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ABBAS GENERALIS

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Very dear Brothers and Sisters,

Once again I draw near to each one of you through the medium of a circular letter. I know that it is better to circulate than to write circulars, but one does not impede the other. I trust, then, that this will find you all well: persevering in fraternal unity and in the breaking of the bread with joy and simplicity of heart.

The present letter is a continuation of the preceding one. By means of the other I invited you to join me at the table of the Word; with this I intend to say as much again, but this time at the table of the Eucharist. This double and unique banquet has only one aim: conformation according to the model of Him who died and rose for our salvation.

The Eucharist is the fount and summit of the School of Christian and monastic love. We are, therefore, in the very heart of the *Schola Caritatis*.

The Eucharist is the sacrament of the dialogue of sacrificial love between God and humankind. God, who sacrifices and gives himself so that we can offer ourselves as victims, living, holy and pleasing to God. This is the spiritual worship that we are invited to offer.

There is no doubt that through the centuries eucharistic doctrine has accented different aspects of the mystery. Nor is there any doubt that other aspects hidden today will be uncovered tomorrow. And the same is valid for eucharistic devotion; history is witness to its different manifestations.

Tradition underscored the essential, the Eucharist as: sacred celebration, sacramental sacrifice, sacrificial banquet and the real presence of Jesus Christ. Our own century rediscovered others aspects: the "memorial" of the pasch, the building up of the Church and of ecclesial communion, the eucharistic priesthood of all the baptized, as also the *epiclesis*, or invocation, of the Spirit. More recently other dimensions have come to light; participation in the Resurrected One, the divinization of the cosmos, the anticipated parusia and social commitment.

Not wishing, nor being able to say it all, it is necessary to circumscribe the theme, but leaving unlimited openness to the mystery in order to lose ourselves infinitely in it. A word, then, concerning the Eucharist as the mystery of union with Christ and fraternal communion.

THE EUCHARIST AND UNION WITH CHRIST

We must understand with total realism the words of Jesus at the institution of the Eucharist: "Take, eat, this is my body" (Mt.26:26). The subject "this" (the bread)

is identified with the predicate "my body" (the person of Jesus). And if we believe that Jesus was and is the Only Son of God, who can neither deceive nor be deceived, we must conclude that the consecrated bread and wine is Christ really present. Our ecclesial faith has been constant and unanimous in this respect.

Risen and Present

The Eucharist is above all a sacrament of presence, for it is the sacrament of the pasch and of the salvation which is Christ himself, in person. That is why the first Christians spoke of the "table of the Lord", "the supper of the Lord" (1 Cor.10:21; 11:20). He who had eaten with the apostles made himself present and presided at the meal. The story of the disciples at Emmaus is clear testimony to this reality: Jesus appeared to them in the breaking of the bread. And today Jesus says to us: "Behold, I am at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens to me, I will enter his house and take "the supper" with him and he with me" (Apoc.3:20).

Our eucharistic celebrations actualize the apparitions of the Risen One, allowing him to fulfill his word: "I will come back to you" (Jn.14:18-22). And we believe that He comes back today as he came that first day of the week, and came for the second time on the first day of the following week (Jn.20:19,26).

It is above all, and basically through the Eucharist that each of us is put into real contact with Jesus Christ, dead and risen for our sakes. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist, the Lord makes Himself present in various different ways.

- First of all through the very community gathered in His name and oriented towards Him. When the Risen Christ appears in the midst of His disciples, shut up in a room for fear of the Jews, we can believe that He came not from without but from within the one heart that united them.
- Christ also makes Himself present when the evangelical Word is proclaimed. That is why, at the invitation of the Deacon: The Word of the Lord; we respond: Glory to you, oh Lord.
- Above all, Christ makes Himself present in the consecrated bread and wine. He Himself, hidden under appearances of bread and wine, in order to be eaten and drunk. His own divine person humanly incarnated, historical and inculturated, crucified and resurrected and bursting with divine glory, makes Himself present in order to consume, as He is consumed.
- In the same way, Christ makes Himself a transformative presence when we eat and drink Him at communion. We consume Him in order to be converted into His own body, we assimilate Him in order to be assimilated.
- All these ways of presence make ever more present, the one who is always present, the Present One.

The motivating force of our contemplative life can be seen as search-encounter. Jesus presents Himself to us in the Eucharist where He seeks and finds us; He thus invites us to seek and to find Him. Our life, oriented toward contemplation, consists in seeking the Presence and making ourselves present. Christian contemplative life is unimaginable to me without the Eucharist, and without a deep participation in it.

Spouse and Bride

The Eucharist is the sacrament of the coming of the Lord in person. The desire for this coming motivates our daily celebration of the Eucharist. With the Spirit and the Bride we cry: "Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus" (Apoc.22:20). Recognizing ourselves as Church-Bride and wishing to prolong the presence and communion we do not hesitate to preserve the consecrated Bread after the celebration. We thus make use of our right over the already glorious Body of our Spouse and Lord: "The Groom does not have authority over his body but the Bride" (1Cor.2:4).

But, what relationship can we establish between the Eucharist and the matrimonial union, in reference to the union of Christ and the Church?

Fathers of the Church were not lacking who likened the Eucharist and matrimony to Christ and the Church, basing themselves on the text of Eph 5:22-32. The celebration of nuptials between Christ and the Church occurs in the nuptial banquet of the Eucharist: here the Lord as Spouse makes His own the Church and incorporates her to Himself as His body and blood, that is why "he feeds it and looks after it, because no one hates his own body" (Eph.5:29).

The Church, for its part, as a New Eve, becomes "flesh of his flesh and bone of his bone". In effect, in the Eucharist, "Christ loves the Church and sacrifices Himself for her" (Eph.5:25). To this sacrifice of the Lord and Spouse corresponds the total sacrifice of His Bride, the Church.

The "new and eternal matrimonial covenant" which is wholly Eucharistic, becomes reality for us in our monastic consecration. This covenant and consecration occur precisely in the eucharistic wedding banquet and is called to be renewed in each celebration of the supper of the Lord. Only thus can we represent Christ united to His Bride, the Church, by indissoluble bonds. Only in this way can we persevere in the fidelity of love until the coming of the Lord.

Prayer and Mysticism

Thanks to the celebration of the Eucharist, the Church is a praying community. It is precisely in speaking of the Eucharist that Paul says to the Corinthians: "When you meet together as *ekklêsia*...(1Cor.11:18).

If prayer is entering into communion with God, we can understand why the Eucharist fosters prayer. Even more, we can say that the Eucharist was instituted to make the ecclesial community a praying body.

The eucharistic celebration reaches its height in the words of the Lord: "Take and eat, take and drink". To take is to receive, not only to receive, but also to be received. Eucharistic prayer is communion in mutual giving and mutual receiving. In this way, the word of Jesus is accomplished "You in me and I in you" (Jn.14:20).

The eucharistic Christ is the glorified Christ who is in full communion with the Father and the Spirit. To eat Him is to partake of the Trinitarian communion. When we pray, eating and communing, we become a dwelling of God, dwelling in God. When any one of us approaches the Eucharist with a loving faith, Jesus says: "The Father and I are One" (Jn.10:30).

"And he is forthwith gathered up to God in love through the Holy Spirit and receives God coming to him and making his abode with him, not spiritually only but corporeally also, in the mystery of the holy and life-giving body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ." (William of St. Thierry, Meditations X:8, cf XIII:5)

Is it too much to say that eucharistic communion is the true door by which to enter into the mystery and be mystically transformed? Can we maintain that the eucharistic mystery is the privileged place of the mystical experience? If Christ is a consuming fire, is it not normal that our hearts should burn in the obscurity of faith when the broken Bread has been shared and eaten?

EUCHARIST AND FRATERNAL COMMUNION

The simple reading of the eucharistic texts of the New Testament tell us clearly that the Eucharist is the sacrament of solidarity between Christ and the brethren, the sacrament of shared life. It expresses and produces communion in solidarity with the life of Jesus and with all believers who partake of the same Bread. And at the same time it commits us to the sharing of this life.

If the monastic community is above all a community of faith, then the Eucharist, sacrament of unity, has in it a supreme function to fulfill. Celebrating the sacrament of unity together allows us to manifest already existing unity and to nurture it in order that it may grow to its eschatological fulfillment.

Together towards God

The evangelist, in Matthew 18:20, speaking of the search and encounter with God in the liturgy says: "Where two or three are gathered in my Name, there am I in the midst of them".

Those gathered are not simply "in" but, according to the Greek text, "moving towards", that is: oriented towards an intense search of the Name, that is, the Person. This once more explains why, in the eucharistic assembly, the Spirit and the Bride cry: "Come! Maranatha!".

In the Eucharist we seek Jesus, as a community, in a tension towards the eschatological, towards the ultimate and definitive. In it, we live the first commandment of love of God within the ambience of the second commandment of love of neighbor, in the person of our community, brothers and sisters.

The Gospel of John is fully Eucharistic (cf above all in Chapter 6). But it happens that when the time comes to speak of its institution, John omits it. And so you know what he does? He puts in its place the New Commandment: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn.13:34-35)! Thanks to this mutual love, Jesus tells us: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I in him" (Jn.6:56).

At the end of his Rule, St. Benedict gives us his spiritual testament: love one another ardently. He then expresses one last desire: may Christ bring us all together to eternal life! The Eucharist is a volcano of incandescent love which makes ardent love possible. In each celebration the Lord returns to bring us all together into His glorified and eternal life.

The Body of the *Kyrios*

In the Eucharist Jesus is present, immolated and risen, that is to say: the *Kyrios*. That is why Paul speaks of "the supper of the *Kyrios*", the "cup of the *Kyrios*" and "the table of the *Kyrios*". Now, the title of *Kyrios* carries with it a reference to the community. It means the *Kyrios*-Lord of the universe, the world, the Church, the community:

"None of us lives for himself and none of us dies for himself. While we are alive we live for the *Kyrios*; and when we die, we die for the *Kyrios*. And so, alive or dead, we belong to the *Kyrios*. It was for this purpose that Christ both died and came to life again, so that he might be *Kyrios* of both the living and the dead" (Rom.14:7-9).

When St. Paul, writing to the Corinthians, says the bread we share is a participation and a being in the body of Christ (1Cor.10:16-17) he is referring also to that body of Christ which is the community. That is why, afterwards, he will state that the unity effected among all is a constituent part of the celebration, anything contrary to this "is not the supper of the Lord" (1Cor.11-20).

Further on, in 1Cor.11:29, we read, "a person who eats and drinks without recognizing the body is eating and drinking his own condemnation". What does the word "body" signify in this context? We can say that it refers to the Church, without overlooking the reference to the eucharistic Body of the Risen One. In effect, that is how the whole structure of the passage brings it out; furthermore, the Apostle had already said: "We are all one body who partake of the one bread: (10-17); and a little later he will affirm: "You are the body of Christ" (12:27).

Benedict invites the superior to say the Lord's prayer aloud, twice a day. In this way all can renew the commitment to mutual pardon and remove the thorns of discord. It presupposes the Lord's invitation: when you approach the altar to offer your gifts... With a certain trepidation I cannot avoid asking myself: When the Lord presents Himself to us, besides being reunited does He also find us united? Are we more preoccupied with the legality of the celebration (conformity to ritual), than for authenticity (the concord of the assembly)?

Communing and Sharing

The primitive community of Jerusalem tells us about the fruits of the "breaking of the bread in the homes and the eating together, praising God" (Acts 2:46-47). That is, "the believers were united and held all things in common, (2:44) all thought and felt the same, possessing all in common and no one considered anything he possessed his own". (4:32)

In regard to the preceding, the Abbot of Ford, Baldwin, doctor of the eucharist and of the common life, gives us the fruit of his life and meditation in the following:

"Charity knows how to convert individual ownership into communion; not by doing away with individual property, but so that property may lead to communion, that communion may not be lacking, nor its good impeded. But diversity or property that impedes the good of communion is contrary to charity.

"The gifts received are reduced to unity, to communion, in two ways: when the gifts given to individuals are possessed in common by the sharing of love and when they are loved in common by the love of sharing. A gift is always common to the one who has it and the one who does not. If he who has it shares it with another,

he has it for the sake of another; and he who does not have it actually does have it in the other because he loves him! (Tractate XV, on the cenobitic life).

Even more, the most profound sense of this shared meal is only understood when we are in solidarity with the poorest and most dehumanized members of the body of Christ. In effect, He Himself tells us: "When you give a banquet invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind; and happy are you because they are unable to repay you; you will be repaid when the just are risen" (Lk.14:13-14; cf 14:21).

Our evangelical and monastic poverty also invites us to solidarity with the impoverished and to prefer those humans broken by our inhumanity. The generous response to this invitation is not a work of flesh and blood. It is a gift of the Father who grants us a deep solidarity through the Body and Blood of his Son.

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The previous Joint General Meeting had as its central theme "contemplative identity". Reading the reports of the houses, as well as the "synthesis of the important themes and common challenges", I do not find the Eucharist mentioned very often; however, it was not missing in the "conferences" presented by several superiors. True, the references are few but necessary to help us not lose sight of what is evident.

On the other hand, I am certain that we are all in accord with what is maintained by the Magisterium of the Church:

"The celebration of the Eucharist and the intense participation in it, as fount and summit of all Christian life, forms the irreplaceable and animating center of the contemplative dimension of all religious communities." (SCRIS *Contemplative Dimension* 9. 1980)

"No community can be built if it does not have its roots and core in the celebration of the most holy Eucharist, from which should spring, consequently, all education in community spirit." (Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 6)

It is for this reason that I had wanted to dedicate this circular letter to the Eucharist. I trust that it will also serve as a bridge and preparation for the central theme of the next Joint General Meeting: "The Community, School of Charity".

Visiting the catacombs I found a very ancient image: a woman with her arms extended in an attitude of prayer. It represents Mary, the Church, each one of us. Like Jesus with his arms spread on the cross, through him, with him and in him, we should offer ourselves in the eucharistic sacrifice so that all the dispersed sons and daughters of God may be brought together in communion.

With a very affectionate greeting, in Mary of St. Joseph,

Bernardo Olivera,
Abbot General