

SPIRITUAL LIFE AT ITS SOURCE

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*O Sacred Banquet in which Christ is received;
The memory of His Passion is recalled;
The mind is filled with grace;
A pledge of future glory is given to us.*
—Office of Corpus Christi.

The Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist has a unique position among the seven Sacraments of the Church. Some of the Sacraments give to the soul of the recipient a distinct and permanent mark called the character; but this peculiar stability is not conferred by the Holy Eucharist, because it in itself is something permanent—the Body and Blood of Christ under the accidents of bread and wine. Some of the Sacraments come into being and produce their effects only with their administration; but in the Holy Eucharist the reality of the Sacrament has an objective existence and it is intended for constant use. The Holy Eucharist sets up in a permanent way in man's nature that rectitude and some of the brilliancy that human nature has lost by sin. In addition, the Holy Eucharist is ordained for our use as daily food—a nutriment that gives man life and transforms him into a son of God. *And I live, now not I; but Christ liveth in me.*¹

The Holy Eucharist is the greatest of all the Sacraments primarily because of the content of the Sacrament—the Body and Blood of Our Lord, and secondarily because of the incommensurable effects produced in the soul by its worthy reception. St. Thomas Aquinas, the Doctor of the Holy Eucharist, has treated of the effects of this Sacrament in countless places throughout his works but the formal treatment will be found in the Third Part of the immortal *Summa Theologica*; in the *Opuscula Varia*, Opusculum LI—"Concerning the Venerable Sacrament of the Altar" and in the well-known Office of Corpus Christi in the Breviary.

St. Thomas teaches that the specific effect of the Holy Eucharist is the reception of grace by the soul. Now this grace is not merely actual grace but habitual grace and the accidental infusion of certain virtues as well. Not only are these gifts

¹Gal. ii, 20.

bestowed but they are aroused to act. *The charity of Christ presseth us.*² St. Thomas calls the Eucharist "the Sacrament of Love (Charity); it signifies love and effects love."³ Charity follows grace and it is that virtue which has for its special office the union of God and man. Since the Holy Eucharist is the greatest of all the Sacraments and since it contains the source and fulness of all grace, its special grace is the perfection of the virtue of Charity. Under its action man undergoes a transformation. As Saint Thomas describes it, it is "a transformation of man into Christ by love."⁴

Saint Thomas offers four reasons why the Holy Eucharist confers grace. First, the Eucharist contains the cause of grace, viz., Christ, Who just as He visibly bestowed the life of grace upon the world by His coming into the world, by coming to man through the medium of this Sacrament, He thereby causes the life of grace in him. *He that eateth Me, the same shall live by Me.*⁵

Secondly, the Holy Eucharist represents Christ's Passion and therefore works in man the effects which Christ's Passion wrought in the world. *This is My blood . . . which shall be shed for many unto the remission of sins.*⁶

Thirdly, the Holy Eucharist is given by way of food and drink and therefore does for the spiritual life all that material food does for the corporeal life, by sustaining it, by promoting its growth, by restoring it to health and by giving delight to the appetite. In promoting growth, in contradistinction to ordinary food, there never comes a time when the Eucharist fails to increase spiritual advancement in the worthy recipient. The Eucharist unites man to Christ and once the soul is so united it is susceptible of increased graces in accordance with the greater frequency and intensity of the acts of charity which prompt, direct and control all the activity of man's nature. It thus fits a man for progress in perfection. The reparative power of the Eucharist makes good the damage done and lessens the possibility of such injuries in the future—injuries caused by the habits of sin, the natural tendency towards all sins and the frequent commission of venial sins. These are all causes of

² I Cor. v, 14.

³ *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 78, a. 3, ad 6.

⁴ *IV Sent.* Dist. XII, q. 2, 1.

⁵ *John* vi, 28.

⁶ *Matt.* xxvi, 28.

spiritual deterioration. The delight imparted by the Sacrament does not necessarily imply an impression of sensible exhilaration. Sometimes as a special gift, sensible sweetness does accompany the reception of the Sacrament, but the delight referred to by St. Thomas is essentially spiritual, manifested in fact by the ease and completeness of the act of charity. Love and contrition spring from the heart, and the soul is ready to accept whatever sacrifice is demanded of it. *For My flesh is meat indeed and My blood is drink indeed.*⁷ *Eat, O friends, and drink, and be inebriated, my dearly beloved.*⁸ *Thou hast given them Bread from heaven containing in Itself all sweetness.*⁹

Fourthly, the species under which the Eucharist is given denotes charity or the union of the members of Christ's mystical body in love. In this unity each partaker of Christ's Body, being transformed into Christ, is united with every other partaker. Each communicant is one with Jesus and one with his fellow communicants. Concerning this unitive power of the Sacrament St. Thomas quotes Saint Augustine: ". . . for out of many grains is one thing made, viz., bread; and many grapes flow into one thing, viz., wine." "O Sacrament of piety! O sign of unity! O bond of charity!"¹⁰

A second effect of the Holy Eucharist is the pledge it gives of future glory. Glory is defined as the perfect union of the soul with God in charity and knowledge. St. Thomas treats of the Holy Eucharist as a pledge of eternal glory from two aspects. First, he considers it on the part of Christ Who is contained therein and from the part of His Passion represented by it. Jesus promised eternal life to His partakers when He said: *If any man eat of this bread, he shall live forever.*¹¹ By His Passion Christ opened to us the way to eternal life. *This is the chalice of My Blood, of the New and Eternal Testament.*¹² Secondly, St. Thomas considers the Sacrament in its use and in its species. The consumption of this spiritual food and the unity indicated by the species of the bread and wine may be had in this life, but not with the perfection concomitant with the state of glory. The Kingdom of Heaven begins in this life and is fully developed in eternity. Here we feed on the Bread of Life hidden under the sacramental

⁷ John vi, 56.

⁸ Cant. v, 1.

⁹ Office of Corpus Christi.

¹⁰ St. Aug. Comment. In Joann.

¹¹ John vi, 52.

¹² Canon of the Mass.

veil; in Heaven we shall share the Bread of Angels fully revealed. The Holy Eucharist does not at once admit us to eternal glory but it gives us the power to attain it. The Passion of Christ is the sufficient cause of glory but we are not thereby immediately admitted to it. St. Paul says: *we suffer with Him, that we may be also glorified with Him.*¹³

Other effects of the Holy Eucharist refer to the presence of sin in the soul of the recipient. St. Thomas first mentions the relationship of the Sacrament to mortal sin. While the Eucharist has the power from the Passion of Christ of forgiving all sins, since the Passion is the font and cause of all forgiveness, the effect of the Sacrament is impeded when the recipient places an obstacle of such magnitude as mortal sin in its path. Nourishment is given to the living and not to the dead. The Eucharist is nourishment for the spiritually alive and those in mortal sin are spiritually dead. However, the Holy Eucharist may effect the forgiveness of sin when the Sacrament is received by one who is actually in the state of mortal sin but who is unconscious of his guilt.

In considering the effects of the Sacrament in regards to venial sin, St. Thomas distinguishes between the outward sign of the Sacrament and the reality of the Sacrament. The outward sign of the Sacrament is nourishing food. Now in our daily activity our tissues are continually being taxed and food becomes a necessity in order that the daily loss may be restored. In the spiritual order the daily commission of venial sins lessens the fervor of charity but does not destroy it completely. Since we take food for corporal repair, the Eucharist becomes the divinely appointed remedy for spiritual repair. While venial sins are not opposed to the habit of charity they are opposed to the fervor of its act, but by the efficacious activity of the reality of the Sacrament the fervor of the act is increased and thus venial sins are forgiven. It is the certain stand of St. Thomas that venial sins are remitted by means of acts of charity excited in the individual by the Sacrament, which acts express a virtual displeasure towards venial sin. The presence of venial sin does not lessen habitual grace and habitual charity, but it does hinder the increase of grace and charity in act, for it diminishes the fervor of charity and has a preventative influence on the practice of virtue. The presence of venial sin may also hinder to a cer-

¹³ *Rom. viii, 17.*

tain extent the actual assimilation of that spiritual sweetness which is a secondary effect of the Sacrament, because of the distraction suffered by the communicant.

Another effect of the Holy Eucharist as explained by St. Thomas is the preservation of man from future sin. Man is preserved from future sin in much the same way as the body is preserved from death. Man's nature is preserved from inner decay by the use of food and is protected from outward assaults by the weapons man uses for his defence. The Eucharist by uniting man to Christ through grace, strengthens the spiritual life—the life within. The Eucharist is a sign of Christ's Passion by which the devils are conquered, and thus it repels all those exterior assaults characteristic of man's daily struggle. While the Holy Eucharist does not make it impossible for a man to sin in the future, it does, however, build up in the heart of man a direct appreciation for good and an increased desire to seek and follow good for the love of Jesus.

The Holy Eucharist is an efficacious means for the remission of part of the punishment due to sin. According to St. Thomas it does not remit all the punishment, for it was not instituted for satisfaction but as a spiritual nourishment which strengthens the union between Christ and His members. However, because this union is the effect of charity, from the fervor of which man obtains forgiveness of sin, remission is granted according to the measure of his devotion and fervor. As a sacrifice the Eucharist has the power of satisfying for all punishment since its value is infinite, but on the part of the one offering and on the part of those for whom the sacrifice is offered, the satisfactory power is not such as would remit all punishment, for the sacrifice has in its application a finite effect. The measure of the devotion of the offerer and of those for whom it is offered determines the quantity of punishment remitted. If only a part of the punishment is taken away it is not due to a defect in the power of Christ but to the quality of the devotion of man.

Such are the effects of the Holy Eucharist as taught by the Angelic Doctor, St. Thomas. The story of his life gives a complete picture of a man whose every deed was centered about the Holy Eucharist. To Jesus in the Holy Eucharist he dedicated all his powers, all his aspirations and all his works. When he speaks he does not present a theory; he is relating a true story of the place of the Holy Eucharist in his own life. He is giving us the key to sanctity—that sanctity that gained for him, under

God, the eternal possession of God Himself in all knowledge and in all love.

The doctrine of St. Thomas has formed the matter of this article, and accordingly nothing could be more fitting in the nature of a conclusion than his own words in tribute to the Sacrament of Jesus' love for men. The following paragraph is taken from his Fifty-Seventh Opusculum and is found in part in the lessons of the second nocturn for the Feast of Corpus Christi. It is a complete tribute from a man whose pen ever indicates the state of his heart—a heart closely united to the Source of all activity through Jesus in the Blessed Eucharist.

"There can be nothing more health-giving than this Sacrament. Thereby are sins purged away, strength renewed, and the soul fed upon the fulness of spiritual gifts. This Supper is offered up in the Church both for the living and the dead. It was ordained to the health of all; all receive its bounty. Nothing can be more replete with delight than this Sacrament the glorious sweetness of which is of such a nature that no man can fully express it. Therein spiritual comfort is drawn from the very source. Therein a memorial is made of that great love which Christ showed in the time of His sufferings. It was in order that the boundless goodness of that, His great love, might be instilled into the hearts of His faithful ones, that when He had celebrated the Passover with His disciples and the Last Supper was ended, the Lord, *Jesus, knowing that His hour was come that He should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them unto the end,*¹⁴ instituted this Sacrament, the everlasting showing forth of the death of the Lord, until He come,¹⁵—this Sacrament, the embodied fulfilment of all the ancient types and figures,—this Sacrament the greatest miracle He ever wrought, and the one mighty joy of them that now have sorrow, till He shall come again, and their hearts shall rejoice, and *their joy no man can take from them.*"¹⁶

¹⁴ John xiii, 1.

¹⁵ 1 Cor. xi, 26.

¹⁶ John xvi, 22.

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