

# Eucharist, Mission and Evangelization

by Andrés Motto, C.M.

*Province of Argentina*

We know that there are many people who live good lives and yet do not receive communion. This statement not only refers to non-believers and to believers who are non-Christian, but also to those members of Christian churches who do not believe in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. I have in mind the many Catholics who, even though they know the value of the Eucharist, do not see the need to receive the Eucharist frequently in order to grow in the values of the Kingdom. What can we say about this situation? In this article we intend to show briefly that the Eucharist is a legitimate and necessary way to advance in the mission. Also, we will talk about the aspects that we ought to modify in our religious practice that will make the Eucharist the source of evangelization and not merely an empty and temporal rite. Finally, as Vincentians, we cannot separate the Eucharist from its role as an essential aspect of evangelization: to work for the dignity of all people.

Above all, we want to point out that, as Vincentians, the Eucharist constitutes the source, the goal and the synthesis of our mission and our spirituality. We know very well the enormous and varied richness of the Eucharist in the life of the Christian. As such, it is part of our pastoral work to develop these for the people, revealing the rich significance for the life of the community. The Eucharist is at the same time a communal feast and celebration. It is the creator and restorer of communion and fraternity in the many sharing the one bread, It is the sacrament of love and of the life of Christ in us as the seed of the resurrection. It is the source of all holiness. It is the root and the end of all apostolic work. In its quintessence, it is the sacrament that renews for us the saving Paschal mystery of the Lord putting us in contact with him who rose from the dead in his living body for ever. Our Founder always celebrated the Eucharist with dignity, because in a certain way, the priest is his Mass. The Eucharist is the prayer of prayers. The best

way to assure that the People of God pray is by praying together with them.

In this context of the missionary value of the Eucharist, we point out the presentation of John Paul II in this Eucharistic year to reaffirm the importance of this sacrament for the life and mission of the Church. For us, members of the Congregation of the Mission, the Eucharist must help us to be contemplatives in action, to be mystics with our eyes open, and to bring about a wise peace with prophetic energy. The Pope develops the missionary aspect of the Eucharist in Chapter IV of the apostolic letter *Mane nobiscum domine*. As he does frequently in various documents, John Paul II takes a biblical passage and later develops it. For this particular topic, he selects the text of the disciples of Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35). We, just as the disciples of Emmaus, after receiving the body of the Risen Lord, ought to joyfully evangelize, giving witness to the Kingdom. Each Eucharist ought to renew in us the Christian life, giving thanks to God for continuing his project in the world. This makes us have no fear of giving witness to God in a world that presents two errors with regards to religion: 1) On the one hand, there is has a secular culture that prescind from God. It thinks that religion is an anti-value from which we must be liberated or at least have its influence reduced. 2) On the other hand (as an extreme opposite), the havoc of religious fanaticism is raised. In light of these two errors, it must be pointed out that:

*It is a mistake to think that any public reference to faith will somehow undermine the rightful autonomy of the State and civil institutions, or that it can even encourage attitudes of intolerance. If history demonstrates that mistakes have also been made in this area by believers, as I acknowledged on the occasion of the Jubilee, this must be attributed not to "Christian roots," but to the failure of Christians to be faithful to those roots. One who learns to say "thank you" in the manner of the crucified Christ might end up as a martyr, but never as a persecutor.<sup>1</sup>*

St. Vincent wanted the life of his sons and daughters to be intimately connected to the Eucharist. Therefore, arriving at a new place, the first thing they ought to do is visit the Blessed Sacrament and put in God's hands the mission that they were about to conduct.<sup>2</sup> He wanted them to celebrate the Mass with profound devotion. At the same time, he wanted them to make sure the *Corpus Christi*

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<sup>1</sup> *Mane nobiscum domine*, 26.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. SV I, 514; English edition, 1, 504.

processions were done correctly, stepping in when the processions were out of order, almost imitating a carnival.<sup>3</sup> One of the concerns of the Congregation was that the seminarians, who were formed, not only know the ecclesiastical sciences, but also that they care for all the sacraments and especially celebrate Mass with dignity.<sup>4</sup> This is a very necessary topic because in many seminaries one frequently sees candidates about to be ordained with an astonishing ignorance of liturgy and sacraments. Now, beyond knowing liturgy, is the true meaning of the Eucharist being lived in our communities?

### **Revive Fellowship in the Christian Life**

There is no doubt that the true cult is that which makes us better persons. To be better persons is equal to saying we must grow in our capacity to love. Then why is it that so many times our parishes are filled with people who do not grow, who are filled with fear or resentment, struggling for power, indifferent to the pain of the neighbor and even provoking that pain? This problem has to be resolved now with great urgency. Besides, we know that one of the objectives of our missions and our missionary parishes is to bring people closer to the Church and to revitalize the life of the parish. We have to resolve this problem with urgency. Is it worthwhile to bring people closer to the community when community life is so deficient? What can be done so that communities have the capacity to be receptive and influential?

Let us start with some existential data: some time ago, a certain phenomenon began in many parishes. Catholics decided that they were going to go to Mass (or receive the sacraments) where they find a cordial reception, some friendly faces, a lively liturgy, and preaching that is sensitive to their needs. Without considering ecclesiastical jurisdiction, they go to the parish community where they feel welcome effectively and affectively. This approach is felt primarily in the outward sign of the Church: a dynamic Eucharist. There are many Catholic Christians whose tie to the Church does not involve the Sunday liturgy, and who have little value for the sanctions of not fulfilling the precepts of the Church.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. SV II, 527; English edition, 2, 575-576.

<sup>4</sup> St. Vincent attributes this idea to Fr. Bourdoise: "Before him, no one knew what it was [a seminary for learning the rubrics]; there was no special place where they were taught; a man, after his philosophy, after his theology, after the least studies, after a bit of Latin, went forth to a parish and administered the sacraments there in his own style; that is what made for such great diversity" SV XII, 289.

<sup>5</sup> The ecclesiastical law with regard to assistance at Sunday Mass and many other questions has not changed, but Catholics have assumed that they

It seems that Catholics will not be going backward with regard to this style that they have initiated. This was not a process that was orchestrated or programmed, but rather a change of sensibility that rose up more or less spontaneously in various sectors. Perhaps, due to “these disobediences” God himself is calling to a greater authenticity, to leave a pharisaical practice and enter into a liturgy that is more authentic. I believe that, as missionaries, we ought to sit down with the people and talk with them. We ought to come down from our clerical throne to understand what is happening. At the same time, if we effectively want to draw the people closer to the Church of the Lord, we ought to convert the Eucharist into gatherings of communal praise, full of fervor, enthusiasm, interest and so much so that the motivation to participate in the “Day of the Lord” comes not from fear of sin, but rather from the interior need of Christians to encounter God and community. In this aspect, I consider dangerous the path of certain renewal sectors (frequently inside the actual Church), where the only way out consists in being faithful to the past.

To be missionaries today implies going out to meet the needs of the people. This is more important than where to put the flowers. It means we must understand the hopes, the fears, the struggles and the needs of the people. The hurt and suffering people need a word that can help them understand and resolve conflicts in life. We know that the Eucharist is always preceded by the word. In this context, what value is there in a boring, uninteresting, poorly prepared homily, when the preacher does not know when to stop, which goes on endlessly, which does not offer anything useful for daily life; a homily that is not shared with anyone, saying things that are not felt nor lived. To all this we add horrible songs, a defective sound system, a place not well prepared and not less the people.... It also happens that there are parishes where the celebrations are “correct,” but they do not respond to the spiritual needs of the people. This is to say that the celebrated Eucharist ought to be an experience of the richness of the Christian mystery and therefore should evangelize in a personal way. We cannot keep the faithful and ourselves in infantilism. We cannot encourage a liturgy that maintains the people in loneliness, depression and pain.

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on their own can change the law. Even today it is frequent that actually almost all the Catholics that are in the church come forward to receive the sacrament. Up to a few years ago, a large number did not go to receive, some simply because they had missed Mass the previous Sunday. Today, many adults and youth go to communion even though they are aware that their lives are not always in agreement with Church laws. Cf. ANDREW GREELEY, “The Children of the Council,” in *America*, 7 (2004) 8-11.

The other need is participation. There is little value in the missionary who brings the people closer to the Church so that they can have a life of mere spectators. Certainly, participation in the Christian life does not consist only in liturgical activities, but even at that much attention should be paid to all that promotes participation. We must remember that the People of God are primarily responsible for the liturgical action. If this is so, the result is that the spiritual life of the parish and of the community will be profoundly transformed by the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. In the liturgy, all ought to be transformed. The liturgy should be very prayerful, as Anselm Grün, the “transformer,” points out.<sup>6</sup> The rites that we celebrate in the liturgy are “transformers” and the rite itself is a way that leads us to the transformation. Each time that we celebrate a rite, we are heading for an interior transformation. The central rite of transformation is the Eucharist. In it, we celebrate the transformation of the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. Products of creation are transformed into divine gifts. Besides, in the Mass, we celebrate (or we ought to celebrate) our own transformation. Our daily lives, our work, our sentiments, and our joys are transformed into joy and divine life. All the sacraments are, in the last instance, ways of transformation.

To draw the people to the Eucharist is to make them discover the transforming force of the liturgy, in the first place by the *anamnesis* or remembrance. Participating in the past salvific action, those who take part in the liturgy are drawn out from the routine and the boring to be filled with the force of a super-personal and divine event. Also, one is transformed by participating in the liturgy of heaven. People are elevated above the routine and monotonous to be brought to the superior and divine powers that transform us into new beings. Finally, the transformation in the liturgy has a place for anticipation too. The future opens up in the present and transforms it. In this sense, the very liturgical year, prayed attentively, gives us many symbols of transformation. C. Jung said that the Christian liturgy, with its richness in signs, gestures and words, was, even without consciously seeking it, a true therapeutic system.

The question is: Do we live the transforming power of the Eucharist? At times, we have to admit sadly that the moment of the corporal action, of the signs, of the very celebration is relegated. As pastors, it would be our task to organize the liturgy in such a way that it has a new transforming force. This includes not only the external forms, but all that they realize. The people ought to

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. ANSELM GRÜN, *Transformació* (Lumen: Buenos Aires, 1997) 73-82.

experience something happening if one, day in day out, goes to church and lives the liturgy. This certainly would be an opportunity for receiving the grace of God, if the rites are not done superficially. Even more, how much can the Sunday liturgy transform a family that relates to God during one hour? How much can daily Mass transform one who discovers Christ? Naturally, these transformations do not always appear visibly. These transformations take place slowly, and at times imperceptibly, but really. It is also certain that the People of God will be helped if we, the clergy, pray and celebrate the Eucharist with devotion, putting our life on the altar, with all its interior and exterior conflicts. Our life, slowly transformed by God, will make us live in greater communion with all.

Another element to improve is strengthening hospitality in our communities. For example, the Bishops in the United States, in a message to young adults, said: "We must be aware of the pain of so many of you who feel unwelcome and alone, strangers in the house of God."<sup>7</sup> We know that this reality is repeated in many places and within other sectors of society.

Ordained ministers have to be aware that Christ is present in the person of the minister, but that we are not the center of congregation's attention. It is for this reason that humility must accompany in a very special way the liturgical service. To preside does not mean to do everything nor to give orders in a demanding way. It implies teaching, delegating, coming to a consensus, hoping, modifying, etc., attitudes that require the practice of the virtue of humility. Prayer, like all activities of love, implies a great giving. The one who uses liturgy to show off talents, to gain fame, to preach to himself, in short, to find himself, still has to grow much in love. A new reason for going in search of humility is that it teaches us to love just as Christ in the Eucharist.

Searching for a more participative Eucharist should make us think about games and festivals, as strange as it seems. Let us observe the game.<sup>8</sup> Understood in its full sense, it is present in the participation of the rites, traditions and liturgies. What we observe in the game is: serious (because it has rules that must be followed); 2) interesting (because each one makes the effort, is attentive and enjoys him/herself); 3) humble (because that which is most important is not the individual, but something external, e.g., a ball). The liturgy can be considered a game in the religious sense. For this reason, it

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<sup>7</sup> UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS, *Message to young adults*, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. JOHANN HUIZINGA, *Homo Ludens* (Emece: Buenos Aires, 1972) 11-42; HANS GADAMER, *Truth and Method* (Continuum: New York, 2003) 101-113.

would not be bad to come to the liturgy with the desire to play instead of experiencing it so solemnly. We repeat, we use the word game not in the physiological sense but rather as a cultural attitude of relaxation and entertainment.

We now move to the concept of feast.<sup>9</sup> We are conscious of how people feel drawn to feasts and we also know that many Christians do not live the liturgy as a feast. This is true in part because the clergy do not celebrate it as a feast. We know from anthropology that the feast is a rupture from daily life. It is a parenthesis in the face of daily tensions. This implies an air of gratitude and joy. It is the vital response opposed to business (that is why worldly feasts are not always true feasts). It is the capacity of contemplation, of knowing how to “waste time,” accepting life as gift and grace in an atmosphere of esthetics and play. Happiness is part of the feast, with its thousands of expressions in dress, food, drink, dance, song, etc., even up to a certain extravagance and abundance. Besides, all feasts presume the presence of the community or a social dimension of coming together among members of a group with an open spirit of wanting to know one another. In this way, all barriers are torn down and the identity of the group is celebrated in a joyful way. The feast also has a certain ritual, that captures the spirit of the group. It has a more or less fixed structure either inherited or invented. The feast is also in intimate relation with time. It is the celebration of a determined time (today) with a lived remembrance of the past (anniversary or birthday, etc.) and a hopeful projection to the future. Oh that our liturgies might reveal the divine feast! As Eucharistic Prayer IV says: “Father, we acknowledge your greatness: all your actions show your wisdom and love.” The God of the Bible is free and happy. The first one to have a feast is God himself. The question is: do we live the liturgy as play and a religious feast?

For that, the people of God ought to recover its voice. They ought to pray in a way that the prayers, the acclamations, the responses be heard. The Word ought to be proclaimed relating it to our own lives. The music and the songs permit various and different styles in the celebrations, so that the people find ways of expressing themselves to get closer to God. We cannot convert our churches into museums of the past where only the music of the past is heard, as if the Church were the custodian of the music of the past. The Gospel teaches us to display both the old and the new of our treasure (Mt 13:52). We must use the better singers, not so that the people listen to the singing, but so that the entire community sings. There is no need to tire out oneself teaching the responses and the other

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<sup>9</sup> JOSÉ ALDABAL, “Fiesta,” in *Cuadernos Phase* 27 (1991) 3-13.

musical texts to the people of God. Also, the people participate more when they share their reflections (from time to time). The value of the word should be accompanied by the value of liturgical silence. That is to say, the Eucharist should recover and grow in its interactive format. In that way, the people will feel really and affectively pleased to have come to the house of God. Like all that I have previously mentioned, this is a task that requires perseverance, preparation and the willingness to do it.

Bringing this point to a close, we recall the advice of St. Vincent as he teaches us that a magnificent act of charity is participation in the Mass.<sup>10</sup> The Eucharist is a beautiful expression of the theme “love is inventive up to infinity.”<sup>11</sup> This is the sacrament of charity “par excellence” and it leads us to practice charity. Vincent de Paul believes profoundly in the power of the Eucharist for one to grow in charity; that is why he commented that some persons who were divided should be invited to the Eucharist with the intention of asking God for the unity of those persons.<sup>12</sup> This is to say that the Eucharist is not only to express the love of God, but also the love of neighbor. So to participate well in the liturgy, one must go with an attitude of charity.<sup>13</sup> St. Vincent tells us that to receive the Eucharist correctly, one has to prepare the heart to be open to the love of God and the love of neighbor. God asks only that we give him our hearts.<sup>14</sup> And this giving over of our hearts demands of us repentance of our past faults, abandonment to all vanity in the world and a firm purpose not to offend him again.<sup>15</sup>

So, as we can see, the Congregation of the Mission since its origins has a great concern for the Eucharist. However, the liturgy should not be understood as rubrics, nor as a fanatical completion of the ritual. The liturgy ought to be profoundly connected to the pastoral so that it be the way all people make contact with the divine realities and bring about the liberating transformation of human realities.

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. SV IX, 42-43.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. SV XI, 146.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. SV I, 570; English edition, 1, 560.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. SV XII, 376.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. SV XIII, 36-37; English edition, 13a, 41.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. SV XIII, 30-37; English edition, 13a, 36-42.

**To serve the poor and transform structures<sup>16</sup>**

The Eucharist well prayed ought to be the project of solidarity for all humanity. As Vincentians, we ought to be at the forefront of communion, peace, and solidarity with all, especially with the poor. Jesus Christ at the Last Supper used a jar full of dirty water and a used towel, and it was the solemn Eucharist. Of what value are neat and tidy liturgies if we do not get close to those who are suffering more than us and have so many needs that we do not have. To be a missionary implies that we give a warm welcome to those people who are suffering from discrimination in society, the physically challenged, people with special needs like the elderly, the economically marginalized, the socially deprived for any reason: such were the followers of Jesus. It is urgent to recall that the Eucharist is a meal shared among all. More than “receive” communion we should “share” communion!

The purpose of this article is not to develop an analysis of the actual social-political situation. We simply point out that we are happy that military dictatorships have practically disappeared. Another positive fact is that Communism in the Soviet style, with all the human rights violations implied in it, has fallen. However, the certain negative aspects of neo-capitalism have persisted and are growing. This style of society has fostered and given growth to the exclusion of the poor and maintains the supposition of being the only model of life for humanity. The superpower is reigning, submerging the world in violence and holds to no law but its own cravings. Added to this are terrorism, political corruption and the increased criminal activity of the population.

In the face of this situation, what repercussions does our Mass have? It is very important that our communities help the poor... but that task will be incomplete if we help the marginalized but do nothing to change the structures that continue creating misery, poverty and exclusion. Christian action would be incomplete if, for example, each year we establish more soup kitchens for children and do not work to eradicate the deep evils that produce in the homes of the lowly insufficient food for the children to eat. The Vincentian mission continues in the active commitment in favor of a more just and fraternal society. John Paul II says:

*In the Eucharist our God has shown love in the extreme, overturning all those criteria of power which too often govern*

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. GUSTAVO GUTIERREZ, *Teología de la liberación* (Sígueme: Salamanca, 1990) 300-320; SEGUNDO GALILEA, *Espiritualidad sacerdotal* (Ed. del Seminario Pontificio Mayor: Santiago de Chile, 1991) 5-46; 67-72; JEAN-MARIE AUBERT, *Compendio de la Moral Católica* (Edicep: Valencia, 1991) 228-234.

*human relations and radically affirming the criterion of service: "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all" (Mk 9:35). It is not by chance that the Gospel of John contains no account of the institution of the Eucharist, but instead relates the "washing of feet" (cf. Jn 13:1-20)... We cannot delude ourselves: by our mutual love and, in particular, by our concern for those in need we will be recognized as true followers of Christ (cf. Jn 13:35; Mt 25:31-46). This will be the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations is judged.<sup>17</sup>*

I would like to point out that when I make a retreat, I always discover that I am not praying enough and among my promises I tell myself that I must pray more. I suppose that this promise would be shared with many readers of this article. It seems that one has a hard time in finding equilibrium. That is to say, we always have a bad conscience in light of prayer. This can be a good thing in a way. Affirming all this, I can honestly also point out: I like to recall that St. Vincent repeats the centrality of charity in a way that subordinates piety to evangelizing activity. This is expressed in things that are real and yet strange for the ritualistic mentality, such as leaving Mass to attend to a poor person: "You are right in having no scruple about missing Mass to assist the poor, for God prefers mercy to sacrifice."<sup>18</sup> He emphasized to the sisters that they ought to participate in daily Mass, but for as sublime as that is, they should still omit it for the sake of serving the poor<sup>19</sup> In this way, they affirm that the true love of God is found in the love of neighbor. It is to be understood that charity is the absolute norm and to fulfill that duty is above and beyond all other obligations. We find these teachings of the great commandment of love of God and the neighbor explained by Jesus (Lk 10:25-42), which are found in the diptych of the good Samaritan and of Martha and Mary. In certain situations of emergency, God himself "leaves his place" to attend to others:

*There are some occasions in which it is not possible to observe the order of day; for example, there is a knock on the door while you are at prayer and the sister has to go attend a poor sick person in an emergency; what should she do? She would do well to go and leave her prayer, or rather in continuing it, because God asks this of her. Because, you see, charity is above all the rules and everything must relate to it. It is a great*

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<sup>17</sup> *Mane nobiscum domine*, 28.

<sup>18</sup> SV VII, 52; English edition, 7, 66.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. SV IX, 42.

*lady. One must do all its commands. In this case, then, it is to leave God for God. God calls you to pray and at the same time calls you to attend this poor sick person. This is a called leaving God for God.*<sup>20</sup>

This text reminds us that the fundamental virtue of the Christian life is charity. Of course, charity without prayer is empty.

We understand that the mission of the Church is to place itself right there where the celebration of the Lord's supper and human fraternity are indissolubly united. The first task of the Church is to celebrate with joy the gift of the salvific action of God in humanity, realized through the death and resurrection of Christ. This is the Eucharist: memorial and thanksgiving. For that reason, it is really a feast. It celebrates the joy that one desires and that one seeks to share. The Eucharist is realized in the Church and, simultaneously, the Church is built up by the Eucharist. In the Church we celebrate that which was realized outside the building up of the Church in human history. This work, creative of a profound fraternal humanity, gives its *raison d'être* to the Church.

In the Eucharist we celebrate the mystery of human fraternity, which includes the dignifying of each and every human being. We recall that the Last Supper is presented having as a backdrop the Jewish Passover, which celebrates the liberation from Egypt and the covenant of Sinai. This was God's action in favor of a people who were living an intolerable economic and political situation. The work of Yahweh implied a salvation, therefore, which included the economic and political.

We know that the work of Jesus Christ, lived with such strength in the Eucharist, fights sin. However, we often forget that the political and economic injustices are part of the sin from which Jesus came to redeem us. How many Eucharists beautifully celebrated are absolutely indifferent to social injustices and conflicts! The "institutional violence" that Medellín denounced is frequently accompanied by institutionalized hypocrisy. This has become a real scandal for those who seek in the Church the defender of all people, as Jesus Christ wanted. It is very striking how conservative sectors have blown up some moral themes, minimizing themes related to social ethics, celebrating Masses where leaders who are oppressors of the people receive communion. It is true that this has occurred more often in the past than now, but we cannot say that these practices have been banished or that they will not come back to intensify.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> SV X, 595.

<sup>21</sup> We have to recognize that a part of the Catholic Christians, including many who were formed in a Catholic educational environment, frequently

In conflictive situations, a Eucharist that does not bring about a real commitment against injustice and in favor of the marginated is an empty rite, contrary to the teachings of Christ, who despite our inconsistencies, continues to be present in the consecrated bread. Eucharist and social justice are much more closely united than they appear in many parishes. Still, the ideological influence, which leads to individualistic worship or closed to the social question, or even worse, to celebrating in a triumphalist manner for those holding power, is strong. "To bring about the memorial of Christ" in the Mass is more than carrying out an act of worship: it is to accept the sense of a life that ended in death, at the hands of the powerful of this world, for love of the rest.

In this Eucharistic Year, we ought to commit ourselves as Vincentian Family to taking a clear position of denouncing the actual situation of social injustice and collaborating in the process of seeking a more human world order. This will happen, to a good extent, by applying the teachings of the Social Doctrine of the Church. Each Eucharist ought to be a liturgical manifestation of a permanently lived reality: the attitude of solidarity with the oppressed and disenfranchised. We ought to maintain an active hope, trusting that we can construct the Civilization of Love each time with greater determination. As custodians of the liturgical action, we must be prophets who unite Word, Eucharist and dignifying of the other.<sup>22</sup> There are times when this prophetic Eucharistic stance can bring Christians to loneliness, marginalization and even to martyrdom. That is why each Mass teaches us, like our Master, to be ready to shed our blood for love.

The contact with Christ in the Eucharist should lead us to greater contact with the Bible in order to separate worship from the Marxist and capitalist ideologies in their pure and severe forms. But

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find themselves tied to social systems that foster social exclusion. We have contributed in many places to creating a "Christian order," giving a certain sacred backing to unjust situations, especially those of the powerful against the weak. At times, the Christian has ended up being a piece of the dominant system or having accommodated the evangelical message to justify military dictatorships, brutal capitalism, guerrilla violence, war, religious fanaticism, etc. In this situation, all apolitical positions usually express: 1) cowardice, 2) covert social disinterest, 3) subterfuge to continue allowing the powerful to exploit the rest, 4) lack of a critical sense, 5) camouflage of pre-existing political pacts.

<sup>22</sup> Here we want to affirm that opting for the Christian God is opting for justice, with the complexity that these questions contain. To better clarify them it is convenient to leave to one side: 1) the ambiguous and impoverished simplifications, 2) the demonization of some social sectors and the idealization of others.

we also ought to separate ourselves from religious fanaticism (which also shakes Catholicism in its neo-conservative versions), so as to lose the missionary sense, thinking that we have nothing to announce. All is a question of equilibrium. We cannot return to a pretended evangelical “purity” that leads us to get farther away from human realities, among which are social conflicts. Also, we ought not to reduce the Christian richness to social work. Rather, we ought to develop, from the point of view of the Eucharist, a reflection, a spirituality and an ethic that lead us to encounter God through others. Without a doubt, these are the bases of spirituality and the Vincentian ethic. Christian faith cannot forget eschatology, but eschatology cannot be an excuse to want nothing to do with human things.

It is necessary to confront decisively this challenge which supposes that we look at reality and make the decision to transform it. Our Eucharists cannot serve for us to be unconcerned by the suffering of others. This is not acceptable, neither in a human or Christian way. Social conflict, currently emphasized by some neo-liberal schools, is a sad historical reality. For as difficult and risky as the task might be, we have to see this situation in the light of faith and the demands of the Kingdom. The problem is this: the question is how charity, inspired by faith, can work to seek creative solutions. One of the essential propositions, from Eucharistic love, is to attain the exclusion of hatred, lack of interest, and the reciprocal exploitation of diverse social groups. To participate evangelically on the side of justice and the excluded implies commitments, taking stances, being opposed to certain practices, defending as “not negotiable” human rights, etc. All this is done out of love and to put down social violence (which is always the absence of love). For example, John Paul II appreciates Christians who participate in solidarity movements in the work world: *“The Church is firmly committed to this cause, for she considers it her mission, her service, a proof of her fidelity to Christ, so that she can truly be the ‘Church of the poor.’”*<sup>23</sup>

The universality of Christian love is incompatible with the exclusion of persons. On the contrary, Christian charity permits the preference for the poorest and oppressed, who are already the favorites of our Master, who loved most those who most needed to be helped. Therefore, evangelizing implies affirming that the love of God is directed to all without exception, beginning with those who suffer most. No one is excluded from our love. The gospel even commands us to love our enemies. This does not take away the fact that one

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<sup>23</sup> *Laborem exercens*, 8.

must confront those who create hunger and misery, not to reject or hate them, but rather to call them to conversion. To evangelize is to never tire of the call to conversion.

So, in light of all the numerous social conflicts, many times in our own communities, it costs us to take a common stance. It seems that each one tends to respond from his ideologies, favored positions, upholding of privileges or responding in agreement with worldly criteria (neo-Machiavellianism) or maintaining a “pious neutrality” that deep down contradict the evangelical mandate. On the contrary, we have the Eucharist as the paradigm that invites us to unity, although for that one must “crumble” the various grains. The Church, in celebrating the Eucharist, wishes to be a sign of communion in history (LG 1). Therefore, she must contribute to the unity of the world, knowing that the harmony of all people is possible only by effective justice for all. In the midst of a 21<sup>st</sup> century that began with terrible violence and exclusion, the first mission of those who receive communion is to show that we believe in peace and equality. Thus, the Church will constitute an authentic and efficacious sign of unity in the universal love of God.

An important and urgent task for the Congregation of the Mission is to strengthen peace and unity today, knowing that unity is above all a gift from the Lord, that we must ask for in prayer, but it is also our job. This vocation to unity calls us, from our Eucharistic identity, to work with other non-Catholic Christians, as well as with men and women of other religions, and even with those of no religion, to build a world that respects the dignity of the poorest. I conclude this article with a text from St. Vincent de Paul that makes reference to the greatness of the Eucharist. Receive it with the devotion that it merits and spread it to others. It compares communion to a new birth of the Lord:

*The angels made the air resound with hymns and praises when he came into the world; St. John paid homage to him while he was still in his mother's womb; the Magi, who represent human knowledge, contributed their gratitude as well; the shepherds, symbolizing simplicity, also brought their reverence to him. But here is something unusual: what shall we say about the irrational animals? They did not want to be left out of this acknowledgment. What is even more unusual, however, is that inanimate things, who have no gratitude, made an effort in nature to have some so that they, too, might add to it their faith and homage. If God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, the angels, little children, persons of great dignity and exceptional knowledge; if the simple people, the irrational animals, and inanimate things contributed to the*

*birth of the Son of God — some to foresight, some to the work, others to preparing themselves — each [according] to his savoir-faire — how much more should we foresee, work, and prepare ourselves to receive this same Creator?*<sup>24</sup>

(ARTHUR KOLINSKY, C.M., translator)

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<sup>24</sup> SV XIII, 36; English edition, 13a, 40-41.