

“TAKE THE FLAME OF CHRIST AS YOU GO!”

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INTRODUCTION

My task is to focus, to give justice and bring the most respectful attention to what happens toward the end of the celebration of the Eucharist: the dismissal rite. It is at this very special moment that we are challenged and commissioned to TAKE THE FLAME OF CHRIST AS WE GO! That moment, as we prepare to take our separate ways and say our goodbyes to one another, has a significant resonance with the Great Commission of Jesus at the end of his earthly life: GO AND TEACH!

Practically all the new Roman Missal provides us with the texts translated into English from the *Missale Romanum, edition typical tertia*. There are, however, entirely new texts,

and I am happy to offer this presentation on these new texts for the dismissal, texts which bring fresh and needed clarity to what happens at the end of the celebration of the mysteries of the Eucharist. These texts do nothing less than connect what we have just done in Eucharist with what we live out as disciple-missionaries, a hyphenated term introduced at the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America held in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007. What is of great importance to these brief formulas is that they remind us of our central identity: we who believe in Jesus Christ follow him as DISCIPLE-MISSIONARIES.

Four of us American bishops had the privilege of attending the Aparecida Conference. It was truly one of the great ecclesial experiences of my life. Every day we would celebrate the Eucharist at the Basilica Church of Our Lady of Aparecida which can accommodate 30,000 people. There were bishops from every Latin American and Caribbean National

Conference and others invited from throughout the world, including North America, Asia and Africa.

This is what the Concluding Document of Aparecida says about the Eucharist: “it is the privileged place of the disciples’ encounter with Jesus Christ. With this sacrament, Jesus attracts us to himself and makes us enter into his dynamism towards God and towards neighbor. There is a close connection between the three dimensions of the Christian vocation: BELIEVING, CELEBRATING, AND LIVING the mystery of Jesus Christ...the faithful must live in faith in the centrality of the paschal mystery of Christ through the Eucharist so that their whole life is increasingly Eucharistic life. The Eucharist...is at the same time the inextinguishable source of missionary drive” (*Aparecida Concluding Document*, no. 251).

It is interesting to note that at the end of the Aparecida Conference, every bishops’ conference in Latin America and

the Caribbean was asked to conduct a continental mission, a *Gran Misión* which would have no end but which would continue indefinitely. The idea of this mission was to emphasize that the Church is always in mission.

Actually, the Church exists because it has a mission, the mission to evangelize the world and give it cause to rejoice in the saving events initiated and fulfilled by Jesus Christ. The missionary activity of the Church, says the Second Vatican Council, comes from its very nature, “according to the plan of the Father, it has its origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit.” (*Ad Gentes*, no. 2). The Son was sent to the Father to reconcile the world to himself. Jesus Christ is the first missionary, the ‘one Sent’ according to St. John’s gospel. Christ, in turn, sent the Holy Spirit to exercise his saving influence and to promise the spread of the Church. What we are sent to do at the end of the Mass is to be part of the epic story of God’s plan of salvation. We are reminded that we are

links in an unbreakable chain that has its beginning with the mission of the first apostles.

Just what are these new formulas? Here they are:

“GO FORTH, THE MASS IS ENDED.”

“GO AND ANNOUNCE THE GOSPEL OF THE LORD.”

“GO IN PEACE, GLORIFYING THE LORD BY YOUR LIFE.”

And we respond: “THANKS BE TO GOD.”

The inspiration of these texts comes from His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI himself. This is what he wrote in the 2007 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*:

“I would like to comment briefly on the observations of the Synod Fathers regarding the dismissal at the end of the Eucharistic celebration. After the blessing, the deacon or the

priest dismisses the people with the words: *Ite, missa est*. these words help us to grasp the relationship between the Mass just celebrated and the mission of Christians in the world. In antiquity, *missa* simply meant “dismissal.” However, in Christian usage, it gradually took on a deeper meaning.

The word “dismissal” has come to imply a “mission.” These few words succinctly express the missionary nature of the Church. The People of God might be helped to understand more clearly this essential dimension of the Church’s life, taking the dismissal as a starting point. In this context, it might also be helpful to provide new texts, duly approved, for the prayer over the people and the final blessing, in order to make this connection clear” (no. 51).

In *Sacramentum Caritatis*, Pope Benedict makes the strong plea, words that appear to be taken directly from the Aparecida document, that the most holy mystery of the Eucharist “needs to be **FIRMLY BELIEVED, DEVOUTLY**

CELEBRATED AND INTENSELY LIVED in the Church....

The offering of our lives, our fellowship with the whole community of believers and our solidarity with all men and women are essential aspects of that spiritual worship, holy and pleasing to God (cf. *Rom* 12:1), which transforms every aspect of our human existence, to the glory of God.” The Pope exhorts “the lay faithful, to find ever anew in the sacrament of Christ's love the energy needed to make their lives an authentic sign of the presence of the risen Lord” (no. 94).

All who claim any sort of expertise in the liturgy, must read and study this document, for in it, Pope Benedict places such things as the Church's work for justice and peace in the context of the Eucharist. Communion with Christ is also communion with all those to whom he gives himself, that means everybody in the world. Once we recognize this connection, this recognition, we are lead to commit ourselves to transform unjust structures and to restore respect for the

dignity of all men and women, created in God's image and likeness. When we respond in this way, "the Eucharist becomes in life what it signifies in its celebration." The Pope makes the strong plea that the Church "cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the struggle for justice" (no. 89).

The Holy Father is saying some profound and very challenging things here: the Eucharist reaches out to the ends of the world in order to save it. This is totally in keeping with what is prominent in the Eucharistic prayers.

In the third Eucharistic prayer the priest says: "May this Sacrifice of our reconciliation, we pray, O Lord, advance the peace and salvation of all the world."

In the Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II we pray: "May he make your Church a sign of unity and an instrument of your peace among all people...bring us to share with (those who have died in your friendship) the unending banquet of

unity in a new heaven and a new earth, where the fullness of your peace will shine forth.”

In the Eucharistic Prayer for Use in Masses for Various Needs I, we pray in the preface: “...by the word of your Son’s Gospel you have brought together one Church from every people, tongue and nation, and, having filled her with life by the power of your Spirit, you never cease through her to gather the whole human race into one.” Yes, at Mass we Catholics say some pretty daring things!

The Holy Father goes on to call the Eucharist, “a mystery of liberation” and in the light of this, urges all the faithful to be true promoters of peace and justice. “All who partake of the Eucharist must commit themselves to peacemaking in our world scarred by violence and war, and today in particular, by terrorism, economic corruption and sexual exploitation” (no. 89).

He addresses the unfortunate effects of globalization which has provoked “inequalities that cry out to heaven,” and that it is impossible to remain silent before the distressing images of huge camps throughout the world of displaced persons and refugees, who are living in makeshift conditions...Are these human beings not our brothers and sisters? Do their children not come into the world with the same legitimate expectations of happiness as other children?”

He makes the point that less than half of the huge sums spend worldwide on armaments would be more than sufficient to liberate the immense masses of the poor from destitution. He again connects these challenges with the Eucharist reminding us that it is the “sacrament of charity.” (no. 90)

With these powerful statements, it is quite understandable why he wanted new formulas for the dismissal rite which would underscore the need to extend the gift and challenge of Eucharist to the world.

AN UNFORGETTABLE EXPERIENCE OF DISMISSAL

In the early years of my priesthood, I worked as a missionary in rural Mexico, in places where the Catholic faith runs very, very deep. In Mexico, as throughout Latin America, popular religion is part of the fabric of the faith of the Church. Traditions abound, for example, the Advent and Christmas seasons. I recall a Christmas Eve when we celebrated the Midnight Mass. In Mexico there is a custom of *la acostada del niño*, or the laying the Child Jesus in the crib. The ritual actually takes place in the homes where the extended family, including the *padrinos*, the godparents of the Child Jesus, gather to celebrate Christmas. This one evening, every family brought a small statue of the Infant Jesus. I will never forget the sight: there were baby Jesuses all over the sanctuary. The people said, “We want baby Jesus to attend Mass.” After Mass, everyone took their baby Jesus and processed out of the church to their homes.

We the priests ran up to the roof to watch the scene. It was incredible. It was a foggy night and we could see little family groups going to their homes with lighted candles and singing lullabies to the Christ Child. They were literally taking Jesus home. To me this is an example of what the dismissal rite should do: it should inspire us to take Jesus home and to every place that we work, play, live and have our being.

THE COSMIC SPIRAL

To me the Eucharist has two forces of energy: one that summons us to the center and the other which sends us forth, like the symbol of the spiral. The shape of the spiral reminds me of the Eucharist which brings us together to the center of our Christian selves, and that is of course, the Person of Jesus Christ himself. At the same time the Eucharist, at the moment of dismissal, sends us forth the ends of the earth, similar to the way the Apostles were sent on the mission to set the world

ablaze with the Word of the Gospel and the powerful Spirit of the Resurrection.

It is most interesting to see how often the spiral appears in nature and in ancient and indigenous folklore. Spirals show up in celtic art, native American petroglyphs, Nazca earthworks, Arabic architecture, Japanese rock gardens, Hindu spiritual texts, Australian aboriginal paintings and African art. We see it in the labyrinth. Look at the shape of hurricanes and tornados, in the growth of ferns, in the pattern of leaves growing on certain plants, the nautilus shell and the helix shape of the DNA molecule. How can we forget that our tiny planet is whirling around space among millions of stars that make up our Milky Way galaxy, and the movement is that of a colossal spiral.

It is all around us, as if it seeking our attention to tell us something. It has been associated with the cycles of time, the seasons, the cycles of birth, growth, death, and then rebirth.

We Christians at Eucharist return again and again to the source and fount of the saving waters of baptism and our flame of faith is rekindled that we might set the world ablaze with divine love. After all, are we not supposed to be channels of God's love, of his life, of his grace, of his joy?

WHAT THE SAINTS TELL US OF THE FLAME OF CHRIST

When we eat of the bread of life and partake of the holy drink at Eucharist, we go to have our flame rekindled. Being conscious of what happens at Eucharist, can inflame us with Christ. Those who make this credible are the saints. Each one has his or her way of being on fire with the power of Christ's Spirit.

The flame of St. Teresa of Avila shines in her famous expression and admonition of trust:

“Let nothing trouble you

Let nothing frighten you

Everything pass, God never changes

Patience obtains all

Whoever has God wants for nothing

God alone is enough.”

St. Teresa of Lisieux was another woman of saintliness aflame with divine love and who never ceases to inspire with her lesson on love: “Love appeared to me the hinge for my vocation. I knew the Church had a heart and that such a heart appeared to be aflame with love. I know that one love drove the members of the Church to action, that if this love were extinguished, the apostles would have proclaimed the Gospel no longer, the martyrs would have shed their blood no more....that love is everything, that this same love embraces every time and every place. In one word, that love is everlasting. Then, nearly ecstatic with the supreme joy in my soul, I proclaimed: O Jesus, my love, at last I have found my

calling, my call is love. In the heart of the Church, my mother, I will be love, and thus I will be all things...”

Another example I can share with you is that of St. John Chrysostom, known for his golden tongue with which he preached the power of the wisdom of the Gospel. Recently I discovered, with the help of Father Tom Rosica, C.S.B. of the Canadian Salt and Light Catholic Television, a powerful quote from St. John Chrysostom about St. Paul: “Who could grant me now to throw myself around the body of Paul and be riveted to his tomb and to see the dust of that body...of that mouth through which Christ spoke... the dust of Paul’s heart too, which one should rightly call the heart of the world,...a heart so large as to take in entire cities and peoples and nation...which became brighter than the sun’s beam, warmer than the fire, stronger than the adamant; letting rivers flow from it, which was deemed to love Christ like no one else ever did I wish I could see the dust of Paul’s hands, hands in chains

through the imposition of which the Spirit was given...I wish I could see the dust of those eyes which were rightly blinded and recovered their sight again for the salvation of the world; which were worthy to see Christ, which saw things that are not seen. I wish I could also see the dust of those feet, which ran through the world and were not tired, which were bound in stocks and which walked on so many journeys.”

Another example is that of St. Ignatius of Antioch, whose letter to the Romans, written on the way to his martyrdom, expresses his fiery passion to see God.

“For though I am alive while I write to you, yet I am eager to die. My love has been crucified, and there is no fire in me desiring to be fed; but there is within me a water that lives and speaks, saying to me inwardly, ‘Come to the Father.’ I have no delight in corruptible food, nor in the pleasures of this life. I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the

bread of life, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who became afterwards of the seed of David and Abraham; and I desire the drink of God, namely His blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life.

Allow me to become food for the wild beasts, through whose instrumentality it will be granted me to attain to God. I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ.”

CONCLUSION

Let us be clear of one thing, the entire Mass is not to be grasped as an end in itself, for it is the preparation for our being sent. The Eucharist is the school of ministry. Part of the preparation for being sent is being enlightened through and through by the word of life and fed with Christ’s Body and

Blood which, in turn, does several things. It nurtures us, it enables us to grow, it heals us, it enkindles the fire of divine love and keeps the flame of Christ alive in our lives as disciples-missionaries. At baptism we received, either ourselves or our sponsors, a candle lit from the paschal candle and are told to keep that flame alive. “You have been enlightened by Christ. Walk always as children of the light and keep the flame alive in your hearts. When the Lord comes, may you go out to meet him with all the saints in the Heavenly Kingdom. Amen.”

A vivid reminder of the flame that we are to keep alive is what happens at the beginning of the Easter Vigil when, after the paschal candle is lit, we all light our individual candles, hold them high and together bring the light of Christ into a world of darkness. Indeed, we have all received a flaming torch at baptism. Let us keep that torch alive and make it even brighter when it is our turn to hand it over to those that will follow.

Like Blessed John Newman, we are links in a chain and must not allow the fire to be extinguished in our time. His prayer of discernment reflects what for many of us, at certain times in our lives, happens in our confused minds and hearts:

“God has created me to do Him some definite service. He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission. I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work. I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it if I do but keep His commandments. Therefore, I will trust Him, whatever I am. I can never be thrown away. If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him, in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him. If I am in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him. He does nothing in vain. He knows what He is about. He may take away my friends. He may throw me among

strangers. He may make me feel desolate, make my spirits sink, hide my future from me. Still, He knows what He is about.”

How do we keep the flame alive? How do we nurture what was planted in our hearts at our baptism?

- By being conscious and alert to the abiding presence of God in our lives.**
- By seeing God in all things beautiful, bright, colorful and joyful.**
- By connecting what we see with our eyes with the beauty around us that reflects God’s own beauty.**
- By listening to the sounds of music, not only from symphonies and the like, but also from the sounds of nature, of birds and breezes, of waves crashing, of the percussion of thunder, of horses and coyotes.**
- Above all by listening to God’s life-giving word and placing ourselves in the Biblical persons of Abraham, Samuel, Isaiah, the two Josephs, Mary of**

Nazareth and Mary of Magdala, Zacchaeus, Peter and Paul: those people are us.

- **By loving the Eucharistic action with a passion and doing everything in our grasp to grow in the knowledge and love of its mysteries.**
- **By remembering often that there is a power beyond us that is at work in our inner selves, as stated by St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: “Now to him who is able to accomplish far more than all we ask or imagine, by the power at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”**