

Eucharist of Life

The Second Vatican Council's (1962-1965) *Lumen Gentium* famously described the Eucharist as the “source and summit of the Christian life.” (LG 11). *Lumen Gentium* suggests with this formulation that the Eucharist is neither “above” other aspects of the Christian life, for there are many other Gospel responsibilities to attend to and Catholics cannot attend Mass all the time, nor “last,” as the Eucharist is truly central to Christian life and not a mere appendage to the work of discipleship. Rather, what *Lumen Gentium* wants to say is that the Eucharist is situated in the midst of the flow of the Church's life in the world. Perhaps best exemplified in the Emmaus story, the Eucharist is originating font as well as summative expression – “first” and “last” simultaneously. The People of God re-present their ecclesial experience as they gather before Word and Sacrament, destined to be made into Bread for the world. This cyclical process ensures that the Eucharistic act never remains closed in on itself but is always in motion inside of the fundamental reality of creation, including and alongside “God's other peoples,” to borrow a phrase from Jesuit theologian Gerald O'Collins, S.J. (Gerald O'Collins, S.J., Salvation for All: God's Other Peoples: Oxford, 2008). It is perhaps more fitting then to speak of the Church's *Eucharist of life* rather than its *life of Eucharist*.

Liturgy serves as the ritual and sacramental context for the process of mind, body, and spirit healing at Saint John Vianney Center. Daily and Sunday masses establish the rhythms of residential life and intensifies the moments, sometimes far-reaching and transcendent, at other times hesitant and disoriented, that are lived daily in sessions, groups, on walks, in the dining room, and in all spaces of being together. At the conclusion of their wellness journey, each resident is offered an opportunity to participate in a special discharge Mass of blessing and commission. The discharge Mass is a very particular kind of re-presentation that sums up the

resident's journey of transformation within the liturgical celebration of Christ's ongoing presence among the residential and staff community. It offers deep gratitude for the invisible bonds of love and support wrought by the Lord at Saint John Vianney Center that will continue to empower their next phase of vocational life. The purpose of this essay is to bring to a more conscious expression how this event discloses the meaning of Eucharist at Saint John Vianney Center in the tradition of *Lumen Gentium* 11 and what I am calling the *Eucharist of life*.

The Eucharist re-presents not only Christ's paschal mystery, but the entirety of salvation history, beginning with God's creation of the world. This is the deep meaning of memory in the biblical worldview; it is a mystical re-membering of the seemingly disparate aspects of time and history into the immediacy of the present and the holism of God's saving work. On this side of eternity, God's plan can only appear to human awareness as opaque, mysterious, but also animated by faith, hope, and love. If this is the case in a macro-cosmic or macro-historical sense of salvation history, it is true for each person whose unique life reflects the splendor of the whole and is constitutively linked to God's ongoing, interconnected, and universal salvific work celebrated at the Eucharistic table. Residents narrate, as the authors of Sacred Scripture did before them, the kairotic moments of their lives during either the homily or the testimonies after the discharge blessing: the call to priesthood or religious life, major family and social events, as well as the rupture of illness, consequent need for healing, and time spent at Saint John Vianney Center. All of this is made present and actualized in the Church's Emmaus memory of the One who walks with us, often with our impartial but budding awareness that He is More, and we are called to More, than the grumblings shared "on the road." The retrospective recognition of the One who made our hearts burn within us is ritually celebrated and lived to a higher degree of intensity in the Church's wider anamnesis and offering of bread and wine, where Christ's

presence among the Body – right here in Downingtown - is sacramentally celebrated. This memory makes present the relationships in whom Christ worked to bring about the reconciliation of new life and incorporates them into the Church's great thanksgiving of praise. At Saint John Vianney Center, the discharge Mass illuminates how Christ's sheltering reach is extended through the gifts of other residents, staff of various departments, and people from all walks of life – even those of different faith backgrounds – who are rightfully gathered up into the Church's act of Eucharist through the inclusion of their stories in the reenactment of God's redemption of humankind and the world.

These gifts of Christ visiting us in the clothes of the stranger approach us in humble and hidden ways but are made manifest in liturgical time. Whether it is the grateful remembrance of a sensitive and vulnerable moment of encounter at the airport or front door, a felt need to speak, and be listened to, at a nurse's window, or a late-night board game and conversation in the dining room, the Church's Eucharist reawakens our collective memory to the compassion and unconditional love that encircles the brokenness, death, and despair of the Cross. This trustworthy and stable Christocentric reality serves as the basis for hope in a new world to come, and at the microcosmic level, a newly created future for the departing resident. The Church prays for the ultimate, definitive, and eschatological consummation of this new world in its memorial acclamation. However, the Eucharist is also a kind of school of cultivating what some theologians have called a "sacramental imagination" whereby the assembled vigilantly discerns and glorifies the vestiges of the Kingdom among us even now. We are also prepared and sent forth by the Mass to play in the ever receding but transfigured moments of grace and mercy in history, with the promise of remembering and renewing our covenantal bond to each other in the Divine Family of Persons at the next Eucharist. In this way, the Eucharist imitates the eternal

love and self-gift of its Triune God, which is why the Church proclaims a Eucharist – and world
– without end.

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