

Notes and Comments

THE EUCHARIST AND FREEDOM

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INTRODUCTION

The Eucharistic Congress of 1997 was focused on the rather unique theme, "The Eucharist and Freedom." Many different conferences and articles have explored the various connections between the Eucharist and different concepts of freedom, common impediments to the exercise of authentic freedom, and ways of coming to true freedom. The Eucharist brings us the real sacramental presence of Christ who frees and unites us all.

This note aims at reflecting on the relations between the Eucharist and our human freedom by relating both not just to Christ, but to the Triune God. In so doing, the Church will also be shown to constitute a necessary and intrinsic dimension of both the Eucharist and our authentic Christian Freedom — "the freedom that we have in Christ Jesus" (Gal 2:4).

This note will be structured around two illustrations, which attempt to "diagram," as it were, the key connections between the Trinity as grounding the basic links between the Eucharist and freedom in the Christian community, the Church.

The *first* illustration of three equal intersecting arches ties our "Christian *experience of Freedom*" to its basic source, God Himself as Father, Son and Spirit, the Blessed Trinity, who is celebrated in every Eucharist.

The *second* illustration, the Cross or Crucifix, symbolizes how all members of the Body of Christ, the Church, nourished and empowered by the Spirit in the Trinitarian Eucharistic celebration, continue the liberating mission of Christ as prophet, priest and

king.

We *conclude* with a brief word on the multiple dimensions that mark "Eucharistic evangelization," carried on through the grace of Christ in his Church, and reaching out to the whole world.

I. THE CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE OF FREEDOM

Our *first* illustration, called *triquetra*, is an early Christian emblem for the Trinity, composed of 3 equal intertwining arches. It can illustrate our response to the question: how does the Eucharist "free" us? What is the ultimate basis — the bottom line ground — for our *authentic* human freedom?

[*"Authentic"* must be emphasized because we all know how often and to what incredible depths human freedom is abused — from unspeakable crimes against humanity, to the ever present temptations to selfish, even sinful, self-centeredness.]

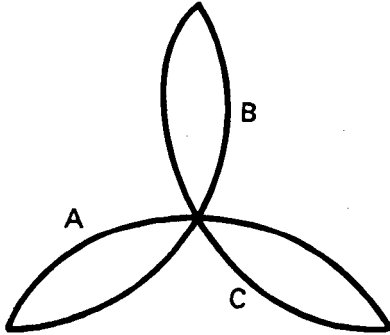
The Christian answer cannot be other than this: the basis of our human freedom is the living God of Love revealed by Jesus Christ, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the contemporary insight which we wish to draw from the *triquetra*.

Perhaps it seems strange to bring in the Blessed Trinity to clarify the Eucharist as liberating — after all, the Trinity is a *mystery* that is usually presented as something we cannot possibly understand, and therefore simply has to be accepted in faith.

But if we are created as human persons in the image and likeness of the God of Love, surely the basis for our personal human freedom must be God. Moreover the illustration can imply much more: as relative to a specifically "CHRISTIAN" experience of freedom, it lays down the *triple basis* for the *actual experience* of freedom. It offers a diagram of how the God of Love precisely as three distinct divine Persons — Father, Son, and Spirit — is intimately involved in our free activities as human persons.

We can show this briefly in two steps. *First*, how the *triquetra* sketches a personal God of Love experienced by us in three

dimensions. *Second*, how these three Persons of God free us, liberate us.



The first step, then, focuses on a Trinitarian interpretation of the *triquetra* itself. The horizontal arch [A] represents *Christ*, the *Son*, who is Emmanuel, God-with-us, uniting us all as sons/daughters of the Father. The descending arch from top to bottom left [B] represents the Father, the ultimate source and beginning of all life; while the upswinging arch from bottom right to the top [C] represents the Holy Spirit who is God's own Love within us. All three arches meet in a central point, symbolizing both the perfect unity of God in Himself — the one divine nature — and, the unity of God's action in us and the world.

The *second* step indicates how this Trinitarian structure of the God of Love among us overcomes the most basic impediments to our human freedom. God the *Son*, Jesus Christ, grounds the human SOLIDARITY that alone can support *authentic* personal freedom by rejecting and overcoming all individualistic self-centeredness. God the *Father* is the only ultimate AUTHORITY who thus refutes all human tyranny, all attempts to make some created person, power, force, institution — whatever — and any 'god' that dominates and usurps our God-given freedom, basis for our inalienable human rights. God the *Holy Spirit* is the inexhaustible and irrepressible divine source of our freedom's

SPONTANEITY that constantly works to overcome all forms of coercion, repression, subjugation and hopeless stagnation.

Both steps can briefly be summarized as follows:

- God *above* us: the Father; ultimate liberating *authority*
- God *alongside* us: Jesus the Incarnate Son; *solidarity*
- God *within* us: the Holy Spirit; source of *spontaneity*.

Conclusion. The ultimate basis for the specifically Christian experience of human freedom must be God Himself. Not the One God of philosophy, but the Triune God revealed by Jesus Christ. In creating, redeeming and sanctifying us, it is the Triune God in the personal dimensions of Father, Son and Spirit, who liberates us and grounds all authentic human freedom.

II. THE TRINITY GROUNDING OUR FREEDOM AND THE EUCHARIST

Our *second* illustration is the Cross of Christ or the Crucifix. It is surely fitting that any explanation of the Catholic view of the Eucharist and freedom climax in the Cross, the symbol of Christ's Paschal Mystery through which the Triune God has redeemed the world. Hence this most familiar and basic symbol of our Catholic Faith can illustrate how the Eucharist brings us to the Trinitarian experience of freedom just described.



First, there is the *Cross's upright*, rooted in the ground and pointing upwards, toward heaven. As rooted in the ground it symbolizes *Christ's oneness with us all, even "being born in the likeness of man, . . . obediently accepting death, death on a Cross"* (Phil 2:7-8). As pointing upward toward heaven, the upright expresses the *Father* "who so loved the world that he

gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life" (Jn 3:16).

Second, the Cross's horizontal Crosspiece symbolizes this saving liberating Love of Father and Son, namely, the Holy Spirit, who is poured out — breathed forth — over the whole world (Jn 19:30).

Such in brief sketch is the meaning of the Cross, the key symbol of our Christian Faith. Catholic tradition, and Filipino Catholic piety in particular, have depicted this even more starkly in the Crucifix, the Cross with the suffering body of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A. THE CROSS AND THE EUCHARIST

In the Eucharist we experience most strongly the Christian Trinitarian experience of freedom, since the Eucharist is precisely the sacramental celebration of the Cross, of Christ's Paschal Mystery. Thus the Eucharist itself is essentially Trinitarian, consisting of:

- *Thanksgiving* worship of the FATHER;
- *memorial* making present, CHRIST in his Paschal Love;
- *invocation* of the SPIRIT who unites us:
 - to the Risen Christ made present in Bread and Wine,

[Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy . . . the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ.]

- and to one another.

[May all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit.]

Now it is in the Eucharist, celebrated by the Church, the Christian community, that we experience most strongly the LIBERATING AUTHORITY of the FATHER, the SOLIDARITY with CHRIST, the Son, that frees us for others; and the SPONTANEOUS INSPIRATION of the SPIRIT that motivates hope beyond hope. This is all the more true in Filipino culture in which, as the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines noted, Filipinos are naturally

and spontaneously attracted to religious celebrations and practices.

It is in the Eucharist especially, then, that we experience each divine Person actively "working" to transform us gradually into "other Christs" — into the fullness of FREEDOM and love found only in Christ Jesus. We come to Mass to worship God who is our Father, the ultimate Authority of Love, liberating us from sin and raising us to be his adopted sons/daughters through Christ and the Spirit. In the Mass, we worship in solidarity by joining our prayers and offerings to Christ's unique Self-offering of love on the Cross to the Father. In the Mass we are empowered by the Creator Spirit, who unites us to the Risen Redeeming Christ and to one another.

B. THE CROSS AND THE MISSION OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

The Cross presents in dramatic form the threefold saving mission of Christ as *prophet, priest and king*. On the wood of the Cross Jesus as *Priest* offers his supreme once-and-for-all sacrifice for the sins of the world. His death is the ultimate *prophetic* sign overpowering the evil of sin by the perfect oblation of Love. Finally, on the wood of the Cross was nailed the inscription: "Jesus the Nazorean, the King of the Jews" (Jn 19:19). Thus the Gospels present the Cross as the climax of Jesus' *kingly service*.

The Eucharist is the center of the Catholic Church. Actually, a double relationship exists. As Pope John Paul II has expressed it: "just as the Church 'makes the Eucharist' so 'the Eucharist builds up the Church' " (*Dominicae Cenaee*, #4).

On the one hand, in the Eucharist the Church as people of God are gathered together in reconciliation and worship to celebrate the Passover of the Lord. In practical speech, this means that without the Eucharist, we would have no Catholic community called together and vivified by the Risen Christ through his Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, the Eucharist is never a private rite. As THE sign or Sacrament of Church Unity and Love, the Eucharist can only be celebrated by the Church, the Christian community. Moreover this close mutual relationship between Church and

Eucharist is clearly manifested in that we traditionally call both Church and Eucharist the "BODY OF CHRIST" [*CORPUS CHRISTI*].

The Eucharist which brings sacramentally present to us the Risen Christ precisely in his saving Paschal sacrifice, is the center of the Church's liberating MISSION TO THE WORLD, continuing Christ's very own mission. In Christian Faith, then, both Eucharist and Church constitute the very center of the whole human race, and even of the physical world.

Such a Christian vision is truly liberating, because it frees all men and women from two basic temptations. *First*, the temptation to see the world only as a secularist — making money, reputation and power the 'gods' of human living (cf. Mt 4:1-11). *Second*, the opposite temptation to run from "the world" to some "spiritualistic" escape that alienates us from our real human situation. Church and Eucharist enlighten us as to our true, authentic meaning as human persons — of matter and spirit — in this material GRACED world.

As Vatican II teaches, the Church "brings to all the light of Christ," because the Church itself is "a kind of sacrament or sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men and women" (LG 1). Centered around the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity and love, the Church brings to the world the light of Christ that liberates all from the slavery of secularism and its opposite, a false escapist spiritualism that alienates us from our human condition.

So every baptized Christian, as incorporated into Christ's Body, the Church, is empowered to continue Christ's saving MISSION on earth, in the threefold role of prophet, priest, and king (cf. LG 10-13). Just as the nature of the Church itself is formed in likeness to the Trinity as personal loving communion (LG 2-4), so its MISSION is Trinitarian, flowing directly "according to the plan of the Father from the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit" (AG 2). Every baptized person is formed by the Spirit into the likeness of Christ, Priest, Prophet and King, as adopted son/daughter of the Father.

In this way, the Church, not just in its Eucharist but in its essential MISSION as well, actively promotes the authentic human FREEDOM of all its members. By incorporating every baptized in its MISSION, all are freed precisely in sharing in

Christ's mission as prophet, priest and king.

Sharing in Christ's mission as *Prophet* — to proclaim the Word of God — frees the Christian from illusions and self-deception by the TRUTH of the Gospel about Jesus Christ, who IS the TRUTH (Jn 14:6).

Sharing in Christ's mission as *Priest*, Christians "worship the Father in Spirit and Truth" (Jn 4:23), freed from all idolatry and secularistic egotism.

Sharing in Christ's mission as *King*, we are called to loving service of others, to working for peace and justice, and toward the coming of the Kingdom of God. So we are freed from the self-centeredness, that feeds on itself to the point of self-destruction.

Conclusion. The Cross is the symbol of the Triune God's perfect Love for us, freeing us from false gods, false pride and self-centeredness, false notions of success. At the foot of the Cross we experience the perfect freedom of Jesus Christ, the only authentic lasting freedom in this life. It is the Triune God, Father, Son and Spirit, present to us in Eucharist and the Christian community, the Church, who sets us free in Christ Jesus.

If you live according to my teaching,
 you are truly my disciples;
 then you will know the truth,
 and the truth will set you free. . . .
 If the Son frees you,
 you will really be free. (Jn 8:31, 36)

FINAL CONCLUSION

Through reflection on two symbolic illustrations, we have sketched the Trinitarian basis for the relation between the Eucharist and authentic Christian freedom. In keeping with the theme of this year's Eucharistic Congress, we can conclude with a brief summary of the many dimensions of Eucharistic evangelization that have been illumined in the foregoing.

The Church's Eucharistic evangelization is:

— *Christic*: celebrating the memorial of the Lord's Pasch;

- *Pneumatologic*: in the presence and action of the Spirit;
- *ecclesial*: creating communion with Christ in the ecclesial communion;
- *diaconal*: serving by sharing in the sacrifice of the Suffering Servant;
- *eschatological*: anticipating already the Promise of the Kingdom of God yet to come in its fullness.

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