

## Eucharist and Daily Life

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### Abstract

Unfortunately there is a tendency to understand the Eucharist today on the level of information because symbols that were so meaningful for one situation in a particular worldview are universalised without going deeper into the meaning of this worldview. We need to go deeper in order to understand what we are doing when we celebrate the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not a matter of mere information. It belongs to the realm of understanding that leads to faith. If it remains just at the level of information it does not move us nor does it burn our hearts. *Understanding* makes us familiar with the world of symbols. It transforms us, transforms the world around us and changes our vision. Moreover, our attitudes towards these symbols change, our concerns become universal and we discover meaning in life. The author shows that the Eucharist leads to celebration and self-emptying in daily life. Self-emptying means, among other things, work for justice and peace. *Kenotic Service* or working for the welfare of others is the translation of the Eucharist into daily life. It is a service that seeks the well-being of *all* without seeking any reward. Only then we become channels of peace, reconciliation and healing and are able to build communities. In short, the Eucharist takes place at every moment of our life.

### Keywords

Daily life, kenosis, symbol, metaphor, material dimension, cosmic dimension, intellectual dimension, communion, paschal mystery, sin of the world.

## INTRODUCTION

The Eucharist and the Paschal Mystery belong to the world of symbols. Symbols like lamb, blood, meal, bread etc., have loaded meanings in a cultural setting. In order to understand or get involved in the world of these symbols we need to locate them in their contexts. We have to be familiar with those worlds.

The Paschal Mystery refers to a historical setting and its background is the Exodus: passing over from slavery in Egypt to a land of freedom. But this does not end there. It is symbolic of a *process* of liberation which is highlighted in the Eucharist. The Eucharist too has a similar meaning: it is a *passing over*. Again, the Eucharist cannot be restricted merely to the Eucharistic ritual. It is a lifelong *process* of passing over from darkness to light and from death (sin) to life.

Unfortunately there is a tendency to understand the Eucharist today on the level of information because symbols (like the *paschal lamb*, *lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world* or *Christ our Paschal Lamb* etc.) that were so meaningful for one situation in a particular worldview are universalised without going deeper into the meaning of this worldview.

We need to go deeper in order to understand what we are doing when we celebrate the Eucharist. The Eucharist is not a matter of mere information. It belongs to the realm of understanding that leads to faith. If it remains just at the level of information it does not move us nor does it burn our hearts. *Understanding* makes us familiar with the world of symbols. It transforms us, transforms the world around us and changes our vision. Moreover, our attitudes towards these symbols change, our concerns become universal and we discover meaning in life. Understanding opens us to the realm of faith. Hence it is important that we consider the meaning of the Eucharist in this context of *information* and *understanding*. The more our world becomes the world of symbols, the more meaningful the symbols become for us. Consequently it is imperative that we get some idea about what we mean by *symbol* and its expression in language,

*metaphor*. Only then can we understand the fuller meaning of the Eucharist and its significance for our daily life.

## SYMBOL AND METAPHOR

Whether we are aware of it or not we live and move in a world of symbols; our day to day language is symbolic; our religious experiences are expressed in a symbolic language. For example we can recall scenes in our lives where our hearts began to burn! Any scene of beauty, friendship or joy, any moment we had experienced, something that we were unable to explain adequately in words like the sunrise, sunset, moonrise in the sea, crystal clear water, the smile of a baby, the beauty of a landscape, the depth of concern of a friend etc. Such experiences are symbolic experiences. We are unable to fathom their depths. We are taken up, grasped as it were by these experiences that point to the *beyond*, experiences which we try to put in words. But these *expressions* are not the *experience*, though they are intimately connected with each other. So there is an *experience* that belongs to the level of the symbol, and there is the *expression* of that experience which pertains to the level of symbol-language, namely, metaphor. In other words symbol refers to the experience of reality and metaphor refers to the expression of that symbol-experience in language. Moreover, in order to understand this better let us have a glimpse at our *experience* of reality.

What do we understand by reality? When we look around our world we do not just see objects thrown here and there. What we see is something holistic, something interconnected and interrelated. For example we speak of a flower but a flower does not exist all by itself. There is the plant on which the flower grows. But the plant cannot exist without the earth that holds it, the sun that warms it, the air, the minerals, the water and the surroundings etc. that contribute to its being. There is perfect collaboration between these natural elements that help in bringing forth this flower! If one of these elements is missing we cannot have a flower! What is more, there is a relationship between a human

being and that flower because it is the human being that discovers that flower. Finally, a flower has something more than merely meets the eye. There is something mysterious in it so that none of us can assert that we know [all about] the flower.

To put it concretely, reality is all that *is* and all that *is* is inter-related, and in this interrelationship we observe a trinitarian principle. First of all there is the material *world* (cosmos, universe) we live in and without which we cannot *be*. This world is the background of our very existence. Secondly, there are *humans*, who inhabit this world, who are conscious of their own existence and the existence of the world around them. Thirdly, there is an all-pervading *Mystery* present in the universe which grasps us, before which we stand in awe and which satiates our thirst for Meaning, for the Infinite. There exists nothing outside these three fundamental invariants. None can make sense all by itself. None is independent of the other. The world is meaningless without humans and humans cannot exist without the world. God cannot be known and experienced without humans and the world. There is an existential link, an ontological relationship between these three: God, World and Humans. If something goes wrong with one, all three are affected because they are mutually interdependent and irreducible to the others.<sup>1</sup> To put it differently, our experience of reality encompasses three dimensions: material or cosmic, human or intellectual and the depth or spiritual dimension.

### Material/Cosmic Dimension

First of all there is the material world. It is the realm wherein our senses are active. We see, hear, taste, touch, and smell. We *experience* reality first at the level of matter, at the material level. This is the cosmic dimension of reality. The cosmic dimension then is that dimension of reality which *connects everything* with *everything*. This dimension is quantifiable, perceivable and objectifiable.

### Human/Intellectual Dimension

Secondly, there is the human world. It is a world of persons, of love and understanding. This dimension of reality *discovers*

the interconnection between things. If all things are related in and through the cosmic dimension, it is the human dimension that discovers these relationships. Accordingly it is not enough that things are related; their relationship comes into its own only when the human consciousness locates and identifies them.

## Spiritual/Depth Dimension

Thirdly, there is a spiritual world, the world of faith. Reality has something 'more' than humans can comprehend. It has a dimension of depth. The more we know about a thing or person the more there remains to know. Knowing means being open to knowing something more and implies *inexhaustibility*. We cannot however know anything exhaustively nor can anything be known exhaustively. Raimon Panikkar argues: "To place limits on being - *qua* being - is to destroy it."<sup>2</sup> This is because every *being* has an open-ended character as part of its very nature. This open-endedness is the *mystery* dimension, a dimension of the unknown and of the inexhaustible, a dimension of endlessness. Panikkar calls it the divine or depth dimension.<sup>3</sup>

## Symbol

Symbol is a bridge-builder. It brings the three worlds together: the cosmic, human and the divine. *A symbol symbolizes the symbolized reality*. Symbol is the cosmic dimension of reality.

Firstly, we encounter reality through its body, the material element, the *symbol*. Hence the material world is the *world of symbols*. Every being is a symbol because it is the dimension of relationship.

Secondly, for a symbol to be a symbol there is the need of a symbolizer. A symbolizer is the one who *discovers* symbols, not one who creates them. In the absence of the symbolizer there are no symbols. Humans are the discoverers of symbols because humans encounter reality.

Thirdly, a symbol *makes present* that which it symbolizes i.e., *symbolized reality*. Symbolized reality is the depth dimension

of reality. The depth dimension makes us enter into a world of meaningfulness of symbols. Our experience of reality when it is not superficial, takes us beyond the material level (beyond the symbol level). It makes us come in touch with the real – the level of faith, the level of meaningfulness. A sunset should take us to the Source of Beauty or the cosmos/world should point out to the Creator. But the danger is that too often we remain just at the material/object level. But the one, who discovers the symbolic dimension of the world, discovers that the world is not just an object, but a sacrament of God's Presence, that it is sacred, that it is the symbol of the divine. According to Vaishnava Spirituality the whole Universe is the body (symbol) of the Supreme Being. The Universe is the symbol and the Supreme Being is the symbolized Reality. A symbolic experience of the world is an experience of *seeing God in all things and all things in God*! See for example Blake's poem:

To see a World in a grain of sand  
And a Heaven in a wild flower,  
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand  
And Eternity in an hour<sup>4</sup>

In other words a symbol is *self-expressive*. It does not require an interpretation. When a symbol requires an interpretation then it has ceased to be a symbol. That is why we need to clarify some misunderstanding regarding the use of the word 'symbol'. Generally we say a flag is the symbol of a nation; a ring is the symbol of commitment; a rose is a symbol of love etc. They are not symbols but are *epistemic signs*.<sup>5</sup> Flag and nation are two different things brought together (artificially) by common understanding and given meaning in a particular culture. We need information about one in order to explain the other. We need someone to interpret the meaning to us. A real symbol on the other hand is transparent because it contains the reality in itself. E.g. a *smile* is an expression of *joy*. Joy is pressed out as it were through the facial movements of the smile. Joy cannot be seen except through its *symbol* the smile, but the smile is not joy and joy is not the smile but one cannot be without the other. Similarly,

the human *body* is the symbol of the *person*. We cannot separate the body from the person and the person can only be expressed through the symbol *body*. A smile does not stop at the smile nor the body stop at the body, but they lead us to participate in the symbolized reality i.e. joy and person respectively. Similarly a search for the symbolic nature of the world will lead one to the discovery of the Source of Reality. God breaks through the symbol and reveals Himself as the Symbolized Reality.

A Symbol *re-presents* or *makes present* the symbolized reality i.e., it reveals in itself or carries within itself the reality it symbolizes. The Symbol and the symbolized reality are not identical but are inseparable. One does not exist without the other but one is not the other. It is in this perspective we can try to understand the Scripture text: *Philip the one who sees Me has seen the Father*. The Symbol takes us to the Source. The symbolizer is the *pontifex*, the bridge-builder.

Reality then is the integration of three dimensions (cosmic, human and divine) i.e., these three dimensions form one community because they interpenetrate one another. Each dimension is unique, irreducible to the others and at the same time one cannot be without the other two. Hence there are no individual beings disconnected from one another. Panikkar calls this unitary experience of reality the *cosmotheandric experience*. 'God, World and Man' as he aptly puts it, are not and cannot be three separate entities but are three common invariants that form one fundamental unity in radical relativity.<sup>6</sup> Such an understanding is important for us to comprehend the meaning of the symbol-worlds.

## Metaphor

We can look at reality (and consequently persons and our world) from two perspectives: either we look at it from an *objective and objectifying perspective* - information level, or from a *symbolic perspective* i.e., from the level of understanding and faith. The basic problems that we face today such as individualism,

selfishness, fundamentalism, spiritual blindness, consumerism, discrimination against women, children, Dalits, the poor and the marginalized, ecological disasters and finally loss of meaning in life leading to addictions and despair etc., are all the outcome of this objective and objectifying attitude in life.

The symbolic perspective on the other hand operates at the level of understanding and openness. In order to understand we need openness. This is because life is not just information although information is very important in life. Faith cannot be understood from the objective perspective. Faith is basic openness. It belongs to another type of consciousness, another dimension, the level of openness of our being. Faith is the foundational ability given to every human being. But this ability needs to be activated. Openness to reality makes us experience faith and from this experience burst forth *expressions* of this faith-experience.

Consequently the *language* we use in our world of reality is either *informative* language or *symbolic* language.<sup>7</sup> Informative language is descriptive with univocal meaning, whereas symbolic language is the language of metaphors. Symbolic language is transformative, because there we enter into a world of personal relationships.

There can be three levels of interpretation: The material dimension is a world of perception where we concentrate on the *meaning* of the world; the human or the intellectual dimension points out to the *significance* of that world and the spiritual and mystical dimension concentrates on the *meaningfulness in life* of that world.<sup>8</sup> For example we can look at the sunset and remain just at the material level or personal level or it can open us to the third dimension, the sphere of faith.

We use *symbolic language* or *metaphor* to express our experience. Expressions like “Were not our hearts on fire”? “You must be born again”, “I am in the Father and the Father is in Me”, “I am the Vine and you are the branches” etc. cannot be understood at a literal or descriptive level. They are loaded with meaning and are real. Metaphor refers through what one is saying to what



one is *experiencing*. Metaphor (symbolic language) is *really* true but not *literally* true.<sup>9</sup> In the language of the metaphor we go beyond the physical meaning (literal meaning) and go into the direction of the fuller meaning of understanding. E.g. *were not our hearts burning within us* - here there is a denial of physical fire and a movement towards the real fire of personal relationships. Hence the truth of the metaphor is this: *a metaphor is really true but not literally true*. Literal truth is partial and not the whole truth. In other words literal language is informative and descriptive, not transformative. The metaphor: Jesus is the Son of God – *really true* but not *literally true*!

## **BREAD, THE SYMBOL OF LIFE AND COMMUNION**

Coming back to our theme the Eucharist, when we say that bread is the symbol of life and communion, we proclaim a greater truth here. Bread is a very rich symbol of life, and life is wholeness and communion. Communion is possible only in a world of relationships, of self-giving and collaboration. Communion is not possible in isolation and without mutual interdependence. No being exists by itself. Being is relationship. For example, one single corn or grain of wheat does not make bread. Bread is bread only in communion, in togetherness. Bread is a community, a presence of God's working in the world and in humans. It is a mysterious work of collaboration between God, the world and humans (the three fundamental invariants i.e., the Cosmic, the Human and the Divine). The existence of the corn goes back to Creation. Bread is there from the beginning of Creation and it is an ongoing process. Bread brings the three worlds together:

*The Cosmic*: the seed, the sun, the earth, the wind, the water, the minerals, fire, time and space etc. All these are cosmic elements. Without these cosmic elements the seed cannot grow and bread cannot be made.

*The Human:* human labour, human concern, love and pain, hope and despair, sweat, anxiety, fears, insecurity, poverty are equally a part of the process of bread making.

*The Divine:* bread remains always a mystery. How can we explain the mystery of *growth*, the mystery of the corn? What is this corn? We can analyze it through reason but none can give a final word of what it really is. It has a depth dimension.

Bread symbolizes a cosmic process, the cosmic process of self-giving or Kenosis. It is a continuous process of life and death. Beginning with the corn at each stage there is a self-giving, a death, so that the *other* might come to life. The corn has to yield itself, surrender itself to the earth and the earthly elements in order to give birth to the seedling. Jesus says “Unless a grain of wheat falls in the ground and *dies* it remains alone, but if it dies then it yields a mighty harvest”<sup>10</sup> The cosmic elements like the sun, water, earth, minerals etc., have to die to themselves to give life to the grain of wheat. The grain of wheat dies and gives life to the plant; the plant dies, in the sense it surrenders itself so that many other corns are born; again the corns die i.e. they have to be ground in the mill to become flour; the flour has to be kneaded and formed into bread and the bread has to be baked in the fire in order to become bread. The bread dies in order to be transformed into life-blood in humans. The process goes on and on. One who eats this bread has then the opportunity to become bread for others. All this reveals a deeper truth: a process of self-emptying, a process of life and death. This is so because reality itself is kenotic. Self-giving is the navel of Reality.<sup>11</sup>

The process of self-emptying is a continuous process. We all eat the same bread that has undergone this kenotic process. But unlike the bread, humans can turn out to be selfish. Thus the cosmic process of self-giving comes to a halt with the blindness and selfishness of human beings. It is because of this selfishness that today our bread contains blood and exploitation, poverty and hunger. It is profit-oriented bread which causes division, destruction and death. Symbolically expressed, humans though

they come into being because of the kenotic process of the cosmos, refuse to continue this process. Hence instead of communion what we have been mostly experiencing today is fragmentation.

In short, bread, a natural symbol of self-giving and communion, has in our present Indian context become a symbol of dehumanization, division, sectarianism, discrimination and marginalization on the basis of class (the rich and the poor), caste (the problem of untouchability), gender (patriarchal system that is denying human rights to females), creed (interreligious conflicts) etc.

## CONNECTION BETWEEN THE PASCHAL MYSTERY AND THE EUCHARIST

The connection is at the level of symbols. The world of symbols is a world of Mystery. It cannot be encapsulated in one formula, one doctrine or one belief. The life principle of these symbol-worlds of the Paschal Mystery and the Eucharist is: *Kenosis, self-emptying*, to be for others, not for oneself. Kenosis is life-giving, openness and relationship. The Ultimate Mystery has become human and being human really is equivalent to *openness and relationship*. Our Bread must bring us to this experience of openness and relationship, to communion and life, to an experience of faith.

Self-emptying (*Kenosis*) is the central mystery of Christianity. Where there is self-giving there is life. The same kenotic principle is at work in the *Bread of Life*. That's why Jesus is the Bread of Life for the world. The life of Jesus is a life of *kenosis*. He came to serve and not to be served. Hence bread is not only the symbol of the cosmic process; it means (signifies) to us Christians the Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. The Eucharist is the symbol of Life and Communion. It is not a mere ritual, it is rather a re-collection. God is already present in the kenotic principle working in this bread. And in this bread we recognize the Bread of Life (Eucharist) when we *confess and proclaim* this incarnated principle of kenosis. *Where Kenosis takes*

*place there the Eucharist takes place*, there is the real presence of the Risen Jesus.

Moreover, *thanksgiving* or *gratitude* is grace or the work of God in us. The bread is a community, a communion, the presence of God's working in the world and humans. It is the recognition that our being is a gifted being. It is also our response to this working of God in us and in our world. We thank God for this Presence. *Where there is thanksgiving there is Eucharist*.

Where there is thanksgiving at work there is Hope, Love and Faith. Life, love and light express themselves always in symbols and all these are expressions of self-emptying, of Kenosis. We have already seen that the whole cosmos is self-emptying or kenotic. The sun is there not for itself but to give light and life to others; the water is there to give life to others; the beautiful landscape is there to feast our eyes and to give us delight; the whole creation is there at the service of others; creation is ruled by the principle of kenosis.

## **Eucharist and the Sin of the World**

Just before the reception of *communion* the Priest exclaims: "Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who takes away the sin of the world". As it stands, and judging from the response of the faithful, it has often become a mere pious exclamation which ignores the great truth of the Eucharist!

The Eucharist *proclaims* the principle of Kenosis: This is my Body, my Blood for you!" at work in the world – this is salvation history. Where this principle of self-emptying is operative there can be no sin! Whatever sins we may have committed, they will be wiped away through our kenotic (self-emptying) lives.

The sin of the world consists in *ignoring* the Divine Mystery i.e., *the life* of the world and in believing that the world is independent of this Divine Mystery. The Eucharist is a holistic act that acknowledges that we depend on this Divine Mystery; it is a proclamation of the belief that the Divine Mystery is our first

beginning and our final fulfilment. The more authentic our self-emptying, the less it leaves room for any sin.

## THE EUCHARIST AND DAILY LIFE

The way of symbol is the way of proclamation. What we proclaim on the Altar in the Eucharist is the culmination and the remembrance of everyday life. Only then can we call life a celebration along with all its ups and downs. Hence we need to develop an antenna for the symbolic dimension of the world.

As we said earlier, the Eucharist is the symbol of the kenosis/self-emptying of Jesus. That is why it cannot be restricted to half an hour of celebration. The Eucharist has to be understood as the Eucharist of Life and our lives have to become Eucharist.

Self-emptying is a lifelong process. Where there is self-emptying at work, there is *gratitude/thanksgiving* for the gift of life, not just individual life but *the life of the world*. Where there is self-emptying at work, there is *unselfish concern* for others – whoever they may be. Where there is self-emptying at work, there is *crossing of boundaries* of class, caste, colour, creed and gender. Where there is self-emptying at work there *relationships flourish* - in our families, neighbourhoods, circle of friends, places of work and wherever two or three are gathered together in the Lord's name.

In addition, the Eucharist, rightly understood, is a cosmic, divine and human action. It is not a private prayer but a manifesto of life and a programme of action and commitment. The Eucharist highlights the motivating force of our '*service of the earth*' (environmental questions), *welfare of humans* (human rights questions) and *confession of the Divine* (religious questions). How do we go about with our world? How do we go about with our fellow human beings? Or to be more precise how do we go about with our own body? As we go about with our body so we go about with the world, for we are part of this world-body. The world is an expression of God's love. The Eucharist gives an impetus to the quality of our service, commitment and confession.

Self-emptying also means, among other things, work for justice and peace. *Kenotic Service* or working for the welfare of others is the translation of the Eucharist into daily life. It is a service that seeks the well-being of *all* without seeking any reward. Only then we become channels of peace, reconciliation and healing and are able to build communities. In short, the Eucharist takes place all the 24 hours of the day and night.

## Notes

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