Is the church experiencing a crisis of “Eucharistic need?” This is the contention of Cardinal Jan Schotte, former General Secretary to the Bishops Synod. He uses this rather ambiguous expression (in quotation marks, translating the Latin expression “urgencia eucharistica”) in the preface to the Lineamenta (L) or preparatory document for the next Bishops’ Synod, which is to take place in Rome, October 2–29, 2005. The theme of the synod is: “The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church.”

In explaining why the unusual step was taken of having a synod centering on a topic already treated in a recent papal encyclical (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 2003), the cardinal cites the Holy Father’s desire for a renewal of “Eucharistic practice.” According to the cardinal, the synod will not so much be involved with the presentation of doctrine, “but with the pastoral implication of the Eucharist in celebration, worship, preaching, charity and various works in general.”

A description of our present “Eucharistic need” is spelled out in the Lineamenta. It is reflected in the “shadows” or abuses first mentioned by the Pope in the encyclical Ecclesia de Eucharistia 10. The Synod is not only to promote a greater appreciation for the Eucharist, but also to engage the whole Church in countering these abuses that have arisen in the name of liturgical reform. This disciplinary concern is quite evident in the tenor of questions which appear at the end of the text that are to be answered by synod participants to prepare the working paper or Instrumentum laboris.

The Lineamenta implies that the liturgical reform was not supposed to lead to a “destruction of the secular patrimony of the Catholic church but was intended to foster, in faithfulness to Catholic tradition, the renewal of the liturgy for the sanctification of Christians” (L 4 b). The recent disciplinary instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship, Redemptionis Sacramentum (2004), dealing with these “shadows,” serves as an important “text behind the text,” even though, curiously, it is not mentioned in the list of papal and magisterial references named as key sources for the Lineamenta such as Paul VI’s encyclical.
Mysterium fidei, the revised General Instruction on the Roman Missal (2000), the Catechism of the Catholic Church and Ecclesia de Eucharistia.

What evidence is there to support the insistence of both the Pope and other curial officials that we live in a time of “Eucharistic need”? I will first describe these “shadows” as they are presented in the Lineamenta and then attempt to enlarge the discussion by looking at the Pope’s recent Apostolic Letter announcing the “year of the Eucharist,” Mane Nobiscum Domine.

The Current Context from a Roman Perspective

According to the Lineamenta, the abuses related to the Eucharist are largely due to a certain theological “reductionism”—an overemphasis on certain aspects of the traditional teaching on the Eucharist at the expense of others. These particular concerns are most clearly enumerated in articles 25–28 under the subheading of “Lights and Shadows in Appreciating the Gift.” Despite the one “light” named (participation of the faithful at the liturgy), the shadows described by the authors stem from an overemphasis on: (1) the Eucharist as meal (versus the Mass as Sacrifice), (2) the baptismal (common) priesthood of believers (at the expense of the ordained priest acting in persona Christi), (3) the sufficiency of the Liturgy of the Word (without the Liturgy of the Eucharist), (4) an understanding of ecumenism that leads to practices which are contrary to the faith and discipline of the church (namely intercommunion), and (5) a neglect of Eucharistic adoration.

Taken together, the Lineamenta’s treatment of these shadows points to a reaffirmation of the traditional teaching of the Latin Church on the Eucharist found in the documents of Vatican II and in post-conciliar magisterium. The tone of the text, coupled with the phrasing of the twenty questions posed to the participants of the Synod found at the end of the document, makes it clear that the authors are convinced that the liturgical reform has placed some very central Catholic beliefs regarding the Eucharist in jeopardy. What are these core beliefs? The Eucharist is not just a simple fraternal meal or a simple memorial of the Paschal Mystery, but makes present the sacrifice of the cross (L 7, 10, 11) at which a duly ordained priest presides in persona Christi. The transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ at the Eucharistic celebration constitutes God’s inestimable gift to the church. This real, ontological presence of Christ in the Eucharist should be adored outside of the Mass (L 12). Finally, because the churches of the Reformation lack the sacrament of Orders, they “have not conserved the genuine and integral substance of the Eucharistic mystery” (L 28).

None of these teachings or disciplinary canons is new. By emphasizing them at the expense of a wider horizon, though, the authors tend to focus on the canonical and rubrical norms and are guilty of the same kind of Eucharistic reductionism about which they are so concerned. While there is a strong emphasis on traditional teachings, the larger context of the church’s belief in the res sacramenti (the very purpose of the sacrament) is almost obscured, being limited to a discussion of the Real Presence. Moreover, the call for a more effective program in promoting Eucharistic renewal as related to Christian witness and ministry is also placed on the margins.

Mane Nobiscum Domine: A Wider Perspective

The recent Apostolic Letter Mane Nobiscum Domine (MND, October 7, 2004)
offers a point of departure that may prove much more effective in accomplishing the pastoral goal of the synod in calling the church to a renewed appreciation for the gift of the Eucharist. Rather than beginning with doctrinal assertions, the letter begins with the Emmaus narrative from the Gospel of Luke (24:13-35) at which Christ appears to the two disheartened disciples, listens to their disappointment, breaks open the meaning of the Scriptures and reveals himself in the breaking of the bread. The Holy Father’s use of this scriptural narrative as a framework for the letter offers a more accessible and balanced way of presenting various facets of the sacrament, especially how the Eucharist is experienced in a liturgical context (MND, 1–3). Unlike the Lineamenta, the letter provides a clearer affirmation of the unity of the two tables of the Word and Eucharist.

The Pope arrives at the clearest and potentially most helpful aspect of his program for Eucharistic renewal when he emphasizes that adequate celebration is not simply about following norms, but about allowing the rites to express and celebrate faith in such a way as they can be transformative. For example, in relationship to the Liturgy of the Word, he states:

\[\text{... it is not enough that the biblical passages are read in the vernacular if they are not also proclaimed with care, preparation, devout attention, meditative silence that enable the Word of God to touch people's minds and hearts (MND 13).}\]

Probably the greatest abuse of the Eucharist that most Catholics have experienced is the mechanical and perfunctory celebrations of the Mass during which the Word is never really heard, where preaching is lackluster and unintelligent, and where the presidential prayers—especially the Eucharistic Prayer—are proclaimed without feeling or evident devotion. While liturgical norms are important and an adequate understanding of the doctrine of the church surrounding the Eucharist is essential, the single most important facet of Eucharistic renewal will depend on the quality of the celebration and how it is informed by a well-grounded Eucharistic spirituality. In this vein, the Pope rightly underlines the importance of respecting the symbolic language of the liturgy and how it leads the faithful into the mystery of the Eucharist itself (MND 17).

The Eucharist as a “Project of Solidarity with all Humanity”

Another aspect of the apostolic letter that is crucial for Eucharistic renewal is in promoting what the Holy Father refers to as a “culture of dialogue” which flows from the Eucharist (MND 26). The Eucharist is a “project of solidarity for all humanity” at which every Christian who takes part in the celebration “learns to become a promoter of communion, peace and solidarity” (MND 27).

More than ever, our troubled world which began the new millennium with the specter of terrorism and the tragedy of war, demands that Christians learn to experience the Eucharist as a great school of peace, forming men and women who, at various levels of responsibility in social, cultural and political life, can become promoters of dialogue and communion (MND 27).

The Pope emphasizes that we celebrate the Eucharist in the context of the needs of
our world, and calls for this year of the Eucharist to inspire practical responses to human needs: assuaging hunger, caring for those afflicted with disease, reaching out to the elderly who are lonely, the unemployed, and to the immigrants in our midst (MND 28).

“Eucharistic Need”?

If we consider the Eucharist in the context that the Holy Father presents in Mane Nobiscum Domine it is obvious that we are indeed experiencing a time of “Eucharistic need.” This need is not due primarily to a failure to obey rubrical detail or understand doctrinal nuance, but to see in the Eucharist the “source and summit of the life and mission of the Church”—the way in which God constantly renews us in the Spirit and brings about our transformation into Christ’s Body for the life of the world.

References


