

The Ashram and the Eucharist  
by Bede Griffiths, OSB Cam

The Vatican Council said that the Eucharist is the source and summit of the activity of the Church. I have always found difficulty with this. The constitution of the Sacred Liturgy at the Vatican Council was the work of the liturgical commission. Before the Vatican Council, for almost fifty years, there was a very strong liturgical movement in the Church, but it had certain limitations, and their horizons were somewhat limited. They had prepared this constitution well in advance and I believe it was one of the first to be completed. So it stood for a certain point of view at the beginning of the Vatican Council, but it did not really take into account further developments.

What I want to maintain is that the Holy Spirit is the source and summit of the activity of the Church and in the theology of St Thomas Aquinas the word sacramentum means 'sign' and for him, in the Eucharist, the bread and the wine are the sacramentum or the sign. And the sign is contrasted with the 'res', the reality. The reality is what is signified by the sign. The bread and the wine are signs and they signify something. Then he says the sacramentum et res, the sign and the thing signified, is the body and blood of Christ. That is our ordinary understanding. But then he says the res, the reality of the Eucharist, signified and effected by us, is the unity of the mystical body of Christ. He maintains that the meaning and purpose of the Holy Eucharist is the unity of the mystical body of Christ. This is a very traditional view and the Fathers actually used the words 'mystical body' for the body of Christ in the Eucharist.

In the Church until recently the majority of Catholics thought that the body of Christ in the Eucharist is the body on the cross. Many people were brought up to think that at the Eucharist, as somebody once explained to me, it is exactly as if a sort of a screen was taken away and Jesus is there on the cross, exactly as he was, and you are present with him on the cross. This is not theologically correct. We have to distinguish what constitutes the body of Christ in the Eucharist. It is not the body on the cross but the body of the resurrection. He is present in his spiritual body, the body of the resurrection, which is not in time and space, not conditioned in any way, and is totally one with God.

So what we experience in the Eucharist, through the gross matter of the bread and the wine, is that we open ourselves to the real presence of Jesus in his spiritual body as one with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Catholics have got attached to thinking that it is only in the bread and the wine that Jesus is really present, and so the most important thing is to take communion frequently, so that you experience the real presence of Jesus. But Jesus is really present in the Spirit everywhere. In the whole creation Jesus is present in every grain of sand, every particle and sub-particle. St

Thomas Aquinas asked, 'In what way is God in Creation?' And he said, 'First of all he is in all things by his power; he upholds all things by the word of his power.' And then he said, 'He is not present in his power at a distance because there is no distance in God; therefore he is in all things by his presence. But he is not present in all things by part of himself because there are no parts in God; he is present by his essence. So the essence of God, the Holy Trinity, Christ in his spiritual body, is wholly present in every particle of matter. The whole universe is in Christ, in God. We see the veil of matter, but the reality of the body of Christ is always in God and is always present everywhere.

In the Eucharist there is a particular mode of the presence of Christ. Jesus wanted to make himself near to his disciples. People need some sign of his presence. The Holy Spirit has no sign, but Jesus wanted to give us a sign of his presence so he took the bread and wine, common food and drink, and made himself present to the disciples under these signs. You can keep that bread and wine in the tabernacle and you can venerate his presence there, but you must not for a moment forget that he is present everywhere. He is present in every human being. Every human being is made in the image of God. Beyond our gross body there is this hidden presence of God himself in every human being. We encounter God in each person. So, in the Eucharist Jesus is in a particular mode of his presence, and a very humble one. We need something to touch and to taste and to feel, so he becomes present in that particular mode for our benefit.

There is a beautiful Hindu tradition that says that the avatara, or god, is present in the image in the temple. Lokacharya, a 14th century Tamil theologian, says, 'God who is invisible himself, makes himself visible in the image in the temple. God who is far beyond us, makes himself near to us. God who cannot be seen makes himself seen. God who cannot be touched makes himself touched.' It is a sacramental presence. This is deeply meaningful but God himself is not confined to the image, not confined to the Eucharist.

And that is why I say we should not centre on the Eucharist as though we cannot do without it. In the time of St Benedict the monks may not have had mass at all, and they certainly never had it except on Sundays and feast days. The word mass comes from missa which is found in the *ite missa est* at the end of the Eucharist. It means 'Go you are dismissed.' It is a dismissal but for some reason this dismissal was taken for the whole Eucharist. In the rule of St Benedict there is a frequent mention of missa but it has been discovered that these were not the Eucharist, they were prayer ceremonies. After the normal prayer ceremonies there was a dismissal, the missa.

St Benedict was not himself a priest, and all his monks were lay people. The monastic movement was a lay movement. In St Benedict's time monks were told to avoid two people – bishops and women – because a bishop would try to make you a priest and a

woman would try to get you married. The monk was not a priest; he was a member of a lay community. Today, more and more, the movement is growing in favour of lay communities. We all feel our religious communities get too structured; we are bound by so many rules that they become a limitation after a time. I have met many sisters and brothers who feel the same thing. The community is an institution with its rules and constitutions and we are all bound by these. We lose our inner freedom. Thomas Merton managed to find freedom in the very rigid Cistercian system by overcoming its limitations and opening it up. That is what we are hoping to do today – to open up these structures, because a religious community is intended to be a community of love. You may need some rules and guidance, but spontaneous love is what we are called for, sharing in the love of God.

Today people are looking for a lay community; men and women, single and married, living together and dedicated to God and community. The lay communities in South America are a model for this. They keep in touch with the parish priest and the bishop, but they organise their own communities. They reflect on their lives, read the scriptures, celebrate the Eucharist; they invite a priest but he is only there to serve them. They live with the aim of dedicating their whole lives to God, economically, socially, and politically. This is really the model of the church today.

That is why I say we must not emphasise the Eucharist too much. It is very valuable; it is a sacrament, a great sign of Jesus' presence, but he is present in so many other ways and if we bind ourselves to that we lose the openness to his presence everywhere. Jesus is present in non-Catholics and non-Christians. So many people think that Jesus is among us, but that all these other people are outside. But Jesus is present in every human being who is open to Grace, open to Love. Many Catholics and many Protestants today say you cannot be saved unless you believe in Jesus Christ. Quite obviously it does not make sense because the vast majority of humanity always has been completely outside the Church, they have never heard of Jesus Christ. The Australian aborigines have been 40,000 years in Australia and what was God doing with them all that time? They never heard of Jesus Christ until about 100 years ago.

Jesus died for all humanity and the Grace of Christ and the Holy Spirit is offered to every human being from the beginning to the end of the world. Even if you have no religion, wherever you have love, kindness, unselfishness, friendliness, these things are the effects of divine grace in you. And if you have a religion, Hindu, Buddhist or Muslim or whatever, the grace of God in Christ is coming to you in the Holy Spirit in that religion. We are all sharing in this grace of God, and a Christian would say that it is precisely the death and resurrection of Christ, his sacrifice of total love for the world which enables that grace to be present to the whole of humanity. But this grace can be totally invisible.

The Church is the sacrament of Christ. A sacrament is a sign – the whole church, the hierarchy, the sacraments, the doctrines, the laws, are all signs of this divine mystery that is Christ himself. Beyond all signs and words, that is the reality. In fact if I were asked, 'What is the reality of the Catholic Church?' I would say that it is the communion of the disciples of Christ sharing through the Holy Spirit, as children of the Father, in the life of the Trinity. This is the essence of the Church, this communion of people sharing in the love of God which is revealed in Christ. Communion in love is the ultimate meaning of the Church. Where there is communion in love there is the church.

As Christians, and particularly as Catholics, we must value the sacraments. They have a very important place in our lives. The doctrines of the Church and the hierarchy all have their place. But this is a sacramental church. The institutional Church is a sacrament, a sign of the presence of God. All the dogma of the Church are signs. The divine mystery cannot be properly expressed in words or in concepts. No words are ever adequate to describe it. The most they can hope to do is to point towards this mystery which is beyond all human expression.

We must go beyond the sacramental signs and even beyond the sign of Christ. Jesus himself is the sacrament of God. The human nature of Jesus, his life, death and resurrection is the sign of God's presence on earth. We have to go beyond Jesus in his humanity to the divinity itself. But God himself is beyond all such signs. God is not confined to the Eucharist or to the Church or to Jesus in his human existence. He transcends all words and thoughts and signs.

Meditation is an art whereby we seek to go beyond the body and the senses. We try to calm the body, by the practice of yoga if necessary, and then to calm the senses. We do not suppress the senses, but we learn to harmonise them so that the body is in peace. Then we have to face the mind as it wanders all over the place, and we have to harmonise the mind. Again we do not suppress the mind, nor do we indulge it, but we try to bring it to stillness and to oneness, often by using a mantra. In the Hindu tradition they say it becomes ekegraha, 'one-pointed'. From wandering about through the senses and the thoughts and the feelings, we centre on the one point. At that point we go beyond the body and beyond the mind and we encounter the divine reality.

In meditation we directly experience the divine. Indirectly we need him in the sacraments and the world, but directly and immediately we encounter Christ as God in this inner experience of the heart. That is contemplation. In the Christian tradition meditation is discursive, contemplation is the point where the human person opens itself to the divine.

In contemplation we bring the mind to the point of stillness, then God can enter and take possession. This is when we meet a total reality. In death we face this reality.

So also in meditation we seek to enter into the silence which is like a death to oneself, and experience the hidden mystery.

That is the function of an ashram to enable people to discover the hidden mystery beyond this world. The Church, the world, the whole of humanity is in search of God, and it is going beyond all limitations that we enter into the divine presence. God is calling us. God is present everywhere, drawing human beings out of their narrowness, their egoism, their limitations, into himself. And that is the meaning and the purpose of life.

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