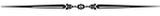


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CELEBRATION OF THE EUCHARIST IN AFRICA

Introduction

On Holy Thursday 18 years ago, the Holy Pope John Paul II offered to the world, “*bishops, priests and deacons, consecrated persons and all the lay faithful*”, a beautiful Letter, a profound message (Encyclical on the Eucharist in its relationship to the Church, Pope John Paul II, Rome, 17 April 2003).

It was on the occasion of Holy Thursday of the 25th year of his Pontificate. We will take advantage of the co-occurrence of the church feast and the papal anniversary to note the full significance for the Church and the Holy Father of such an appointment to celebrate and highlight, in deep understanding of the Mystery of the Easter Faith, the *lex orandi, lex crescendi, lex practicandi and venerandi* of what the tradition of the Church confesses and which the Second Vatican Council attests: “*The Eucharist as a source and summit, fulfillment of all Christian life.*”

When the Holy Pope John Paul II commits us to “*the Eucharist in its relationship to the Church*”, he also recalls for the Christian people what the Fathers of the Church affirmed: “*The Eucharist builds the Church and the Church makes the Eucharist.*”

The features that articulate this teaching of the Holy Pope John Paul II are also vectors of a theology of the Eucharist that illustrates the scope and ecclesial practice of this sacrament: the Eucharist as the Mystery of the Faith; the Eucharist as builder of the Church; the apostolicity of the Eucharist and of the Church; the Eucharist and ecclesial communion, the dignity of the Eucharistic Celebration; and the following of Mary, a “Eucharistic” woman.

The “*Sacramentum caritatis*” (Sacrament of Love), which is the other name of the Eucharist, points out to the People of God the Mystery of Salvation, the Paschal Mystery, the Mystery of faith which is the pledge of Redemption, the mystery of a Creator and Saviour God who loves, creates and re-creates humanity, does not cease, is beyond sin, and offers us his new and eternal covenant – at the price of his shed Blood, of his Body delivered!

The decision of Pope Francis to host the International Eucharistic Congress in Budapest, initially for 13-20 September 2020, marks a great ecclesial action in the power of the Holy Spirit to continue to fill the heart of the whole People of God at an international and universal level – (from this beautiful land of Hungary, land of the Holy King Stephen of Hungary) – with life and the love, presence and adoration of the Eucharist, with a view to celebrating this mystery of faith: “*The Mystery of faith. We proclaim your death oh Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again*” (*Anamnesis*). And also: “*Do this in memory of me.*”

Neither the Covid-19 pandemic, nor the serious difficulties related to health security issues, nor the anguish and worries of the Nation-States (justified in view of the effects of this pandemic), could prevent us from holding the postponed Session of this International Eucharistic Congress. Otherwise we would have ignored the grace of God and the Pope’s capacity of decision and his pontifical stature. We would have made an error and would be without faith, had we not trusted the radical ecclesial involvement of the Primate of Hungary, the fearlessness and ecclesial love of the heir to the ecclesiastical cradle of Esztergom, the capacity for sacrifice for the cause of faith and the Church in history and society, as demonstrated by Cardinal Péter Erdő, Archbishop of Budapest, as well as the entire Episcopal College, who host this Eucharistic Congress.

Your Eminence, I deeply honour your Letter of May 3, 2019 where you invited a very young African Bishop, Cameroonian, whom you met as an Expert at the Second African Synod of 2009 and at the Synod on the New Evangelization in 2012 (both convened by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI), to join this great meeting of ecclesial faith on the Eucharist, source and summit of all Christian life.

Please receive, Your Eminence, all our gratitude and the expression of the joy and gratitude of my entire Diocese of Mbalmayo and our Episcopal Conference of Cameroon, for your generosity and for your friendship and ecclesial fraternity (*“Fratelli tutti”*) and for your openness to the destiny of the Churches of Africa.

On this occasion, I take the opportunity to say THANK YOU to all the working groups, the Ecclesiastical Collaborators, the Auxiliary Bishops, and all the Clergy, the Experts, the Lay Faithful Christians, the Catholic Associations, the Religious Congregations, all young people involved and all those Volunteers who for years have been preparing this International Eucharistic Congress, and “last but not least”, the translators and interpreters for their patience and indulgence.

This presentation is divided into four parts that also constitute the milestones of our approach to the subject that has been proposed to us:

1. Specific features of the Eucharistic Celebration – understanding and foundations. How to approach and appreciate the specific African features of the Eucharistic Celebration?

2. Research and theological roots in Africa (cultural and religious anthropology) on the level of *“specific features of the Eucharistic Celebration in Africa”*

3. Aspects and dimensions of the Eucharistic Celebration in Africa

4. Testimonies and documents: *iconography, catechesis and Eucharistic celebrations in Africa*

1. Specific features of the Eucharistic Celebration – understanding and foundations. How to approach and appreciate the specific African features of the Eucharistic Celebration?

Returning to the title that has been proposed to us, *“the specific features of the Eucharistic Celebration in Africa”*, we wish to make a series of remarks:

Any “specific feature” of the Eucharistic celebration, wherever it may be, fundamentally finds its form, structure and model in the Last Supper, where Jesus, before his Passion and Death, instituted this great Sacrament. The prolegomenes (preparations) for the Paschal meal of

Jesus and his disciples and the account of the Institution of the Eucharist (Mk 14:15 et seq.; Lk 22:12; Mt 26:30).

Consequently, the Holy Pope John Paul II emphasizes in his Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* that “*The event of Holy Thursday visibly bears features of a liturgical ‘sensitivity’ modeled on the Old Testament tradition and ready to reshape itself in the Christian celebration in harmony with the new content of the Passover/Easter*” (No. 47). Pope John Paul II concludes in this line of reflection that “*the Christian liturgy was born in the wake of the words and gestures of Jesus, further developing the ritual heritage of Judaism*” (no. 48).

But, breaking and fulfilling this ritual heritage of Judaism, the Christian Eucharist celebrates “*the gift that the divine Bridegroom continually makes of himself to the Bride-Church*”. It is “*the sacrifice offered once and for all on the Cross where the Bridegroom (Jesus Christ) becomes food for all his faithful*” (n°48). The celebratory form of a “banquet” or “meal” here retains its specific mark, namely “marked by the blood shed on Golgotha”. The “convivial” and “nutritious” dimension of the Eucharistic Celebration must therefore attest to a twofold dimension: normative in its unique and redemptive scope; Hospitable to every person who thirsts for the bread of eternal life. Therefore, “*the bread that is broken on our altars – says Pope John Paul II –, offered to us as pilgrims walking on the paths of the world, is ‘panis angelorum’, bread of angels, which can only be approached with the humility of the Centurion of the Gospel: ‘Lord, I am not worthy that you enter under my roof’ (Mt 8:8; Lk 7:6)*” (no. 48).

We therefore understand the nuance that we wish to bring to this title: “specific features” of the Eucharistic celebration in Africa. The Church in Africa does not invent a specific form of celebration that would take shape and take its source elsewhere than in the celebration of the Paschal Meal, the Holy Communion of Holy Thursday, the Christian eulogical and Eucharistic tradition in the Church’s faith in the Eucharistic Mystery.

Once “*the canonicity and liturgical normativity of the Eucharist*” has been acknowledged, the argument that justifies this title is to be found in the “*series of external expressions*”, fruits of confession and Eucharistic celebration, assuming various shapes throughout history and cultures in Christian communities.

Pope John Paul II notes in this regard: “*Architecture, sculpture, painting, music, letting themselves be guided by the Christian mystery, have found in the Eucharist, directly or indirectly, a motif of great inspiration*” (no. 49). The whole history of the early Christian Church, medieval, modern and contemporary, documents this development in terms of the venues, various motifs and expressions of the Eucharistic celebration in order to turn them towards Christ, to the Gospel of salvation.

The need for an “inculturation” of the Christian faith is attested in everything, including in the liturgy, provided that the liturgical norms that guarantee the celebration of the one faith professed by all are observed.

Pope John Paul II has this to write: “*During my many pastoral journeys, I have been able to observe, in all regions of the world, the vitality that can be manifested in the Eucharistic Celebrations in contact with the forms, styles and sensibilities of different cultures. By adapting to the changing conditions of time and space, the Eucharist offers nourishment not only to individuals, but to peoples themselves, and it forms cultures inspired by the Christian spirit*” (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, No. 51).

Pope John Paul II noted that: “*what has happened in the lands of old Christianity in matters of sacred art and liturgical discipline (which tends to express, through all its elements, the meaning of the Eucharist according to the teaching of the Church) is also developing on continents where Christianity is young*” (no. 51).

Since the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the convocation by the Supreme Pontiffs (John Paul II and Benedict XVI) and the holding in Rome of two African synods in 1994 and 2009 respectively, have highlighted the great adventure of the Christian Mission in Africa, the process of evangelization and the life of the Church on this continent.

Through the Teaching of its Constitutions (especially on the Liturgy, Revelation, the Church, the Mission of the Church in today’s world), the Second Vatican Council showed, with the power of faith and theological thought and pastoral orientation, how much the Christian faith must be incarnated in history and cultures in order to transform them in depth.

2. *Research and theological roots in Africa (cultural and religious anthropology) on the level of “specific features of the Eucharistic Celebration in Africa”*

We have just noted how much the “inculturation” of the Christian faith in Africa was attested under the impetus of the Second Vatican Council and its teachings, to which must be added *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) of Pope Paul VI, while not forgetting *Africae terrarum* of the same Pope and his historic pastoral visit to Kampala in 1969 to the land of the Holy Martyrs of Uganda, where he exhorts Africans to conduct well-organized missions with their roots in their own cultures: “*Africans, you are now your own missionaries!*”

This page in the history of the life of the Church in Africa is characterized by a search for pastoral adaptation in the fields of liturgy, catechesis, celebration of the sacraments, in close alignment with the resources of religious and cultural anthropology derived from African traditions. The theological and pastoral challenge remains, beyond the forms of “indigenization” and formal “adaptation”, the Christian faith and the liturgical rooting of the faith confessed and especially as it fits into the entirety of the Christian Mystery.

With happiness, we can highlight here the successful contribution by the Church of Africa through its musical and choreographic traditions, understanding of traditional rites and resources of oral traditions, which help to enrich liturgical celebrations, catechetical pedagogy, sacred art and African Christian iconography. This, too, is the source of African Christian graphic representation. Therefore, the inculturation of the sequences of certain African Christian liturgies, the rhythms and songs of our choirs and their choreographies, pictorial or plastic iconography are authentic confessions to salvation in Jesus Christ, give credible testimonials of Him and proclaim the miracles of God on African soil.

In other presentations and publications, we have been able to define and systematize Africa’s traditional and modern cultures, the problem of inculturation of the faith in its heritage, its experiences and its perspectives (cf. Joseph Ndi-Okalla, in “Inculturation and conversion”, Paris, Karthala, 1994). We warn against a folkloristic African Christianity that would look away from the death scenes in Africa, from those who have

no bread, from those who are denied law and justice; a Christianity that would close its ears to the “*cries for help from Africans*” (Jean-Marc Ela).

For what we believe, confess and celebrate in the Eucharist, the sacrament of perfect love, is the salvation of all humanity, it is the life of God given in Jesus Christ dead and risen, Bread broken for a new world. We are therefore allowed to ask ourselves the question: Does Jesus Christ save Africans today? How does Jesus save Africans today? To answer this question, we cannot simply read quotes from the catechisms, writings on Christology or liturgical prescriptions. Instead, we must take into account the aspirations of humanity, and see for ourselves the places and conditions in which Africans live today as outcasts and in need on a daily basis, what areas generate mass emigration, where the dignity of the human person is at stake, where the “bread of life and the bread needed for life” are lacking.

We will then also be attentive to the direct concomitants of the Eucharistic celebration: Eucharist and Anamnesis; Eucharist and Mission; Eucharist and testimony, socio-charitable commitment: “*Do this in memory of me!*” “*Give them something to eat!*”

3. Aspects and dimensions of the Eucharistic Celebration in Africa

Since the Second Vatican Council, various Episcopal Conferences in Africa and Madagascar have expressed concern or the wish for liturgical and Eucharistic celebrations that reflect the expression of the confessed and lived faith of the Christian Communities, thus demonstrating “*the inculturation of the faith and the liturgy*”.

The lengthy development that led to the “so-called Zairean Rite” testifies in a paradigmatic way to a form of African Eucharistic celebration that, beyond the name, is a Rite approved by the Roman Magisterium, and finds its expression in other local and some specific Churches where the same Rite is practised.

This rite was approved on April 30, 1988 by the Congregation for Divine Worship, by a decision of Pope John Paul II. It is documented under the name of “*Supplement to the Roman Missal for the Dioceses of*

Zaire”, where a concise description of the liturgy of the Mass is presented (cf. Episcopal Conference of the Zaire – Presentation of the Liturgy of the Mass, Supplement to the Roman Missal for the Dioceses of Zaire, Edition of the General Secretariat of the Conf. Ep., Kinshasa, Gombe 1989); the genesis and the different aspects of this whole problem are excellently treated in: “*African liturgies. L’enjeu culturel, ecclésial et théologique*” by Kabazele Lumbala, Kinshasa, Facultés catholiques, 1996; an intelligible and instructive analysis and presentation of this Rite are offered to us by the liturgical expert Isidore Katele Nkuka in: “*La Celebrazione inculturata d’ell’ Eucharistia nella R. D. del Congo*”, in *Ad Gentes (Revue de Théologie et d’anthropologie de la Mission*, 5 (2001)2, 177-187).

The title “*The specific features of the Eucharistic celebration*” refers to our effort to incorporate into the Eucharistic celebration of the Roman tradition some significant and constitutive elements of the African tradition, whose diversity, nature, motives and meaning contribute to promoting the liturgical participation of the Christian People who celebrate the Eucharist and to enriching the confessed and celebrated faith of this People with a view to achieving what Edith Stein (later Saint Teresa Benedicta of the Cross) called in her conference of the Eucharistic Congress of 1932 in Spierer (Germany) “*Eucharistisch leben*” (living Eucharistically, that is, living from the Sacrament of Perfect Love [sacramentum caritatis] that is, Christ-Eucharist and becoming witnesses to it by diachonia in this world, “in memory of Him”).

Constituent elements and aspects:

The religious and cultural anthropology of the peoples of black Africa bears witness to a great richness and variety of constituents that mark the entire expression of life, beliefs and practices. Jesuit Father Engelbert Mveng was able to characterize such a richness by the expression: cosmic liturgy and religious language. Here various rites are assembled; link with the Divinity and ancestors; initiations and their procedures; forms of meals; dance forms; choreography; music and its instruments: tom-tom drums, drums, balafons, xylophones, stringed instruments (Mvet, Kora, etc.).

It is this universe that marks Afro-Africans who offer themselves to conversion through the grace of Christ. The Christian faith and the Gospel will transform and enrich these cultural and liturgical constituents.

The “so-called Zairean rite” of the Eucharistic celebration therefore includes the following elements:

- At the beginning of the Mass, the announcement of this great event by a “messenger”, as is customary at traditional popular assemblies.
- The veneration of the Altar at the Entrance which, in the Eucharistic celebration, indicates that Christ is at the same time the altar, the victim and the main celebrant.
- The presentation of the Celebrant and all the participating People who humbly make themselves present to God (to respond to his invitation).
- The invocation of the Saints and the ancestors “*whose righteousness only God knows, where we request them to intercede on our behalf*”, thus putting the earthly participants in the liturgy in communion with those of the heavenly liturgy (“*Communio sanctorum*”).
- The enthronement of the Word of God solemnly carried in procession and venerated before its proclamation (Here, the centrality of the word in Africa and the culture of the gestures of orality are intended to enrich the liturgy)
- The blessing of all those who will proclaim this Word (readers and the Gospel).
- The penitential act that occurs after listening to the proclaimed Word or after the Creed (taking advantage of all the intelligence and registers of purification in the tradition).
- The Rite of Peace.
- The presentation of offerings and Oblates.
- The Eucharistic Prayer and the Eucharistic rite create strong integrating elements of dialogue between the Celebrant and the faithful, who are thus involved in the Paschal Mystery of God in Jesus Christ, who gives himself in this Meal of Salvation for the life of humanity.