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The Holy Land, the Land of the Eucharist

May one be permitted, first of all, to express heartfelt gratitude to His Eminence the Cardinal Primate for honouring this Franciscan friar of the Holy Land with the invitation to share some reflections with the participants in this gathering of the International Eucharistic Congress. It was my fond hope to take this occasion to travel once more to Hungary, the land in which my late father's family has such deep roots, and to whose history, culture, and language he was so attached. Unhappily, circumstances at present have, as it were, conspired to prevent me from being present at the Congress in person, so that I am thankful for being given the opportunity of making my modest contribution through use of the audio-visual means of communication providentially put at our disposal for times such as these.

Recently, in the run-up to this International Eucharistic Congress, an Italian newspaper reported the Primate's, Cardinal Peter Erdő's, statement, in an interview he granted it, that the Christian believer's response to the anguish of disappointment, insecurity, and the search for meaning in life, is "*the personal relationship with Christ. This means a concrete, historical, relationship, since Jesus Christ is an acting Subject within history, so that a relationship with Him has an historical concreteness*".¹ At both ends, one may perhaps further explicitate, because of the historical concreteness of the incarnate life of the Eternal Son of God, who became, in history – i.e. in a given place and time – also the Son of Mary, and because of the historical concreteness of the believer, who likewise exists within the framework of a particular time and place.

The Eucharist, indeed, writes Pope Leo XIII, in his Encyclical "*Mirae Caritatis*" of 28 May 1902, "*should be regarded as in a manner a continuation and extension of the Incarnation*". Thereby "*the supreme*

Sacrifice offered on Calvary is in a wondrous manner renewed, as was signified beforehand by Malachi in the words: 'In every place there is sacrifice, and there is offered to My name a pure oblation'." In the Eucharist, "*the Body of Christ is present in many places at the same time, that is to say, wherever the Sacrament is consecrated*". It is this that the Eucharistic Congresses specifically celebrate, the true Sacrifice and the true Body and Blood of Christ made present, offered, in His Person. The Eucharist, not as an idea or an ideal, however noble or uplifting it might be, but as true Sacrifice and Real Presence. A *sacramental* reality, to be sure, not one accessible to the senses, yet the sacrament of a supereminently real Event, in which the Second Person of the Triune God, having assumed human nature, too, was born and acted in history, i.e. within space and time, and did so, moreover, as an acting subject, a participant, within human history.

The Eucharistic Sacrifice is, in mystery, the very same Sacrifice that the Redeemer of humankind actually offered on a certain day – a particular moment within the flow of history – in a certain Place, a particular spot on the face of the Earth. Moreover, this sacramental re-enactment itself was instituted by the Incarnate Lord on a certain evening in history, in a certain, particular, place. Necessarily, given the nature of the Incarnation Itself, i.e. the entry of God into His own creation, hence into time and space, every single moment of the drama of the Redemption was enacted in time and space: the very taking of human nature, the Incarnation itself, in terms of conception in the womb of Virgin Mary, in Nazareth; the Birth, in Bethlehem; the "First Sign" at Cana; the preaching and healing in Galilee; and in Jerusalem: the Last Supper, the Agony in the Garden, the Crucifixion, the burial, being laid in the tomb – and the Resurrection, in that it left empty the Tomb, where the Body had lain – and each and every moment in between, those specifically recorded in the Gospels and all the rest as well. The Eucharist necessarily contains within its own Mystery, the sacramental re-presentation – nay, re-enactment, as it were – of the entire arc of the earthly life of Our Lord together with His Death and Resurrection. For the Body that was nailed to the Cross, that was buried and then raised, living the Tomb empty, was an historical Body – one shaped, that is, by the entire life that

had been lived in it and through it, from Its conception all the way to Calvary.

The truth of the Eucharist, the truth of the sacramental Sacrifice, of the sacramental Body of Christ, depends, therefore, on the truth of the events themselves that are thereby re-presented, re-enacted. There would have been no Eucharistic Body of Christ if there had been no visible, tangible, human body of the Incarnate Word conceived within, and given birth to, by the Virgin Mother, in time and place, and if that very same body had not been nailed to the Cross, had not died on the Cross and had not risen from the Tomb, leaving it empty, there would have been no Eucharistic Sacrifice, no sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ.

Now precisely because of the historical nature of human existence, which means that time moves forward inexorably and irreversibly, we walk with the Lord *by faith* and *not by sight*, and can never enjoy the unrepeatable privilege of the disciples who “were there”. That time is no more, we cannot “step back into it”, so to speak. The *space*, however, is certainly still there, the Land that was the “stage”, on which the drama of the Redemption was enacted in history, and which therefore remains a mute yet eloquent witness to it all. This is why it is aptly called the *Holy Land*. And within it are the numerous particular Holy Places that commemorate particular moments in this history of salvation, in the drama of the Redemption. Thus, while we cannot “travel in time” to witness these events that are now conveyed to us by faith, in the Sacrament, we are indeed able to “go back in terms of space.”

In an age when, even much more so that in the time of Pope Leo XIII, the *reality* of Christ’s Action and Presence in the Eucharist, and indeed in history, is challenged by *idealist* “reinterpretations” of the Christian faith, the enduring witness of the Holy Land, of the Holy Places, is arguably more necessary, more powerful, still. It is there, in the respective Shrine, where in professing the Faith, in reciting the Creed, during the Mass, that *hic* (=here) is inserted at the appropriate place in the Creed, which further specifies the proclamation of faith in the saving Event: *Here* He was conceived; *Here* he was born; *Here* He was nailed to the Cross; *Here* He died; *Here* He was buried and from *Here* He rose.

“However much the present time be full of uncertainties, and of questioning regarding the future of society, and even of the whole of

humankind, Divine Providence will have its own plans, and will confound the those of mere humans, however deeply learned they may be. Divine Providence orders all things for the good of humanity and for the ultimate success of the mission of the Church, on which the health of society itself depends.” These are, freely rendered, the opening words of the Preface to a book on the Eucharistic Congress, published by Father P. V. Vanutelli, a Dominican priest. Even though the book’s publication date is in the same year as that of the celebration of the Congress, it is probable that most of you are not aware of this book. A pity – but quite understandable. The book was published in Rome, in Italian, in the year 1893, and it refers to the celebration of the International Eucharistic Congress in May of that year in Jerusalem.²

One would, indeed, think Jerusalem the natural, primary, location of the Congress. And yet it was a near-miracle that that particular celebration of the Congress took place. It was powerfully opposed, the plan to have it in Jerusalem. The Ottoman Empire’s Government in Istanbul was extremely worried. So were some of the separated Churches. The chancelleries of Europe all seemd to be near to a nervous breakdown. Diplomatic cables flew hither and thither and everywhere. Envoys came and went and came again. And, of course, by normal standards of diplomatic prudence it was a hazardous affair. The “Religious Question” in the Holy Land had already flowed over into a European war (the Crimean War) and, in the flammable environment of the relations between and among the Powers at the time, any spark – so it was feared – could lead to a major conflagration.³ And yet none of this happened, and the Congress did take place, and did prove to be a significant moment in the life of the Church. Its programme was organically related to the opening of Pope Leo XIII towards the Eastern Churches, with its ultimate aim being ending the various schisms not yet healed by restoration of full communion with the See of Rome.

Of no little significance for the prospects of such an enterprise would be educating Western Christians as to the legitimate varieties of liturgical and spiritual traditions within the Catholic Church herself, and at the same time, convincingly showing Eastern fellow believers in Christ that their traditions are indeed held in high honour. Nowadays, in our interconnected (rather, hyper-connected, so to speak) world, and following

the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, this is all happily taken for granted. Yet, at least in large areas of the Christian West, it was not necessarily so at the time. Circumstances dictated by others made matters particularly acute in the Holy Land, where some of the separated brethren forcibly prevented Catholic Eastern-rite liturgies from being celebrated in the principal Holy Places, those subject to the internationally mandated legal régime of “Status Quo”. For all these reasons, particularly powerful witness was rendered to the unity in faith of Western and Eastern Catholics by the solemn celebrations of the Divine Liturgy in the several Eastern rites within the framework of the Congress, in sacred places not subject to external interference.

There is really no substitute for reading Father Vanutelli’s lively and informed witness account of the Congress, as fascinating and exhilarating to read today as it must have been towards the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ No summary could do it justice, and none can be attempted here.

Let us instead simply highlight the chapter that emphatically demonstrates awareness at the Congress of the intrinsic link between worshipping Christ in the Blessed Eucharist and serving Him in the poorest; to which the Papal Legate, Cardinal Langenieux, the Archbishop of Reims, chose to render particularly striking testimony in the course of the Eucharistic Congress. Following some specially elevated, singularly profound, notably elegant, addresses on Eucharistic doctrine in East and West through the ages, Father Vanutelli testifies, the Cardinal Legate, and a delegation accompanying him, left the comfort of the seat of the Congress to visit the “tribe of lepers” that had been made to leave the City of Jerusalem and live on instead, in isolation, in the far reaches of the Valley of Josaphat. “His Eminence – as our witness recounts it⁵ – with a truly princely greatness of spirit, travelled on horseback to make a visit to those unfortunates. Through an interpreter, he addressed to them words of compassion and consolation, and interacted with them also individually, person to person. The Cardinal Legate then had an abundant meal served to those poor people, and had alms distributed generously to each of them. All present were very greatly moved, especially as the Cardinal chose to take part personally in serving the lepers with his own hands, and those poor people responded in such lively manner to being so

honoured by the Pope's Legate that they strove to express their gratitude, with deep emotion and in tears.”

A Cardinal Archbishop after the heart of our Holy Father Francis, is a reverent thought that comes spontaneously to mind.

Today, too, quite sadly, there would not be lacking opportunities for an analogous demonstration of the adoration of the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar “overflowing”, as it were, into serving the Lord Christ in the “least of His brethren”, in the Holy Land as in too many other places on God's Earth.

And this brings me to my final, entirely personal, reflection: Would it be too audacious to express the hope that a future International Eucharistic Congress – not “too future” – may be celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem, in the Holy Land? Better than most, I dare to say, I could list the reasons to advise otherwise, the most intricate difficulties and complications, on every plane, political, diplomatic, religious, security-wise... Yet is there not a “spiritual prudence” capable of prevailing, in this matter, over the “prudence of this world”?! The organisers of the 1893 Congress boldly answered this question in the affirmative, and Providence was with them, and rendered their enterprise both secure and fruitful – quite possibly even much more fruitful, in the end, than may be gleaned from the accounts given of it so far.

Right now, in any case, Jerusalem is assuredly here – in Budapest, Hungary – as it is wherever, from the rising of the sun to its setting, the Eucharistic Sacrifice is offered and Christ really present in the Eucharist is given due worship.

Praised be Jesus Christ!

Notes

1. Freely translated here from the Italian “...il rapporto personale con Cristo. Ciò significa un rapporto storico, concreto, perché Gesù Cristo è [un Soggetto] storico e il rapporto con Lui ha una concretezza storica...”. Cf.: “*Volevano sostituire Dio con il progresso, oggi si chiedono cosa sia il progresso.*” Parla il cardinale Erdő. Domenica si apre a Budapest il 52° Congresso eucaristico. Parteciperà anche il Papa; in the 31 August 2021 digital edition of the newspaper *Il Foglio*.

2. VANUTELLI, P. V. OP., *Il Congresso Eucaristico in Gerusalemme nell'Anno 1893*, Roma 1893.
3. For a thorough study of both the religious and the diplomatic contexts of the Congress, in their interplay, see SOETENS, C., *Le Congrès Eucharistique International de Jérusalem (1893) dans le cadre de la politique orientale du Pape Léon XIII*, Louvain 1977.
4. Much the same could be said, *congrua congruis referendo*, concerning C. Soetens's study, given the privileged place that the Holy Land still has, and inevitably must – for all sorts of reasons – continue to have, in both ecclesiastical and secular policy making.
5. Here in my free translation.