

Monastic Scribe XIII: October 15, 2021

DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME!

I want to share some thoughts about the Eucharist. It is central to Catholic life. The Vatican Council called it the source and summit of the Church. People who leave the Church seem to miss the Eucharist the most. Our Bishops are concerned that belief in the real presence of Christ in bread and wine has been waning. And they try to uphold reverence in the sacrament by limiting it to those who are “worthy.”

I have my own thoughts in what is needed in our Eucharistic devotion and would like to share some of them here.

“I don’t get anything out of it.” That’s something I have heard from people who no longer go to Mass. I can understand adolescents feeling that way and they may or may not see it differently someday. But it is sad to hear adult Catholics speak that way. It is sad because they have been formed as passive Catholics, who are passive even when they disagree with the church. The liturgy of the Mass for centuries was in a foreign language, mumbled by a priest who had his back to the people, and attended by people who recited the rosary or their own prayers. This passivity and clericalism is no longer central to the Mass since the Second Vatican Council, and yet is still clutched on to by people who want the old liturgy in which they can remain silent, passive spectators.

The “active participation of the faithful” was central to the reformed liturgy of the Vatican Council. This didn’t just mean that lay people, both women and men, could now be lectors, eucharistic ministers, altar servers, teachers. It meant that they ought to use the rights, privileges and responsibilities of their baptism in actually celebrating the Mass themselves in union with the priest. It means rethinking what the Mass is all about. It is not a time to adore Jesus but to be one with Jesus and all the members of his mystical body. It means offering ourselves with Christ, offering our families, friends, all in need, the families of the world. The ordained presbyter leads the community in union with the whole church but all the baptized offer the Mass. This understanding necessitates conscious prayer of the heart to be one with the Christ. This is an active, not passive, role in the Mass. Of course, I appreciate a good homily and good music to help me be present to this action. But I need to know my part in the sacrificial offering.

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Perhaps it also asks us to reimagine what is taking place at Mass. The “real presence” of Christ in the bread and wine is not a static thing. It is not a lump of human flesh suddenly on the altar. The Eucharist can better be understood as an action. It is the paschal mystery made present; it is the death and resurrection of Christ in us and with us and through us. After the words of institution are recited (as just one part of the prayer of the consecration), we all sing, “We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your resurrection, until you come again.”

The Eucharist is, therefore, a sacrifice, but in the symbolic representation of a meal. We gather around the altar. We listen to our common stories in the Liturgy of the Word. We bring our gifts (sometimes food we bring to church), and ourselves to the altar and place ourselves there with the bread and wine to be consecrated. At the end of the Prayer of Consecration, we sing our great Amen to “Through him, with him, and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory are yours, Almighty God, forever and ever”. Yes, AMEN. We believe we have given Christ and ourselves, and our world to be sanctified.

“Become what you have eaten” Saint Augustine said about receiving holy communion. Again, just don’t adore Christ. BE Christ in our world today. Take him with you in your daily life. Know who you are.

Be thankful for who you are. No one is saying you are worthy of this calling. It is gift. It is blessing. You have been identified with Jesus Christ and God looks upon you, as God did upon him, “Behold my beloved son/daughter in whom I am well pleased.” By prayer, study of the scriptures, good works, by taking part in the Eucharistic meal regularly, we do become more identified with Jesus Christ. We are Christ’s body in the world. We are given Christ’s body in the Eucharist to sustain us in our journey and mission.

All of this is not theoretical theology. The old adage goes “lex orandi, lex credenda.” As we pray, so also we believe. Our active worship, in contrast to a passive worship, should overflow into our active Christian life, including our efforts at church reform. Am I making sense to you? Drop me a line at joycet@glastonburyabbey.org