Sacrifice, the Sacrament of Communion and the Sacrament of Presence", as drawn attention to by the Pope, that indicates the path for future progress.

So the matter is clear: the altar is both a sacrificial and a banqueting table. The eucharistic Body and the ecclesiological Body are inseparable; the Church is the mystical Body of Christ. She is the People of the Covenant with God. The sacrificial Paschal Mystery and the Covenant are one and the same. The celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the saying of Mass and the administration of the Eucharist are all an act maintaining the Covenant — but only because the foundation of the Eucharist lies in the redeeming death of Jesus Christ. It is His death which is the covenant-forming event. And it is because of this that the celebration and administration of the Eucharist is the most intensive act in the life of the Church, for the Church's most intense nature consists in the union achieved by the submission of the members of Christ's ecclesial Body to the standard laid down by His own servitorial sacrifice (1 Cor 11:17—34).

### 3. Opportunities for and limits to liturgical spontaneity

This problem is closely connected with the aspects of the Eucharist as a Sacrifice, a Communion and a Presence, and must therefore be resolved within their context. When the Pope talks about the "necessity of a strict adherence to the liturgical principles and also to all that shows the community worship given to the Lord, the more so because in this sacramental sign He commits Himself to us with so unlimited a trust as if He disregarded our human weakness,

unworthiness, and our habits, routine, or even the possibility of our disrespect for Him" — he indicates the true balance that should permeate relationship of the sacrifice to the community (including the leader of the celebration, who is also a member of the community).

Faithfulness to the liturgical regulations and spontaneous liturgical initiative may be determined by a proper understanding of the theology of the Eucharist which, as we have shown following the encyclical's train of thought, concentrates on the maintenance of a balance between the Sacrifice and the Banquet, as expressed in the succinct abbreviation *sacramentum sacrificii*. Proceeding along these lines, a year after the publication of *Redemptor Hominis*, John Paul II, in his instruction *Inaestimabile Donum* (on the question of certain standards relating to the cult of the eucharistic mystery), formulated the general principle more explicitly. In this document he repeats, after St. Thomas Aquinas, that "whoever would celebrate the Holy Rite in disregard of the method established through the authority of God by the Church and hallowed by tradition would be a forger". The Pope gives a personal addition: "The faithful have the right to the true liturgy, that is to the liturgy in accordance with the wishes and stipulations of the Church which has also considered the possibilities of adapting the liturgy to the pastoral requirements of particular places and communities where such need may arise. Inappropriate experiments, innovations or ideas confuse the congregation. The use of unauthorised texts leads to the disruption of the link between the *lex orandi* and the *lex credendi*. In this connection it might be worth-while to recall the warning issued by the Second Vatican Council that »no person, not even a priest, may add to, take away, or alter anything in the liturgy on his own account«. The last Holy Father, Paul VI, wrote that »whoever made use of the liturgical reform to carry out wilful experiments was wasting the Church's energy and offending her sense«".

These exhortations, requiring celebrants in particular to adhere well-nigh ascetically to the regulations laid down by the competent liturgical legislator, that is the Holy See and the local dioceses, are no obstacle to a well-conceived spontaneity. However, they provide a clear indication as to the dominant factor here. For spontaneity should not mean boundless "creativity" in continual search for innovations, just as in good music faithfulness to the score is required but leaves room for the virtuoso's creative inventiveness in his interpretation of the piece. The resurrection is born out of the cross, and life is born out of death; so spontaneity in the liturgy comes from faithfulness to the "master's words in His Gospel through the service of truth, but also through hopeful and loving submission to His redeeming power at work". This aspect of litur-

gical activity too, as mentioned by the Pope, may be linked with St. Paul's words: "Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup" (1 Cor 11:28). It is of even greater relevance to the relationship between the Eucharist and Penance.

## II. Penance

### 1. Conversion and the experience of God

Together with the erection of a "community altar", a symbol stressing the aspect of the Meal or Banquet in the Eucharist, in many Western countries so-called "reconciliation rooms" started to be set up for the sacrament of Penance alongside the confessional box. The purpose of this was the enrichment of the penitents' meeting with the confessor through personalistic elements, which (it should be noted) are best expressed through the well-conceived institution of spiritual guidance, unfortunately operating rather inadequately in the West. As a result there arose demands for a more and more shared experience of the sacrament of Penance, sometimes substituting it by a general absolution. There is a certain similarity between this tendency and the trends appearing in the pastoral practice of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The backgrounds to both reveal theological interpretations oscillating between emphasis on Sacrifice and Communion, the Cross and the Resurrection.

Basically there would be nothing wrong in this, if the correct proportions between the two were observed. The history of the Church tells us that a certain degree of polarisation, causing the alternate shift of emphasis from one to the other, has probably always been in existence. The damage started when, after the Second Vatican Council, in some countries the link between the sacrament of the Eucharist and the sacrament of Penance was made laxer, which in certain communities led to the decline of the latter. This in turn started to lead to the diminishing of the spirit of sacrifice and penance, and proper preparation for taking part in the Eucharist.

John Paul II's statement on the Eucharist and Penance shows the primary interdependence of the two sacraments. It points to the necessity of a proper preparation for participation in the Eucharist through participation in Penance; and it also emphasises the converse, the need for continual conversion as a result of fruitful Holy Communion.

"The Eucharist and Penance", the Pope writes, "are thus as it were a binary, but at the same time profoundly cohesive, measure of the authentic life in the spirit of the Gospel, a life that is truly Christian. The Christ who invites us to the eucharistic banquet is always the same Christ who exhorts us to penance and who says,

»Repent!« Without this continual, and continuously renewed effort of conversion, participation in the Eucharist on its own would remain bereft of the fullness of its redemptive effectiveness. The specific readiness to render God a »spiritual offering« would be lost, or at any rate considerably reduced".

Let us return for a moment to our fundamental idea. Between Penance and the Eucharist there exists a permanent and very deep link which can never be broken. It is generally regarded that the sacrament of Penance prepares the way for participation in the Eucharist. This is true, but it is also true that the Eucharist prepares us for full participation in the sacrament of Penance. Taking part in the Eucharist envisaged as the joint offering of Christ and ourselves stimulates in the communicants a spirit of sacrifice and penance in a wider sense than that covered by the penitential acts. It is the road leading to "the heart of the sanctuary for the community meeting with God", it is the road leading to the experience of God. Let us recall how in the mystery of Easter revealing the immensity of God's love for all men the road blocked by sin is opened. The sacrifice of the cross thus becomes not only the cause of forgiveness and the washing away of sin, but also the foundation of the Covenant with God and of friendship with the Bridegroom. This intervention by Jesus Christ is extended through the sacramental liturgy, particularly in the sacraments of initiation and also in the sacrament of Penance or reconciliation. It is this sacrament that sums up and, in a way, repeats the process of initiation in those who have followed the way of the "prodigal sons". Participation in the sacrament of Penance, known as "arduous baptism", is thus an expression of a conscious decision, the choice of the road back to reconciliation with Christ. A confession of sin is a profession of faith in God. In the act of sacramental forgiveness God Himself fills the place of sin in the human soul. Because of this there is no other way to the real meeting with and knowledge of God except through repentance. To the individual prior to this conversion God can only be a word, a concept, a presentiment or a desire, the God of the philosophers and the poets, but not God revealed through His Love, not God saying to the prodigal son on his return, "all that is mine is yours" (Lk 15:31). In His act of forgiveness God allows us to know Himself, takes us into His communion, into His friendship, and lets us experience joy on account of His closeness. "The man who knows his own sin", writes St. Isaac Syrus (6th century) describing Christian penance, "is greater than the man who brings back the dead through prayer. He who knows his weakness is greater than he who sees angels. He who follows Christ, alone and contrite, is greater than he who receives applause in the Church."

2. The community dimension of penance  
requires a deepening  
of the spirit of personal sacrifice

The Church's greatest paradox is her people, already redeemed but still having continuously to complete its redemption. In this process of bringing to completion the chief role is played by the Eucharist and Penance. The Eucharist is the centre for the cleansing and qualitative growth of the Church. It is the Eucharist that liberates the Church from sin, for during its celebration the Blood shed for the remission of sins (Mt 26:28) is a dynamism clamouring for purification and a purifying power. The Eucharist gradually eradicates from the souls of the baptised the climate itself of (or tendency for) sin, which identifies itself with the spirit of this world but which has been vanquished by the death of Christ. It is here that the Church intensifies her nature through a spiritual Exodus, thanks to which the disciples of Christ pass from death to light, from sin to sanctity. Here the Promised Land — union with Christ and with our brethren — is attained.

The sinner comes to the sacrament of Penance as the prodigal son returns to the Father. He acknowledges and confesses his sins, realising the fact of his unworthiness with respect to God and to his brethren. To his sacramental encounter he brings with him "a contrite heart", repentance and a spirit of penance. Thus the material of the sacrament is something personal: contrition, humble confession, satisfaction and return to the communion of the Church as represented by the priest. Thus in the act of sacramental Penance the communal aspect is combined with the individual one. The individual's spirit of sacrifice, in which "the individual expresses himself from the depth of his conscience through his feeling of sinfulness and his trust in God", becomes as it were the ferment for the entire assembled communion. In return the communion of the Church — by means of its love, prayer, example and particularly through acts of penance (where the communal dimension of penance is more and more extensive, especially in the penitential services) — performs a truly maternal function with respect to the individual: both the individual who needs to be brought to Christ and the individual who needs to be united even more strongly with Him.

Realising the multidimensional nature of these situations, "the Church, in her defense of the sacrament of Penance, makes a special profession of her faith in the Mystery of Redemption as a vital and life-giving reality which is in agreement with the truth about mankind's spiritual condition; which recognised human sinfulness, but which also recognises the longing of the human conscience". Thus, on the one hand, the sacrament of Penance may be seen in its appropriate context in relation to the Eucharist, particularly if it

is regarded as a privileged point of spiritual guidance; and it contributes to the deepening of penance as a virtue, on the other.

Although the Pope does not mention expressly the forms of penance in his encyclical, nevertheless by referring his readers to Paul VI's Apostolic Constitution *Paenitemini* (1966) he does indicate what he means by penance. This Constitution, which introduced certain changes in the practice of penance, established the standards of contemporary asceticism. It contains a warning against the adoption of the inner, religious character of penance only, encouraging the outward practice of this virtue and laying great stress on its indispensability in modern community life. Apart from the traditional forms of penance, fasting and abstinence, it also recommends the search for new forms. The community forms of penance just mentioned enrich the penitential practice of modern Church.

### 3. The Eucharist and Penance as a ferment in the "Church of God's Mission"

To conclude these remarks let us return to their most important point. Deliberately combining two selected aspects of sacramentology, the Eucharist and Penance, the Pope makes his aim very clear: "It is obvious that the Church, which is continually preparing for the Lord's second coming, must be a Church of the Eucharist and of Penance. Only in this spiritual profile of her vitality and activity can she be the Church of God's Mission, the Church *in statu missionis*, as revealed by the Second Vatican Council".

Hence, the Pope reminds us that it is not ourselves who have to make the Church missionary in character; that it is not our own dynamism which will make her a 'burning bush'. But our realisation of the Church's nature will transform us into missionaries. By our recognition of our own identity thanks to belonging to the Church we become the "leaven". This we experience in a privileged way, taking part in the Eucharist. Listening to the Word of God in the Eucharist, we learn and come to know the mystery of Christ — or in other words, the mystery of Christ and ourselves, the mystery of the Church. Submitting to His redeeming power at work through the sacrament, we discover in Holy Communion a source of apostolic and missionary dynamism. Thus the celebration of the Eucharist is a missionary act. This may sound paradoxical, but it is a reality. Receiving Christ in Holy Communion we receive His missionary dynamism. This dynamism contributes to our continual spiritual growth and maturity, and it also brings about the realisation of Christ's deepest wish — it kindles a great fire from the spark brought into the world by Him. The Redemptor Hominis is alive now and fulfilling His mystery of salvation, dwelling in His disciples.

"The New Life", as John Paul II reminds us, "which comprises the adoration of the Body of the crucified Christ, has become an effective sign of the new giving to mankind of the Holy Spirit, through Whom the Divine Life which the Father has in Himself and which He gives to the Son is shared in by all who are united with Christ."