The Eucharist and Religious Life Today

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It is critical for religious to reflect on the central importance of the Eucharist in their daily life. We return to the Eucharist again and again to receive God’s gracious mercy, to listen to the story that gives us vigor and articulates the horizon within which we want to live, to eat the bread of life and drink the cup of blessing.

Pope John Paul II’s apostolic exhortation on religious life, *Vita Consecrata*, speaks forcefully about the significance of the Eucharist for the lives of vowed women and men religious. It quotes a well-known statement from the Second Vatican Council, which says that “the eucharist ‘contains the church’s entire spiritual wealth, that is, Christ himself, our Passover and living bread who, through his very flesh, made vital and vitalizing by the Holy Spirit, offers life’ to the human family” (*Vita Consecrata*, no. 95; *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 5). The pope goes on to assert, “By its very nature the eucharist is at the center of the consecrated life, both for individuals and communities” (VC 95). The celebration of the Eucharist is a continuing invitation to make our lives a participation in the paschal mystery of Christ—the mystery of his life, death, and resurrection. And it is a regular reminder of the call to ongoing conversion that is given to every disciple and, in a special way, to religious. Thomas Aquinas said that the Eucharist is “the perfection of the spiritual life and the end to which all the sacraments tend” (*Summa Theologiae* 3, 73, 3; see

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He thought of the Eucharist as the union of Christ with his members and the ultimate sign of what people are meant to be.

As I echo these effusive words about the Eucharist, I am keenly aware that for some religious today this topic evokes ambivalent feelings. While Aquinas may have spoken of the Eucharist as the crown of all the sacraments, for some religious the celebration of the Eucharist is a source of tension and even of pain. We are keenly aware of the “liturgy wars” that have plagued the church at various times since the Second Vatican Council. There seems to have been a new eruption of this conflict in recent years, with protracted debates over the English translation of the Roman Missal and strong feelings about the revival of the Tridentine liturgy. Closer to home, how many times have we experienced tensions within our own communities about the Liturgy of the Eucharist? So often our differences in theological perspective, particularly our divergent ecclesiological viewpoints, become projected onto the Eucharist.

I realize too that for some women religious (as well as other women in the church) the experience of the Eucharist evokes feelings of exclusion and alienation. The fact that presidency at the Eucharist is reserved to male priests and the clerical atmosphere that is sometimes characteristic of celebrations of the sacrament can make some women feel like passive spectators, or worse, like second-class citizens in the church. I am also aware that these negative feelings are so strong among some religious that they no longer, or only on rare occasions, participate in the celebration of the Eucharist. I do not have any easy remedies to assuage the feelings of exclusion and alienation felt by these religious. I can only say that I am keenly aware of them and I take them seriously. We need to continue to discern how to make the celebration of the Eucharist a more inclusive and life-giving experience for everyone in the church. Nevertheless, for a number of reasons, I believe that it is of critical importance for religious to reflect upon, and perhaps to recover, the central importance of the Eucharist in the vocation of consecrated life.

**Telling the Story**

Our lives are enveloped by stories. Stories from our families, our experiences with good friends and close colleagues, and from our own religious communities provide frameworks of meaning for us. When senior religious regale us with stories of the “old days,” they are making memory of events that have given meaning to their lives as religious. Through such stories significant events of the past become present to us—they are memorialized and re-presented. Important people from the past also become present to us and continue to impact our lives. These narratives help to shape our vision of life—our perspective on where we come from and where we are headed, our sense of identity as individuals and as
community, and our estimation of what is truly valuable in life. We are story-laden people.

I am the youngest member of a large family, the last of eight children. My dad died when I was three years old, so I never really got to know him. I had only faint glimpses of what he looked like locked away in the deep recesses of my memory. I really came to know my father through the stories that my mother and siblings told about him. Often these stories would be narrated at the dinner table at festive celebrations like a birthday or a holiday. Sometimes these stories were about baseball. My dad had been a semiprofessional baseball pitcher who was scouted by the major leagues. I love baseball and used to pitch a little myself, though not nearly as well as my father. Sometimes after I pitched a game, someone I did not even know would come up to me and tell me that they had watched my dad pitch “in the old days.” I always listened carefully to what they had to say. And I would listen with rapt attention to the stories my mother would tell about watching my father pitch when they were young. No matter how many times I heard these stories they never grew old for me. It was through stories about baseball and about many other dimensions of life that I came to know my father and he became present to me. And it was by being drawn into those “family narratives” that I gained a deeper sense of the corporate identity of my family. Through these stories I gradually came to know “who we were and what we stood for.”

In recent years, many theologians have highlighted the importance of narrative in the life of the Christian. There is a burgeoning field of biblical interpretation called narrative criticism. In systematic theology too the significance of narrative has also been highlighted. For example, in his well-known theological writings the Dominican Edward Schillebeeckx speaks of Christian believers as people of narrative and of praxis (1979, 669–74). We are people who tell the story of Jesus and treasure that story, especially when challenged by evil and the often senseless suffering in our world. This story shapes our worldview and undergirds our action. In an important book on the Eucharist, David Power, O.M.I., talks about the power of story within the context of the liturgy (304–16). Power says, “It is by the power of language that events are represented and transform reality” (305). He proceeds to discuss what he calls “foundational narratives.” Power observes, “It is from these [foundational narratives] that communities draw their vigor, in reference to them that they express the horizon within which they live. As the life of a community develops over time, new events are illumined by
their relation to the foundational narrative” (306). In other words the new events in the lives of the disciples of Jesus—the events within the lives of each one of us—are illuminated by relating them to the foundational narrative of God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Power goes on to relate this particularly to the ways in which the Christian community deals with the mystery of suffering.

Every time we celebrate the Eucharist we get in touch with our foundational narrative, the story of God’s tenaciously faithful love revealed in a salvific way in Jesus Christ. As Power suggests, it is from this story that we draw our vigor and in reference to it that we express the horizon within which we live. This happens, of course, through the proclamation of Scripture at the liturgy. It also takes place throughout the rest of the celebration. As a presider, when it comes time in the liturgy for the eucharistic prayer, I often think to myself, “We are telling the story of God’s love—the love story of God for the world.” In and through this telling of the story God is embracing God’s people. Perhaps this becomes clearer to us when we pray one of the eucharistic prayers for Masses with children. For example, in the second eucharistic prayer for Masses with children we say:

God, our loving Father,
we are glad to give you thanks and praise
because you love us. . . .
Because you love us,
you gave us this great and beautiful world. . . .
Because you love us,
you sent Jesus your Son to bring us to you
and to gather us around him
as children of one family. . . .
Blessed be Jesus, whom you sent
to be the friend of children and of the poor.
He came to show us how we can love you, Father,
by loving one another.
He came to take away sin,
which keeps us from being friends,
and hate, which makes us all unhappy.

Proclaiming this prayer puts us closely in touch with the story of God’s gracious love for the world poured out in Jesus Christ.

The same dynamic takes place in the other eucharistic prayers, though perhaps it is not as evident to us because the language is more formal or simply because we have heard them so often that we fail to listen to them. What is important to recognize, though, is that by entering into the eucharistic celebration we are immersing ourselves in the foundational narrative that forms the horizon, the overarching vision, of disciples of Jesus. This is one reason why *Vita Consecrata* claims
that the Eucharist is at the center of the consecrated life, both for individuals and communities. Unless we are immersed in that foundational story again and again, we easily lose our way; our vision becomes constricted or even obscured. We need the embrace of God, the embrace of Christ, which comes to us as we recall the story of God’s love for us in Christ and learn what it means to live out of that story.

Two Sets of Symbols

At the evening Mass of the Lord’s Supper on Holy Thursday we listen to John’s account of Jesus’ exquisite act of washing the feet of his disciples. As the liturgy continues, we make memory of the institution of the Eucharist. Two sets of symbols are placed before us in this opening celebration of the Easter Triduum: the basin and the towel, the bread and the cup. Each of these clusters of symbols speaks in a compelling way about the meaning of the Eucharist. I believe that they also illumine important truths about our vocation as vowed religious.

Chapter 13 of John’s gospel begins with a telling introductory comment, which consists of a single sentence in the original Greek: “Before the feast of Passover, Jesus knew that his hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end.” These are the opening lines in that part of John’s gospel that Scripture scholars have dubbed “the Book of Glory.” As Donald Senior observes, they suggest that all that will follow in the events of Jesus’ life represent the ultimate expression of Jesus’ mission. “For John the most eloquent statement of Jesus’ revelation—his most effective sign—is his death out of love for others” (31). As the story continues we discover what it means for Jesus to have loved his own to the end. John’s gospel interprets Jesus’ death as his culminating act of friendship-love (Senior, 32). His total gift of self on the cross is the defining mark of what this friendship-love really means.

I have encountered many people who do not want to have their feet washed on Holy Thursday. Footwashing is messy and time-consuming. It is awkward, even embarrassing, to sit in front of a congregation, take off your shoes and socks, and have your feet washed. No matter how hard we try to sanitize the ritual with fresh towels and customized basins, it is still rather messy. Moreover, having someone stoop down to wash your feet, caressing them as they dry them off, can feel “over the top.” It’s a bit too intimate, too gracious, for many people to feel comfortable with it. Many people feel exactly like Peter in John’s gospel; they are inclined to say: “You will never wash my feet!”

We know, of course that this act was a lot messier in the time of Jesus and his disciples. It was a very earthy gesture of hospitality and service. In a hot, dusty land where people wore sandals, washing the feet of another person was the menial task of a servant. It was certainly not an act that symbolized authority. John’s gospel, however, tells us that Jesus seizes upon this moment to teach his
disciples about authority. He wants to manifest to them what it means for him to be their “master and teacher.” He wishes to model the disposition they are to adopt toward one another and toward the people they will serve: “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (John 13:15).

The messiness, awkwardness, and embarrassment associated with footwashing mirror the messiness, awkwardness, and menial character of everyday love. They signify concrete love in real life, including love within religious community and love for those to whom we minister. A couple of summers ago, my older brother, Tom, died of brain cancer. About a year earlier, family members had begun to notice disturbing changes in him. He was becoming confused and disoriented on a regular basis. At first the doctors diagnosed the problem as the early stages of Alzheimer’s, but then they discovered that he had glioblastoma, a virulent form of brain cancer. We learned early in the process that the prognosis was not very bright. Tom underwent surgery to remove as much of the tumor as possible, and then he endured a round of chemotherapy. He was in the clear for a while, but this form of cancer almost always returns, and eventually it did after the first of the year. Tom gradually declined in his physical health and mental alertness until he ended up in a nursing home where he eventually died in July of the year after the original diagnosis.

I visited Tom in Virginia several times along the way of this arduous journey of his final illness. We celebrated the anointing of the sick before his surgery. When his decline was more advanced and he had been placed in a nursing home, I traveled to Virginia once more to see him and offer him the sacrament of the sick again. Tom was my oldest brother, and he always seemed to me like the “Rock of Gibraltar” in the family. He was a very strong person. He was also a rather private and dignified man, having been an officer in the Navy for much of his life. He was a Navy pilot for almost thirty years, and along the way he had many men and women under his command. He always seemed to have that “officer’s look” even after he retired from the Navy. His wife, Dot, is also a very dignified person.

On this particular day, when I visited Tom in the nursing home, he was sitting in a chair trying to eat his lunch. Dot was sitting beside him, trying her best to help him with his meal. Because of the debilitating effects of brain cancer, Tom was bent over in the chair, his head almost touching the table. I had to turn away
when I first saw that and take some time to get my bearings before I could engage my brother. I looked on as Dot would gently lift Tom’s head so that he could eat some of the food from the tray. He would try to get the fork up to his mouth but often he would miss the food, and Dot would have to wipe off the bib he was wearing. At one point Tom spilled the carton of milk all over himself and Dot had to wipe up the mess. Lunch was turning into quite an ordeal.

This was all very messy and awkward. It was awkward for Tom and Dot and very awkward for me, the younger brother who had always looked up to Tom. It was basin-and-towel stuff. It was menial service, like washing someone’s feet. But amid all of this messiness and embarrassment there was an exquisite beauty that I was witnessing. I was witnessing a profound expression of my sister-in-law’s love for my brother. What she was doing there was emblematic of Dot’s love for Tom “to the end”—in the words of John’s gospel. What she was doing was eucharistic. Whenever I hear the story of the footwashing on Holy Thursday, images of that lunchtime visit with my brother and his wife come to mind.

This scene in John’s gospel commences with the evangelist telling us that Jesus knew that his hour had come. This was “the hour,” the moment of conflict when Jesus would depart from the sphere of everyday life. He was about to lose his freedom, to be arrested, bound, tried, and put to death. Yet he showed at this hour that he was supremely free. He was the one who knew who he was and whose he was—he knew the One to whom he belonged and to whom he was called to be faithful. At this hour, Jesus was free enough to take up the basin and the towel, stoop down, and wash the feet of his disciples. He was free enough even to wash the feet of the one who would betray him and the one who would deny him, as well as the feet of the others who would desert him. In this simple, earthy action, Jesus showed his disciples his path to freedom. It was the path of humble, self-giving love to the end. In and through his faithful service, Jesus trusted that the God he had revealed would be faithful to him, too. He trusted that his Abba-God would release him from whatever held him bound, even the chains of death. In offering this act of footwashing as a model for us, Jesus tells us that this is our path to freedom, too. In the effort to respond to God’s grace in our lives by serving others—serving them in all the messy, awkward circumstances of life—we discover an inner freedom that nothing can take away. In every celebration of the Eucharist, this path to genuine freedom is illumined for us.

The basin and the towel lead directly to the bread and the cup. “This is my body given for you; this is my blood poured out for you.” Jesus’ designation of the bread
as his Body refers to the gift of his whole person, in all of his vulnerability and mortality. At the heart of the Eucharist is the memory of Jesus interpreting his life and death as the gift of himself for us and to us. This was a gift that would live on through the centuries to nourish and sustain us. These words articulate the meaning of a sacrament; they also express a way of life. The basin and the towel go hand in hand with the bread and the cup. When we celebrate the Eucharist we commit ourselves to a life characterized by generous service. All of us fall short in this way of living. We struggle with our own forms of selfishness and pride. We grapple with the inclination to be self-serving in even our best endeavors rather than committed to the well-being of others. And so we return to the Eucharist again and again to receive God’s gracious mercy, to listen to the story that gives us vigor and articulates the horizon within which we want to live, to eat the bread of life and drink the cup of blessing through which the risen Christ gives us himself.

The Eucharist and the Everyday

Some years ago Karl Rahner wrote an essay entitled “The Eucharist and Our Daily Lives.” In this reflection, Rahner contrasts the lofty, sublime meaning of the Eucharist with the profane nature of what he likes to call “the everyday.” He claims that the Eucharist is the definitive religious act of our lives; it is the act that unites us with God. The “everyday,” on the other hand, belongs to the realm of the profane, where God so often seems to be remote. As he puts it, in the everyday “[w]e speak of a thousand matters, the newspapers and the general talk are full of anything and everything” (212). As human beings we live most of our lives in this ambiguous realm of the everyday. We cannot escape it by pretending to live in some impregnable fortress of the sacred, separated from the mundane. Even the contemplative cloister is suffused with the everyday. Rahner observes that “we must go out into this world. We must commit ourselves to it, share in its cares, its struggles, its discussions” (213). Yet the monotony of the everyday can at times leave us weary and depressed.

As he often does, Rahner moves on to surprise his readers with a paradoxical statement. He writes: “This sacrament of the eternal encounter with God, this climax of our personal saving history, in the history of our individual lives, which is the Eucharist, is in fact the sacrament of the everyday” (216). The Eucharist is the sacrament of the everyday. He cites a statement of the Council of Trent in which the council describes the Eucharist as the food of our souls, by means of which we are nourished and strengthened. The Eucharist is our daily bread. Rahner builds on this conciliar teaching and suggests that “the Eucharist is the daily bread of poor Christians, by means of which they must nourish themselves ever anew, and strengthen themselves ever anew” (216).
Rahner proceeds to reflect upon the life of Jesus, especially his passion and death. He points out that as one who was like us in his humanity in all things but sin, Jesus took upon himself the burden of the everyday. In Christ, God shared in the experience of the everyday. This is the wonder of the incarnation. Rahner suggests that Jesus’ death on the cross represents “the concentrated, the pure essence of what is apportioned to us again and again gradually and piecemeal in our everyday lives” (218). Rahner was well aware of the joys that life affords us, of the happiness that everyday life can bring to us. Yet he was also conscious of the fact that life is not an easy journey for anyone. In fact, for many people throughout the world, especially those living in oppressive conditions, everyday life is replete with burdens. And even for us who are privileged to live in an advantaged society, we daily come face to face with the burdens that the “everyday” presents to us, some of which we find difficult to share with anyone. Rahner wants to argue that in his life and his death Jesus has entered fully into the experience of this burdensome everyday and so enters fully into the everyday of each one of us.

Rahner asserts that in receiving the crucified Christ in the Eucharist, we are sent forth to take up the everyday as our task. The Eucharist sends us out into the world of the everyday. He writes, “And this everyday life which we receive from God in this form is our daily life as something that is given to us by Christ himself together with the strength, the interior illumination, the interior grace which enables us to endure this everyday” (220). We are called to recognize in the everyday an opportunity to receive the grace of God. The Eucharist calls us to fidelity to God within the everyday. In both the Eucharist and the everyday we encounter Christ in a hidden manner. In the Eucharist we encounter him hidden under the forms of “earthy stuff”—bread and wine. In the everyday, we encounter the living Christ hidden under the form of the neighbor we are called to serve. The eye of faith “must see somewhat more deeply into the significance of our everyday, and must perceive in the midst of our everyday lives in their everydayness Jesus Christ present in his brothers and sisters” (226).

Rahner is suggesting to us that the Eucharist is the sacrament that attunes us to the quotidian mysteries, the mysteries of God’s presence unveiled in all the down-to-earth endeavors and encounters of our lives. All this makes for inspiring reading, but I suspect that each one of us knows how challenging it is to put into practice. For many of us the vocation to religious life initially had a “mystical”

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quality to it that we found compelling. It was to be a life of total dedication to God—a life steeped in the rich tradition of our founders and foundresses and chronicled by spiritual masters whose works we read in novitiate. It was a life inhabited by heroes and heroines with whom it would always be a privilege to live. It was a life in which we would be filled with extraordinary graces empowering us to offer unstinting service to God's people in good times and in bad. It was a life of perfection in which we would be elevated toward the heights of union with God.

And then we encountered the down-to-earth reality of it all—what Rahner calls “the everyday”—of religious life. We realized how difficult it is to be totally dedicated to God in the daily course of life. We have been blessed to live with some truly extraordinary people, but we have also had to learn to live with those whose vocational zest seems to have run dry. We have lived with people whose reputations outside the community are sterling but who are difficult to rub shoulders with day in and day out. We have been challenged to form community with some people who, for whatever reason, have become unhealthy in this life. And along the way, perhaps, we have had to come to grips with our own need for healing. Moreover, our desire to be men and women of apostolic zeal has been tempered by the challenges of ministry in a complex church comprised of sinful human beings. Maybe some of us have come to feel that the mystical quality of religious life has evaporated.

If this is the case, Rahner would challenge us to imbibe the mysticism of the everyday. And he would say that the Eucharist is the sacrament that enables us to enter into the mysticism of an everyday world that is suffused with imperfection and frustration but that is also quietly charged with the grandeur of God. It is the place where we encounter the risen Christ. The everyday is precisely the place where we are called to holiness. And holiness, in the biblical sense of the term, is all about belonging. You and I are invited to acknowledge and to live out of our belonging to Christ in communities that are far from perfect, in a pilgrim church that is comprised of saints and sinners, in a world that is wounded but is still the handiwork of an all-good Creator.

**The Eucharist and Our Lives as Religious**

The Eucharist, which *Vita Consecrata* tells us is the center of our lives as consecrated men and women, is a marvelously rich reality. It is like a diamond with many facets, only a few of which I have elucidated in this reflection. It is the sacrament in which we are immersed in the foundational narrative—the master story—that guides our lives as disciples of the Lord. This is the story from which we draw our vigor and that provides the horizon within which we seek to live. The Eucharist is the sacrament of the basin and the towel and the bread and the
cup. These symbols signify love to the end, the love that impelled Jesus to wash the feet of his disciples and to be faithful to his mission, even when it meant offering his life on the cross. Paradoxically, this sublime reality of the Eucharist is also the sacrament of the everyday. It is the enduring reminder that Jesus bore the burden of the everyday, and it sends us forth to meet Christ and to serve Christ in the routine details of our lives. It is the sacrament that initiates us into the mysticism of the everyday. For these reasons and for many more, the Eucharist is at the center of the consecrated life, both for individuals and communities.

**References**


