

«*BROTHERS, LOOK AT THE HUMILITY OF GOD*»  
THE EUCHARIST IN THE WRITINGS AND THE LIFE  
OF SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI

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The theme which Pope John Paul II has chosen for the XI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops is: *Eucharistia fons et culmen vitae et missionis Ecclesiae* (The Eucharist, source and summit of the life and mission of the Church). This Synod is going to be celebrated within the context of the year dedicated to the Eucharist. As preparation for the Synod, the General Secretariat of the Synod has published the *Lineamenta* (25<sup>th</sup> February 2004).

The theme of the Eucharist has already been an object of profound reflection recently by the *Magisterium*, in the Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* of John Paul II (17<sup>th</sup> April 2003). In this Encyclical the Pope recalls a unique experience of his pontificate:

«During the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 I had an opportunity to celebrate the Eucharist in the Cenacle of Jerusalem where, according to tradition, it was first celebrated by Jesus himself. *The Upper Room was where this most holy Sacrament was instituted*. It is there that Christ took bread, broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying: “Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my body which will be given up for you” (cf. Mk 26:26; Lk 22:19; 1 Cor 11:24). Then he took the cup of wine and said to them: “Take this, all of you and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all, so that sins may be forgiven” (cf. Mt 14:24; Lk 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25). I am grateful to the Lord Jesus for allowing me to repeat in that same place, in obedience to his command: “Do this in memory of me” (Lk 22:19), the words which he spoke two thousand years ago»<sup>1</sup>.

The Cenacle, the holy place of the institution of the Eucharist, marks an important moment in the sacred history of the Gospels and in the history of the Church. Not only does it recall the Gospel episodes of Holy Thursday, of Easter Sunday and of Pentecost, but it also marks the place where the Friars Minor established themselves in 1335, when the «Holy Zion» was acquired for Christianity by the royals of Naples, Robert of Angiò and Sancia of Maiorca. The Cenacle marks the place where the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land was founded in 1342. Until 1552 the Friars Minor could commemorate the institution of the Eucharist in the Cenacle by the celebration of Mass. In that year they were forced to leave this place where Jesus gathered together the first community of believers. That is why the celebration of Mass by John Paul II in the Cenacle on Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2000, had such a unique significance.

For us Franciscans, Custodians of the Holy Cenacle, history becomes even more a celebration of faith when we return to the Sources of our evangelical charism, when we read in the life of Saint Francis of Assisi his profound love and devotion towards the sacrament of the Eucharist. The aim of these reflections is that of making us relive the mystical experience of Francis in his faith in the mystery of the Incarnation, which becomes alive every day in the Eucharistic celebration. We shall speak about the

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<sup>1</sup> Ioannis Pauli II, Litt. Encycl. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (17.IV.2003), 2: *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 95 (2003).

Eucharist in the Writings of Saint Francis, as well as in some facts of his life as these have been handed down to us by his biographers, in order to conclude with a brief reflection upon the centrality of the Eucharist in our Franciscan spirituality.

## THE EUCHARIST IN THE WRITINGS OF SAINT FRANCIS

The «Eucharistic Writings» of Saint Francis are texts which speak about the body and blood of the Lord and about the respect towards the dignity of altars and churches. They have to be analysed against the historical background of the Church's reform after the Fourth Lateran Council (1215)<sup>2</sup>, and particularly with reference to the Eucharistic letter *Sane cum olim* of Pope Honorius III (22<sup>nd</sup> November 1219). These texts include the following: the first Admonition, entitled «The Body of Christ»; the Letter to the Clerics; the First Letter to the Custodians; the First Version of the Letter to the Faithful, 3; the Second Version of the Letter to the Faithful, 6-7, 12-24, 33-34; the Letter to the Rulers of the Peoples, 6-7; the Earlier Rule, XX,5-6; the Letter to the Entire Order, 12-37; the Testament, 6-11; the Prayer Inspired by the Our Father, 6<sup>3</sup>.

Another important dimension which we have to consider in the study of the «Eucharistic Writings» of Saint Francis concerns the underlying motivation as to why he wanted to speak in such an explicit way about the corporeal reality of the Eucharistic sacrament, particularly with reference to the mystery of the Incarnation.

«The Saint would not have given such a prominent place to our problem in his Writings, were it not for the fact that he felt it his responsibility to protect the friars from heresy ... It was not so much a question of the consequence of the controversy regarding Berengarius' doctrine on the Supper. It was rather a question regarding the errors of the heretical religious movements. We can understand the doctrine of Francis on the Eucharist only if we study his stand regarding the abuses and errors of his times»<sup>4</sup>.

### 1. Admonitio I

The first reference to the body and blood of the Lord, which recurs 18 times in the Writings of Saint Francis, is to be found in the first Admonition. This Admonition reflects the writing of an anonymous Cistercian monk, known by the name of Pseudo-Bernard, entitled *Tractatus de Corpore Domini*<sup>5</sup>. The Admonition could also have been the effect of the Cistercian influence upon Saint Francis by Cardinal Rainerio Capocci of Viterbo, who was a Cistercian monk and a Papal Prefect in Umbria. From the *Chronicle* of Jordan of Giano, 16, we know that this Cardinal was present during the Pentecost

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<sup>2</sup> The Fourth Lateran Council had obliged all Christians to receive Communion at least once a year, on the feast of Easter. Cfr. *Denzinger*, n. 437.

<sup>3</sup> The most complete study regarding the «Eucharistic writings» of Saint Francis is that by B. CORNET, «Le *De reverentia Corporis Domini*. Exhortation et lettre de saint François», *Etudes Franciscaines* 6 (1955) 65-91, 167-180; 7 (1956) 20-25, 155-171; 8 (1957) 33-58; also E. FRANCESCHINI, «L'Eucaristia negli scritti di San Francesco», *L'Eucaristia nella spiritualità francescana* (Quaderni di Spiritualità Francescana, Vol. 3), Santa Maria degli Angeli – Assisi 1962, 38-49; K. ESSER, «Missarum sacramenta. La dottrina eucaristica di S. Francesco d'Assisi», *Temi Spirituali*, Edizioni Biblioteca Francescana, Milano 1981, 231-284.

<sup>4</sup> K. ESSER, *Temi Spirituali*, 236. Our quotations from this study will refer to the Italian edition. The English translation of the texts quoted is our own.

<sup>5</sup> *Patrologia Latina* (Migne) 184, 1149-1150.

Chapter of 1221, as well as during the canonization ceremony of Saint Francis. The following is the text of the first Admonition:

«The Lord Jesus says to his disciples: *I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me. If you knew me, you would also know my Father; and from now on, you do know him and have seen him. Philip says to him: Lord, show us the Father and it will be enough for us. Jesus says to him: Have I been with you, for so long a time and you have not known me? Philip, whoever sees me sees my Father as well* (Jn 14:6-9).

The Father dwells in *inaccessible light* (1Tm 6:16; Jn 4:24), and *God is spirit*, and *no one has ever seen God* (Jn 1:18). Therefore He cannot be seen except in the Spirit because *it is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh has nothing to offer* (Jn 6:62). But because He is equal to the Father, the Son is not seen by anyone other than the Father or other than the Holy Spirit.

All those who saw the Lord Jesus according to the humanity, therefore, and did not see and believe according to the Spirit and the Divinity that He is the true Son of God were condemned. Now in the same way, all those who see the sacrament sanctified by the words of the Lord upon the altar at the hands of the priest in the form of bread and wine, and who do not see and believe according to the Spirit and the Divinity that it is truly the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, are condemned. [This] is affirmed by the Most High Himself Who says: *This is my Body and the Blood of my new covenant [which will be shed for many]* (Mk 14:22,24) and *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life* (Jn 6:55). It is the Spirit of the Lord, therefore, That lives in Its faithful, That receives the Body and Blood of the Lord. All others who do not share in this same Spirit and presume to receive Him eat and drink *judgment on themselves* (1Cor 11:29).

Therefore: *children, how long will you be hard of heart?* (Ps 4:3). Why do you not know the truth and believe *in the Son of God?* (Jn 9:35). Behold, each day He humbles Himself as when He came *from the royal throne* (Wis 18:15; Phil 2:8) into the Virgin's womb; each day He Himself comes to us, appearing humbly; each day He comes *down from the bosom of the Father* (Jn 1:18) upon the altar in the hands of a priest.

As He revealed Himself to the holy apostles in true flesh, so He reveals Himself to us now in sacred bread. And as they saw only His flesh by an insight of their flesh, yet believed that He was God as they contemplated Him with their spiritual eyes, let us, as we see bread and wine with our bodily eyes, see and firmly believe that they are His most holy Body and Blood living and true. And in this way the Lord is always with His faithful, as He Himself says: *Behold I am with you until the end of the age* (Mt 28:20)<sup>6</sup>.

This Admonition, entitled *De corpore Domini*, is structured upon the verbs «to see» and «to believe». Francis speaks about the body and blood of the Lord as a reality which we can see with our bodily eyes, in the same way in which the apostles saw with their bodily eyes the human body of the Lord. As we shall see in all the other Writings of Saint Francis, there is a link between the mystery of the Incarnation and that of the Eucharist. With our bodily eyes we see the Eucharistic species, the bread and wine, which are «sanctified» with the words of the Lord upon the altar by the action of the priest. With our faith we believe that this bread and wine are truly the body and blood of Jesus Christ. This entails a qualitative change from a corporal vision to a vision of faith, which is accomplished «according to the Spirit and the Divinity», which acts in the

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<sup>6</sup> Adm I, in *Francis of Assisi. Early Documents*, Vol. I: The Saint, Edited by R.J. ARMSTRONG, J.A.W. HELLMANN, W.J. SHORT, New City Press, New York 1999, 128-129. Subsequent references will contain the abbreviation FAED, plus the volume and page numbers. The Latin titles and abbreviations of the titles of the Writings of Saint Francis are those followed by K. ESSER in his critical edition of the Writings: *Die Opuscula des heiligen Franziskus von Assisi*. Neue textkritische Edition. Zweite, erweiterte und verbesserte Auflage, besorgt von E. Grau, Grottaferrata (Roma) 1989 (Spicilegium Bonaventurianum, XIII).

Eucharistic miracle in the same way in which It acts in the miracle of the experience of the vision of faith.

We note the insistence of Francis upon the reality of the «true Body» of the Lord Jesus present in the Eucharist. These are words which certainly show the great faith of Francis and his preoccupation to defend the reality of the Eucharistic sacrament against the Cathar heresy, which denied the mystery of the Incarnation, since, according to Cathar doctrine, all matter was an intrinsically evil principle and was totally alien to divinity which is a principle of goodness. The denial of the Eucharist was the logical conclusion of the denial of the mystery of the Incarnate Word. The *kenosis*, or self-emptying of Christ, who becomes incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary, becomes a reality every time it is represented in a real way in the Eucharistic sacrifice.

## 2. *Epistola ad Clericos*

Another «Eucharistic writing» is the Letter to the Clerics. There are two versions of this Letter. The first version is also known by the title *De reverentia corporis Domini et de munditia altaris* (Regarding the reverence towards the body of the Lord and the cleanliness of the altars):

«Let all of us, clergymen, consider the great sin and the ignorance some have toward the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and His most holy names and written words that consecrate His Body. We know It cannot be His Body without first being consecrated by word. For we have and see nothing bodily of the Most High in this world except His Body and Blood, His names and words through which we have been made and redeemed *from death to life* (1Jn 3:14).

Let all those who administer such most holy mysteries, however, especially those who administer them illicitly, consider how very dirty are the chalices, corporals and altar-linens upon which His Body and Blood are sacrificed. It is placed and left in many dirty places, carried about unbecomingly, received unworthily, and administered to others without discernment. Even His written names and words are at times left to be trampled under foot; *for the carnal person does not perceive the things of God* (1Cor 2:14).

Are we not moved by piety at these things when the pious Lord puts Himself into our hands and we touch Him and receive Him daily with our mouth? Do we refuse to recognize that we must come into His hands? Let us, therefore, amend our ways quickly and firmly in these and all other matters. Wherever the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ has been illicitly placed and left, let It be moved from there, placed in a precious place and locked up. Likewise, wherever the names and written words of the Lord may be found in unclean places, let them be gathered up and put in a becoming place.

All the clergy are forever bound to observe all these things above everything else. And whoever *does not do so, let him know he must render an accounting on the day of judgment* (Mt 12:36) before our Lord Jesus Christ. Let those who make copies of this writing in order that it might be better observed, know they have been blessed by the Lord God»<sup>7</sup>.

The second version of the Letter to the Clerics is identical, except for a detail in verse 13:

«We know that we are bound to observe above all else all of these matters according to the precepts of the Lord and the constitutions of holy mother Church»<sup>8</sup>.

This reference to the constitutions of the Church is a clear witness of the influence which the Decree *Sane cum olim* (22<sup>nd</sup> November 1219) of Honorius III had on the Eucharistic devotion of Saint Francis<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> EpCler I, FAED I,52-53.

<sup>8</sup> EpCler II, FAED I,54-55.

«The profound respect of Saint Francis for the Body of the Lord is expressed also in the numerous exhortations to conserve the Sacrament in a convenient way. The abuses which were so widespread regarding this practice had deeply touched his loving heart. We do not know whether he knew about the contents of the numerous conciliar decisions of those times, which had the aim of bringing an end to these abuses. From his Writings we can only know that he knew about the decisions of the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) and the admonitions of Honorius III in the document *Sane cum olim*. He often quotes them textually and appeals to the *constitutions of holy mother Church*»<sup>10</sup>.

In the *Lineamenta* of the Synod on the Eucharist, there is a reference to the centrality of the Eucharistic devotion in the Writings of Saint Francis, which is expressed in his preoccupation that the friars should take good care of the churches, altars, and sacred vessels which are used during the Eucharistic celebration:

«Saint Francis of Assisi demands from his brothers that the chalices, *ciborium*s and altar-linens used for the Eucharist should be precious and should be taken care of with utmost respect and veneration»<sup>11</sup>.

In the section which regards the Sources for the life of Saint Francis, we shall list various episodes which make us see the profound respect of the Saint for the external signs which are linked with the Eucharistic mystery, and particularly, his respect for the person of the priest, for the churches as sacred edifices, for the altar as the place upon which the sacrifice is celebrated, for the chalices and *ciborium*s which contain the body and blood of the Lord, and for the altar-linens and corporals which adorn the altar of sacrifice.

The abuses which concerned the Eucharist were numerous during the Middle Ages, and they were the direct result of the lack of faith of the Cathars in the intrinsic goodness of the mystery of the Incarnation, as well as the result of the carelessness of the clergy, which was fruit of a lack of adequate preparation to celebrate the sacred mysteries with dignity.

«During the times of Saint Francis the Eucharistic celebration was exposed to various abuses and became mixed up with superstitious customs. There were priests who celebrated many Masses every day, not out of a particular devotion, but out of greed for money or to please high-ranking persons. The devout Christians lamented because of the frequency and great number of Masses. Other priests consecrated at every Mass, but they received communion only once, in order to appear not to go against the prohibition of the Church. From these practices there was only one more step to go to arrive at the aberration of the *missa sicca*, that is, the celebration in which the priest would recite all the prayers of the Mass, but without any offerings of bread and wine, without consecration and without communion. Greedy priests would abuse of their dignity to such an extent that they would recur to uniting various Mass formulas with one canon of the Mass, according to their liking or according to the wishes of the people (*missa bifaciata, trifaciata, quadrfaciata*, etc.), in order to induce the people to participate in communion. The various forms of superstition made use of the objects of the altar, and

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<sup>9</sup> The full text of the Papal Decree is found in FAED I,55, footnote a.

<sup>10</sup> K. ESSER, *Temi Spirituali*, 274.

<sup>11</sup> *XI Synod of Bishops, Lineamenta*, 50: The dignity of the Eucharistic celebration.

even of the same Sacrament. These led to an absolute lack of respect in front of the most high sanctuary of the house of God. Respect would always be lacking in the case of any abuse of the Sacrament for base or material aims»<sup>12</sup>.

The pitiful situation in the way in which some priests administered the divine mysteries showed how serious was the problem about which Saint Francis often writes. «(The report of the inquiry known as the Anonimo Passaviense) refers that the priests did not renew in time the consecrated Hosts, which would be eaten by worms; that they would let the Body and Blood of the Lord fall down on the ground; that they would keep the Sacrament in rooms or in a tree in the garden; that during the visits to the sick they would hang the burse with the Eucharist in any place and would then go to the taverns; that they would administer Communion to public sinners and would refuse to administer it to worthy persons; that they would use acid wine for the Sacrifice, would pour more water than wine in the chalice, and after ablutions they would start the celebration all over again; that without any reason they would celebrate many Masses during the same day, or else they would prolong the Mass with unending and confused hymns; that they would make of taverns out of churches and would also host undignified representations in the sanctuary»<sup>13</sup>.

This was the situation which provides the background to the Letter to the Clerics, and to other «Eucharistic Writings» of Francis of Assisi. We also note that the Saint sees a link between the body and blood of the Lord and the «written words and names of the Lord», which Francis wanted his brothers to respect, because they are the means by which the body of Christ is sanctified (consecrated) in the Eucharist. This same characteristic note of Saint Francis' spirituality is also found in his Testament.

«The great respect of the Saint and his living faith in the great mystery of the Eucharist, are also shown in his veneration to the *verba, quae sanctificant corpus*. Evidently in those times, in many churches the books which contained the Canon of the Mass were so worn out that they would have become illegible. It was for this reason that the Councils ordered that a remedy be sought to resolve this problem. Francis was profoundly convinced that there cannot be the body of the Lord, without first having been consecrated through the word of the Lord. Therefore he deplored the grave guilt and ignorance which certain clerics showed towards the words of Scripture, which consecrate the body of Christ»<sup>14</sup>.

In this aspect we also note the link between the Eucharist and the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word present in the divine words, which forms the basis of the faith of Saint Francis in the intrinsic goodness of creation which the Son of God has assumed entirely in his human nature.

### **3. *Epistola I ad Custodes***

The First Letter to the Custodians is another «Eucharistic writing» which shows many similarities with the Letter to the Clerics, regarding its contents and its underlying motivations:

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<sup>12</sup> K. ESSER, *Temi Spirituali*, 238-239.

<sup>13</sup> K. ESSER, *Temi Spirituali*, 264-265.

<sup>14</sup> K. ESSER, *Temi Spirituali*, 278-279.

«To all the custodians of the Lesser Brothers whom this letter reaches, Brother Francis, your servant and little one in the Lord God, sends a greeting together with new signs of heaven and earth which are great and extraordinary in the sight of God yet regarded as of little importance by many religious and others.

With all that is in me and more I beg you that, when it is fitting and you judge it expedient, you humbly beg the clergy to revere above all else the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ and His holy names and the written words that sanctify His Body. They should hold as precious the chalices, corporals, appointments of the altar, and everything that pertains to the sacrifice. If the most holy Body of the Lord is very poorly reserved in any place, let It be placed and locked up in a precious place according to the command of the Church. Let It be carried about with great reverence and administered to others with discernment. Let the names and written words of the Lord, whenever they are found in dirty places, be also gathered up and kept in a becoming place.

In every sermon you give, remind people about penance and that no one can be saved unless he receives the most holy Body and Blood of the Lord. When It is sacrificed on the altar by a priest and carried anywhere, let all peoples praise, glorify and honor on bended knee the Lord God living and true. May you announce and preach His praise to all nations in such a way that praise and thanks may always be given to the all-powerful God by all people throughout the world at every hour and whenever bells are rung.

Let my brother custodians who have received this writing, who have made copies of it and kept it for themselves and for the brothers who have the responsibility of preaching and the care of the brothers, and who have made known and preached about everything contained in it, know that they have God's blessing as well as my own. Let these be matters of true and holy obedience for them»<sup>15</sup>.

In the beginning of the Order the word *custos*, *custodes*, indicated a particular office of those friars who were responsible for a section of a province which would be called a *custodia*, or custody. In the early years of the Order there was no clear-cut distinction between the offices in the Order, and therefore the term has to refer to those brothers who, in some way or another, were responsible for the *ministerium fratrum*, the ministry of the brothers<sup>16</sup>.

In this case also Francis speaks in terms similar to those he uses in the Letter to the Clerics. He insists that the Eucharistic species should be kept in chalices made of precious material. The Saint uses the adjective *pretiosis*, which means precious materials, and he uses the same term in the Testament, his autobiographical writing which exalts the faithfulness of the brothers towards Lady Poverty. For the conservation of the Eucharist Francis seems to make an exception regarding poverty, out of his profound respect for the dignity of the sacrament.

A new aspect regarding the Letter to the Clerics is linked with the respect which Francis expects everybody to show towards the Eucharist, also with external attitudes and gestures of respect and with the ringing of bells which invite people to pray. The same detail is found in the Letter to the Rulers of the People. Cornet had also thought that this idea of Francis was born after his return from the East, where he had listened to the *salât* of the Muslim *meuzzin*, and that the reference to specific times of prayer could be the nucleus of the Franciscan custom which would later develop in the *Angelus Domini* salutation three times a day, accompanied by the ringing of bells.

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<sup>15</sup> EpCler I, FAED I,56-57.

<sup>16</sup> Cfr. K. ESSER, *Origins of the Franciscan Order*, Franciscan Herald Press, Chicago 1970, 67-68.

#### 4. *Epistola ad Fideles I,3 and Episula ad Fideles II,4-15, 22-24, 33-34*

The first version of the Letter to the Faithful, is sometimes known also as the «Exhortation to the Brothers and Sisters of Penance». It has a brief reference to Eucharistic devotion in verse 3:

«In the Name of the Lord! All those who love the Lord *with their whole heart, with their whole soul and mind, with their whole strength* (Mk 12:30) and love their neighbours as themselves, who hate their bodies with their vices and sins, who receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and who produce worthy fruits of penance...»<sup>17</sup>.

Since this Letter speaks about those who do penance, the invitation to receive the Eucharist can be considered as being part and parcel of a life of conversion, as this was practiced in the medieval penitential movements, many of which, as we know, ended up orientating themselves towards the form of evangelical life of Francis and his movement. In fact, the same insistence upon the reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist is to be found more abundantly in the second version of the Letter to the Faithful:

«The most high Father made known from heaven through His holy angel Gabriel this Word of the Father – so worthy, so holy and glorious – in the womb of the holy and glorious Virgin Mary, from whose womb He received the flesh of our humanity and frailty. Though He was rich, He wished, together with the most Blessed Virgin, His mother, to choose poverty in the world beyond all else (cf. 2Cor 8:9).

And as His Passion was near, He celebrated the Passover with His disciples and, taking bread, gave thanks, blessed and broke it, saying: *Take and eat: This is my Body* (Mt 26:26). And taking the cup He said: *This is My Blood of the New Covenant which will be poured out for you and for many for the forgiveness of sins* (Mt 26:28). Then He prayed to His Father, saying: *Father, if it can be done, let this cup pass from me. And His sweat became as drops of blood falling on the ground* (Lk 22:42.44). Nevertheless, He placed His will in the will of His Father, saying: *Father, let Your will be done; not as I will, but as You will* (Mt 26:42; Mt 26:39). His Father's will was such that His blessed and glorious Son, Whom He gave to us and Who was born for us, should offer Himself through His own blood as a sacrifice and oblation on the altar of the cross: not for Himself through Whom all things were made, but for our sins, leaving us an example that we might follow His footprints.

And He wishes all of us to be saved through Him and receive Him with our heart pure and our body chaste. But, even though His *yoke is easy and His burden light* (Mt 11:30), there are few who wish to receive Him and be saved through Him»<sup>18</sup>.

In this section Francis speaks about the Eucharist within the context of the history of salvation, and in a particular way within the context of the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word. Pope John Paul II would speak in similar terms in his Encyclical Letter on the Eucharist:

«In a certain sense Mary lived her *Eucharistic faith* even before the institution of the Eucharist, by the very fact that *she offered her virginal womb for the Incarnation of God's Word*. The Eucharist, while commemorating the passion and resurrection, is also in continuity with the incarnation. At the Annunciation Mary conceived the Son of God in the physical reality of his body and blood, thus

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<sup>17</sup> EpFid I,1-4, FAED I,41.

<sup>18</sup> EpFid II,4-15, FAED I,46.

anticipating within herself what to some degree happens sacramentally in every believer who receives, under the signs of bread and wine, the Lord's body and blood»<sup>19</sup>.

In order to enforce the analogy of faith between the mystery of the Incarnation which takes place in the womb of the Virgin Mary and the mystery of the Eucharist which is celebrated in the womb of the Church, the Pope seems to be inspired by the text which Francis wrote down in the second version of the Letter to the Faithful. The Pope's words are:

«As a result, there is a profound analogy between the *Fiat* which Mary said in reply to the angel, and the *Amen* which every believer says when receiving the body of the Lord. Mary was asked to believe that the One whom she conceived “through the Holy Spirit” was “the Son of God” (Lk 1:30-35). In continuity with the Virgin's faith, in the Eucharistic mystery we are asked to believe that the same Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary, becomes present in his full humanity and divinity under the signs of bread and wine»<sup>20</sup>.

Another text of the second version of the Letter to the Faithful reflects what we have already seen in the first version of the same Letter, which speaks about the link between the life of conversion and penance and the sacrament of the Eucharist. In this case Francis is more explicit, when he seems to make the reception of the sacrament of Penance look like a necessary condition for a worthy reception of the sacrament of the Eucharist. One cannot, however, read these verses with the juridical frame of mind which developed later on in Church discipline, particularly after the Council of Trent. Maybe Francis is thinking more regarding an inner disposition to receive Christ present in the Eucharist in a worthy manner, in the spirit of true conversion and in the commitment of a penitential life which expresses itself also in the practice of the sacrament of Penance. The following are the words of Saint Francis:

«We must, of course, confess all our sins to a priest and receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ from him. Whoever does not eat His flesh and drink His blood *cannot enter the kingdom of God* (Jn 6:54,57; Jn 3:5). But let him eat and drink worthily because anyone who receives *unworthily, not distinguishing*, that is, not discerning, *the Body of the Lord, eats and drinks judgment on himself* (1Cor 11:29)»<sup>21</sup>.

The gift of discernment and the reception of the body and blood of the Lord are evidently linked to the ministry of priests:

«And let all of us know for certain that no one can be saved except through the holy words and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ which the clergy pronounce, proclaim and minister. And they alone must minister and not others»<sup>22</sup>.

Francis insists upon the importance of the ministry of priests in the administration of the sacraments seemingly because of the erroneous views of the heretics who wanted to do away with the ministry of priests, especially when this ministry was exercised by

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<sup>19</sup> Ioannis Pauli II, Litt. encycl. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (17.IV.2003), 55: AAS 95 (2003), 470, quoted in *XI Synod of Bishops, Lineamenta*, 72.

<sup>20</sup> Ioannis Pauli II, Litt. encycl. *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (17.IV.2003), 55: AAS 95 (2003), 470, quoted in *XI Synod of Bishops, Lineamenta*, 24.

<sup>21</sup> EpFid II,22-24, FAED I,47.

<sup>22</sup> EpFid II,34-35, FAED I,47-48.

persons who were unworthy from a moral point of view. We shall see how Francis reacts strongly against this erroneous teaching which linked the efficacy of the sacrament to the moral disposition of the person who celebrated the liturgical action.

### **5. *Epistola ad Populorum Rectores, 6-7***

An interesting reference of this Letter written «to all mayors and consuls, magistrates and governors throughout the world», regards the duty to receive the Eucharist as one of the duties falling upon the responsibility of every Christian person who is in authority and has to be an example to his people. It is interesting to read these words of Saint Francis, against the background of the medieval *christianitas*, in which the duties of the Christian life and those of civil life were not distinct one from the other:

«Therefore I strongly advise you, my Lords, to put aside all care and preoccupation and receive the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ with fervor in holy remembrance of Him. May you foster such honor to the Lord among the people entrusted to you that every evening an announcement may be made by a messenger or some other sign that praise and thanksgiving may be given by all people to the all-powerful Lord God»<sup>23</sup>.

### **6. *Regola non Bullata XX,5-6***

The Earlier Rule of 1221 has a chapter entitled «Penance and the reception of the Body and Blood of Our Lord Jesus Christ». It seems that this chapter, which is missing in the Later Rule of 1223, is a direct result of the liturgical reform began by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) in canon 21, which established the precept regarding the annual reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. Francis speaks about the duty of the friars to confess their sins to other friar priests of the Order or, when these were lacking, to other priests of the Church, and again he links the sacrament of Penance to the reception of the Eucharist:

«Contrite and having confessed in this way, let them receive the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ with great humility and respect remembering what the Lord says: *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life* (Jn 6:54) and *Do this in memory of me* (Lk 22:19)»<sup>24</sup>.

### **7. *Epistola toti Ordini missa, 12-37***

The Letter to the Entire Order reflects the situation of the Franciscan fraternity towards the end of the life of Saint Francis. The Letter is dated towards 1225, and is considered as the fruit of the Papal document *Quia populares tumultus* (3<sup>rd</sup> December 1224) which authorized the Friars Minor to celebrate the Eucharist and the Divine Office in their own oratories<sup>25</sup>. For this reason the style of the Letter is strongly liturgical. The

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<sup>23</sup> EpRect 6-7, FAED I,58-59.

<sup>24</sup> RegNB XX,5-6, FAED I,78.

<sup>25</sup> HONORIUS III, Bull *Quia populares tumultus* (3 December 1224), in *Bullarium Franciscanum* I,20. An interesting reference to this Bull is given to us by Brother Thomas of Eccleston in his Chronicle *De Adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam* II,10: «When the four brothers arrived in London ... they rented a house in Cornhill and they built some walls with dried grass in order to have individual cells. They lived in this simple life until the following summer, without their own chapel, since they did not yet have permission to have altars and celebrate Mass in their dwellings». This is my translation of the original text in Latin in FRATRIS THOMAE VULGU DICTI DE ECCLESTON, *Tractatus de Adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam*, Edited by A.G. Little, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1951.

Letter speaks in a particular way regarding two themes: respect towards the Eucharist and respect towards the dignity of the ministry of priests:

«Kissing your feet, therefore, and with all that love of which I am capable, I implore all of you brothers to show all possible reverence and honor to the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in Whom that which is in heaven and on earth has been brought to peace and reconciled to almighty God (cf. Col 1:20).

I also beg in the Lord all my brothers who are priests, or who will be, or who wish to be priests of the Most High that whenever they wish to celebrate Mass, being pure, they offer the true Sacrifice of the most holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ with purity and reverence, with a holy and unblemished intention, not for any worldly reason or out of fear or love of anyone, as if they were pleasing people (cf. Eph 6:6; Col 3:22). But let all their will, as much as grace helps, be directed to God, desiring, thereby, to please only the Most High Lord Himself because He alone acts there as He pleases, for He Himself says: *Do this in memory of me* (Lk 22:19; 1Cor 11:24). If anyone acts differently, he becomes Judas the traitor and *guilty of the Body and Blood of the Lord* (1Cor 11:27).

My priest brothers, remember what is written in the law of Moses: whoever committed a transgression against even externals died without mercy by a decree of the Lord. *How much greater and more severe will the punishment be of the one who tramples on the Son of God, and who treats the Blood of the Covenant in which he was sanctified as unclean and who insults the Spirit of grace?* (Heb 10:28-29) For a person looks down upon, defiles and tramples upon the Lamb of God when, as the Apostle says, not distinguishing and discerning the holy bread of Christ from other foods or actions (cf. 1Cor 11:29), he either unworthily or, even if he is worthy, eats It in vain and unworthily since the Lord says through the prophet: The person *is cursed who* does the work of the Lord *deceitfully* (Jer 48:10). He will, in truth, condemn priests who do not wish to take this to heart, saying: *I will curse your blessings* (Mal 2:2).

Listen, my brothers: If the Blessed Virgin is so honored, as is becoming, because she carried Him in her most holy womb; if the Baptist trembled and did not dare to touch the holy head of God; if the tomb in which He lay for some time is held in veneration, how holy, just and fitting must be he who touches with his hands, receives in his heart and mouth, and offers to others to be received the One Who is not about to die but Who is to conquer and be glorified, upon Whom *the angels longed to gaze* (1Pt 1:12).

*See your dignity, [my] priest brothers* (1Cor 1:26), and be holy because He is holy (cf. Lv 19:2). As the Lord God has honored you above all others because of this ministry, for your part love, revere and honor Him above all others. It is a great misery and a miserable weakness that when you have Him present in this way, you are concerned with anything else in the whole world!

Let everyone be struck with fear, let the whole world tremble, and let the heavens exult when Christ, the Son of the living God, is present on the altar in the hands of a priest! O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity! O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles Himself that for our salvation He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread! Brothers, look at the humility of God, and *pour out your hearts before Him!* (Ps 62:9) Humble yourselves that you may be exalted by Him! Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves, that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally!

I admonish and exhort you in the Lord, therefore, to celebrate only one Mass a day according to the rite of the Holy Church in those places where the brothers dwell. But if there is more than one priest there, let the other be content, for the love of charity, at hearing the celebration of the other priest; because our Lord Jesus Christ fills those present and absent who are worthy of Him. Although He may seem to be present in many places, nevertheless, He remains, undivided and knows no loss; but One everywhere, He acts as He pleases, with the Lord God the Father and the Holy Spirit the Paraclete for ever and ever. Amen.

Because *whoever belongs to God hears the words of God* (Jn 8:47), we who are more especially charged with divine responsibilities must not only listen to and do what the Lord says but also care for the vessels and other liturgical objects that contain His holy words in order to impress on ourselves the sublimity of our Creator and our subjection to Him. I, therefore, admonish all my brothers and encourage them in Christ to venerate, as best as they can, the divine written words wherever they find them. If they are not well kept or are carelessly thrown around in some place, let them gather them up and preserve them, inasmuch as it concerns them, honoring in the words the Lord *Who spoke them* (3Kgs 2:4). For many

things are made holy by the words of God and the sacrament of the altar is celebrated in the power of the words of Christ»<sup>26</sup>.

The Eucharistic contents of the Letter to the Entire Order are among the richest in the Writings of Saint Francis. The Saint begins the Letter sending his greetings to all the brothers with a profound gesture of humility («kissing your feet») of a slave in front of his lord. The aim of the Poverello is that of encouraging the brothers to show, on their part, the same attitude of humble and devout homage, towards the body and blood of the Lord. Francis underlines the reconciliatory dimension of the Eucharist. By means of the body and blood of Christ all the universe is reconciled and regains peace with God. The reference is to the Christological canticle of Colossians 1:12-20, which can be considered as a key-text to understand the Franciscan theology on Christ, centre and masterpiece of creation and of history, who glorifies God the Father. In this context of a cosmological Christocentrism taken from Saint Paul, Francis speaks also about the power of the blood of Christ which purifies from sin and reconciles the entire universe with the Creator. The Eucharist becomes the celebration *par excellence* of this act of reconciliation.

Francis next directs his attention to the brother priests. We know that, when Francis was still alive, the brothers who were clerics were numerically small in the Order. However, the Saint always shows a profound sense of respect towards them, for the reasons which we will explain later on.

Francis addresses the brother priests who intend to celebrate the Eucharist. He insists on the moral attitude of the priest, who has to be «pure» and celebrate the liturgical action with a pure heart. The morality of the person of the minister is not only linked to his state of spiritual and ritual purity in front of the Lord, but goes down deeply to the sphere of his most profound intentions. In front of the abuses of the priests who celebrated Mass without any due regard to the sacredness of the liturgical action, Francis insists that his brother priests should celebrate the Eucharist «with a holy and unblemished intention». Moreover, they should be aware lest they celebrate Mass «for any worldly reason or out of fear or love of anyone, as if they were pleasing people». For Francis the Mass is never to be linked with social needs or with the aim of acquiring offerings in money, as often sadly would happen in the Middle Ages. The Saint had a profound sense of the sacredness of the liturgical celebration, of the fact that the priest enters the realm of the One who is totally other, of Him who is Holy in an eminent way, and that therefore nothing should come in the way between the mystery of the body and blood of Christ and the liturgical action of the minister. Whoever acts for other motives becomes a traitor like Judas, who hands over his Master in order to receive money.

According to Francis, the celebration of the Eucharist, when it is not done with a good intention, becomes a profanation of the body and blood of the Lord. Francis quotes the text of Hebrews 10:28-29, which was the same text which Honorius III used in his decree *Sane cum olim* (22<sup>nd</sup> November 1219). The sin of profanation of the Eucharistic species consists in not being able to discern according to the Spirit, not being able to discern the body and blood of Christ from other food. It consists in being unworthy to receive the Eucharist or even in the undignified celebration of Mass without the necessary spiritual disposition. For Francis the lack of respect towards the Eucharist as regards to the physical contact with the Lord would be the equivalent of a lack of faith.

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<sup>26</sup> EpOrd 12-37, FAED I,117-119.

The Saint does not think twice before he says that the same priestly action which is carried out not in a correct manner becomes not a blessing for him who celebrates, but a curse. If we confront these words with the witnesses which we have already quoted regarding abuses which were rampant in the Middle Ages in the celebration of the Eucharist, we can understand very well why Saint Francis is so preoccupied to admonish his brother priests not to fall in the trap of a lack of faith.

The great dignity of the Eucharistic mystery is even more sublime from all the other external signs of the presence of the Lord in history. Francis speaks about some meaningful ways in which the Lord is present in the history of salvation: the womb of the Virgin Mary who carries Christ; the holy fear of John the Baptist who does not dare to touch the head of the Lord during His Baptism; the sacred tomb in which Christ was laid. This tomb becomes for Francis a living sign of the presence of the Risen Lord. It is a strong sign for the late-medieval sensibility of Francis, who was brought up within the context of the crusades and the conquest of the Holy Land, to which he personally participated in 1219-1220. Some historians, like Angelo Clarenò, had even thought of a personal visit by Francis to the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. In spite of all this, according to Francis, the priestly ministry of consecrating the body and blood of the Lord is even greater than all these external signs, because the priest touches with his hands the divine presence of Christ present in the consecrated bread and wine. Here we have an experience of faith which is very strong, and which departs from the physical experience of the real contact with the Lord during the liturgical action.

It is from this profound faith that Francis arrives to speak about the dignity of the priest. In a hymn of praise to the greatness of the Eucharistic sacrament, Francis speaks about the dignity of the priestly ministry, which is the most solemn way in which the Son of God wants to manifest his love towards humanity. For this reason the priest becomes a qualified witness of a gaze full of faith which goes deeply into the divine *kenosis* («Brothers, look at the humility of God»).

After presenting this form of mystical treatise on the mystery of the Eucharist which is celebrated by priest during Mass, Francis speaks about two themes which have a profound relationship with what he said before. Francis speaks about the one Mass of the fraternity, and about the respect towards the written divine words with which the priest consecrates the body and blood of the Lord.

Regarding the Mass of the fraternity, Francis insists, first of all, that it should be celebrated «according to the rite of the Holy Church». He shows that he is profoundly convinced to be always united in a sense of filial obedience to the Church, even in the external way in which liturgy should be celebrated, in order for it to become a strong moment of unity in prayer. Francis does not want his brothers to celebrate private Masses, which were so common in the Middle Ages, since concelebration was practically out of use in that period. Francis rather asks that one priest would celebrate, while all the other brother priests would participate in his Mass with humility like all the other lay brothers. These words of Francis sound strangely against what the Missal of Honorius III prescribed: «If there are more priests in the same place, each one of them can celebrate privately the Mass he chooses» (*Sed si sunt plures sacerdotes in loco, secrete possunt cantare missam quam volunt*). This was the practice of the Papal chaplains in the Lateran

palace. It seems that Francis wants to have an exception to the rule for his brothers<sup>27</sup>. The motivation which underlies his words, however, is clear: «let the others be content, for the love of charity, at hearing the celebration of the other priest». It seems, therefore, that the only intention of Saint Francis is that of respecting the priority of fraternity even in the life of prayer. It could certainly also have been a way to protect the brother priests from falling into the same abuses of celebrating Masses with the aim of getting stipends and offerings for them. But probably, the real reason for Francis' words lies in the fact that the same fraternal structure of Franciscan life asked for a sharing in everything, even in the way in which the Eucharist is celebrated.

The consecration of the Eucharistic species is carried out through the power of the divine written words of the Lord. It is for this reason that Francis, in his various Writings, speaks about the respect which the brothers should show towards the divine written words, which become a sacrament, a living sign of the presence of the Lord. The link between Word and Eucharist is very strong in the Writings of Saint Francis, because it is through the power of the divine words that the bread and wine are «sanctified» during Mass.

### **8. Testamentum, 6-12**

At the end of his life, Francis dictated his Testament, in which he recalls the Gospel themes which were dearest to him. The Testament is an autobiographical writing of great importance to know the mindset of Saint Francis. Here we propose for our reflection some verses which speak about the Eucharist:

«Afterwards the Lord gave me, and gives me still, such faith in priests who live according to the rite of the holy Roman Church because of their orders that, were they to persecute me, I would still want to have recourse to them. And if I had as much *wisdom* as *Solomon* (1Kgs 4:30-31) and found impoverished priests of this world, I would not preach in their parishes against their will. And I desire to respect, love and honor them and all others as my lords. And I do not want to consider any sin in them because I discern the Son of God in them and they are my lords. And I act in this way because, in this world, I see nothing corporally of the most high Son of God except His most holy Body and Blood which they receive and they alone administer to others. I want to have these most holy mysteries honored and venerated above all things and I want to reserve them in precious places. Wherever I find our Lord's most holy names and written words in unbecoming places, I want to gather them up and I beg that they be gathered up and placed in a becoming place. And we must honor all theologians and those who minister the most holy divine words and respect them as those who minister to us *spirit and life* (Jn 6:63)»<sup>28</sup>.

The first part of the Testament is an autobiographical document of Francis, in which he recounts his experience of conversion/penance, recalling the episode of his encounter with the leper and the mystical experience of the Crucifix of San Damiano. It is within the context of faith that Francis expresses in his reference to the presence of Jesus in the churches, of which the prayer *Adoramus te* is the most concrete sign, that one has to reflect upon the respect which Francis showed towards priests who administer the body and blood of the Lord.

Francis considers the priest as an object of faith. In Admonition 26 he had already stated: «Blessed is the servant who has faith in the clergy who live uprightly,

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<sup>27</sup> Cfr. S.J.P. Van DIJK, *Sources of the Modern Roman Liturgy. The Ordinal of Haymo of Faversham and Related Documents (1243-1307)*, Leiden 1963, Vol. I, 40-55.

<sup>28</sup> Test 6-12, FAED I,125.

according to the rite of the Roman Church»<sup>29</sup>. These words, as well as those of the Testament we have just quoted, show, however, that not every priest merited respect and faithful veneration, but only those priests who lived according to the *forma* of the Roman Church. With this expression Francis indicated a very concrete attitude, and not simply a sense of unity and faithfulness on the intellectual-ideological level towards some dogma or ecclesiastical law. In concrete terms, the priests who lived according to the form, or rite, of the Roman Church were those who were in complete agreement with the Pope and with the indications given by the Roman Curia also regarding the way in which they would celebrate the liturgy. The proof of this assertion lies in the same Testament, which judges those friars who did not want to pray the Divine Office as the Rule prescribed. Francis compares these friars to persons who are not Catholics. The priests who lived in complete faithfulness to liturgical practice of the Church of Rome, even though they might have been impoverished and did not have the wisdom of Solomon, merited all signs of respect and reverence on the part of the brothers.

Francis then speaks about the motivation as to why he reasons in such a way. He admits that a priest might externally be a sinner, but his person would remind everybody of the sacramental presence of the Son of God. With tones which echo the first Admonition, Francis speaks about seeing the Son of God «corporally» in the sacrifice of the bread and wine which only the priests sanctify during the celebration of Mass and only they distribute to others. The physical person of the priest in this way becomes the sacrament which immediately recalls the real presence of Christ. As we shall see later on, there are many episodes in the life of Saint Francis which show how he had a great sense of reverence towards the priests, even those who were poor or who were judged to be morally unworthy, for the simple reason that he saw a meaning full of significance in the person of the priest.

In agreement with what he had already written in the Letter to the Clerics, Francis speaks in the Testament about the custody of the Eucharist in «becoming» places (but the Latin term is *pretiosis*), which are worthy of holding the most sacred mysteries. The same criterion is applied to the holy written words of the Lord which sanctify the body and blood of Christ, as we have already seen in the Letter to the Entire Order.

### **9. *Expisitio in «Pater Noster», 6***

A brief but significant text which has a Eucharistic reference is found in one of the prayers of Saint Francis, known by the name «A Prayer inspired by the Our Father»:

«*Give us this day: in remembrance, understanding, and reverence of that love which [our Lord Jesus Christ] had for us and of those things that He said and did and suffered for us, our daily Bread (Mt 6:11): Your own beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ*»<sup>30</sup>.

Saint Francis considers the fourth petition of the Lord's Prayer in an explicit relationship to the Eucharist. He follows a patristic tradition which had always interpreted the daily bread within the context of Jesus who says that He is the living bread coming down from heaven (Jn 6:51). It is a reference to the memorial and offering of love which Jesus renews every day in the celebration of Mass.

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<sup>29</sup> Adm 26, FAED I,136.

<sup>30</sup> ExPat 6, FAED I,159.

## Summary

The Writings of Saint Francis are full of references to the Eucharist, which is understood as the sacrifice of the body and blood of the Lord. Francis speaks in a very concrete way regarding the body and blood of Christ, addressing his Writings as Admonitions, or Letters to the Clerics, to the Custodians, to the Christian faithful, to the Rulers of the Peoples, to the Entire Order, and particularly to the priest brothers or, at any rate, to the clerics. He dedicates a chapter of the Earlier Rule, as well as a section of the Testament, to the theme of the Eucharist, seen under two aspects, namely regarding the respect due to the most holy sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, and the respect due to the priests who sanctify and celebrate the divine mysteries during Mass.

Francis demonstrates a look of faith and adoration towards the Eucharist. He speaks about «seeing» with our bodily eyes the same body of the Lord present in the bread and His blood present in the wine. For Francis the Eucharist is a mystery which passes through a mystical experience of a living contact, in a certain way, through a bodily contact, with the person of Christ. There is a very strong analogy between the mystery of the Incarnation of Christ in the womb of the Virgin Mary and the mystery of the Eucharist which is celebrated daily by the priest.

Francis answers to the call of the Church following the Fourth Lateran Council, and translates in a very concrete way the ecclesiastical dispositions which were contained in some papal documents and decrees which spoke about respect towards the Eucharist. Francis wanted his friars to know what the Church of Rome was asking of them and of all Christians regarding the respect of the liturgical norms in the celebration of Mass and in the custody and correct administration of the divine mysteries. That is why he insists on the cleanliness of the churches, the altars, the altar-linens, the corporals, as well as on the fact that the vessels in which the body and blood of Christ are sanctified should be made of precious material. He reminds his brothers on the correct way to carry the Eucharist and reminds all clerics that they should be the first examples of faithfulness to these precepts of the Church, by celebrating the Eucharist not only with a moral disposition of purity and holiness, but also being aware not to celebrate Mass for the simple reason of acquiring stipends or offerings or just to celebrate it with haste and without any care for the greatness of the Eucharistic mystery.

Francis reminds the Christian faithful of their duties regarding a holy and dignified reception of the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. He sees a link between the life of penance and conversion and a correct faith in receiving in a worthy manner the most holy body and blood of the Lord.

Francis feels it is his duty to speak to the priests who were members of the Order, and remind them of the great dignity of their calling to be ministers of the divine mysteries. At the same time he showed a great sense of love and respect towards the priests who lived in union of intentions and practice with the Church of Rome. For Francis the priest, even though he may be poor, or even a sinner, is the mediator between God and humanity. Francis sees the hands of the priest who carry Christ on the altar as being sacred instruments, just as the womb of the Virgin Mary who carried Christ was sacred. We should not be surprised, then, to come to know the many episodes of physical respect which Francis would show towards priests in many moments of his life.

In front of the Eucharistic mystery Francis contemplates the humility of God: «Brothers, look at the humility of God». The many facts of his life which we shall now consider briefly in the second section of our reflection are a proof of how his life was a vision of faith and contemplation into this great mystery of God who becomes poor and humble in order to give Himself to us as spiritual food and drink.

## THE EUCHARIST IN THE LIFE OF SAINT FRANCIS

The Sources for the life of Saint Francis abound with references regarding the great devotion which Francis showed towards the sacrament of the body and blood of the Lord. As an introductory text which orientates us in our reflections, we shall choose that of Thomas of Celano's *Memorial of the Desire of a Soul*, 201:

«Toward the sacrament of the Lord's Body he burned with fervor to his very marrow, and with unbounded wonder of that loving condescension and condescending love. He considered it disrespectful not to hear, if time allowed, at least one Mass a day. He received Communion frequently and so devoutly that he made others devout. Following that which is so venerable with all reverence he offered the sacrifice of all his members, and receiving *the Lamb that was slain* (Rv 5:12; 1Pt 1:19) he slew his own spirit in the *fire which always burned upon the altar* (Lv 6:5,6) of his heart.

Because of this he loved France as a friend of the Body of the Lord, and even wished to die there, because of its reverence for sacred things. He once wanted to *send* brothers *throughout the world* (Jn 3:16) with precious pyxes, so that wherever they should find the price of our redemption in an unsuitable place they might put it away in the very best place.

He wanted great reverence shown to the hands of priests, since they have the divinely granted authority to bring about this mystery. He often used to say: "If I should happen at the same time to come upon any saint *coming from heaven* (Jn 3:31; Gal 1:18) and some little poor priest, I would *first show honor* (Rom 12:10) to the priest, and hurry *more* quickly to kiss his hands. For I would say to the saint: Hey, Saint Lawrence, wait! His *hands may handle the Word of Life* (1Jn 1:1), and possess something more than human!"<sup>31</sup>.

This text offers many clues to understand more deeply the motivations which drove Saint Francis to show such a fervent devotion toward the Eucharistic mystery. First of all we note that the devotion which Francis had touched his inner sentiments, more than being simply the fruit of theological speculation. Francis burned inside his heart with love towards the Eucharist. His experience was a mystical experience. As in the case of all mystical experiences it was linked directly to the object which was the source of his love, and is presented by Francis with the expression «body of the Lord». We have already noted in the Writings, and we shall also note the same aspect in the Sources, that Francis does not use the theological term «Eucharist», but that he rather makes a reference to the visible object of the act of faith, namely, the body of Christ

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<sup>31</sup> 2C 201, FAED II,375-376. This text is quoted in the *Lineamenta* of the Synod on the Eucharist: «We recommend a true devotion when one goes to receive Holy Communion. Saint Francis of Assisi "toward the sacrament of the Lord's Body, burned with fervour to his very marrow, and with unbounded wonder of that loving condescension and condescending love. He received Communion frequently and so devoutly that he made others devout"». [2C 201] (*Lineamenta of the XI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops*, «The Eucharist fountain and summit of the life and mission of the Church», 44). Parallel texts to 2C 201: AC 108, FAED II,214-215; LM IX,2, FAED II,598; SP 65, FAED III,309. References to the SP will be those to the Sabatier edition of the *Speculum Perfectionis*.

present in the consecrated bread, or else, as Francis would express it in his own times, the body of the Lord present in the «sanctified» bread.

Celano speaks about some consequences which were the result of Francis' devotion to the Eucharist. First among them is his daily participation at Mass. Moreover Celano gives as a surprising detail. He says that Francis «received Communion frequently». Since we know that the practice of receiving communion among lay people in the Middle Ages was normally restricted to the annual Easter precept, and that a community of consecrated virgins in contemplative life, such as Clare and the Poor Ladies of San Damiano, received Communion seven times a year<sup>32</sup>, this detail is truly surprising. Francis considered Communion as the offering of his entire existence to the Lord, as the most sublime act of consecration, to the point that we have a very precious witness of his great wish to participate at Mass possibly every day. This is the witness which is given to us by brother Leo, and which is found in the rubric which this friar wrote in the breviary of Saint Francis between 1253 and 1260, and which he eventually left as a legacy to the Poor Clares of the Monastery of Saint Clare in Assisi:

«Blessed Francis acquired this breviary for his companions Brother Angelo and Brother Leo, and when he was well he wished always to say the Office, as is stated by the Rule. At the time when he was sick and not able to recite it, he wished to listen to it. And he continued to do this for as long as he lived. He also had the Book of the Gospels copied, and whenever he would be unable to hear Mass due to infirmity or any other manifest impediment, he had that Gospel read to him, which on that day was read at Mass in the Church. And he continued to do this until his death. For he used to say: “When I do not hear Mass, I adore the Body of Christ in prayer with the eyes of my mind, just as I adore It when I see it during Mass”. After blessed Francis read the Gospel or listened to it, he always kissed the Gospel out of the greatest reverence for the Lord. For this reason Brother Angelo and Brother Leo, as much as they can, humbly beg Lady Benedetta, the abbess of the Poor Ladies of the Monastery of Saint Clare, and all the abbesses of the same monastery who are to come after her, that in memory of and out of devotion to our holy Father they always preserve in the Monastery of Saint Clare this book out of which he so many times read»<sup>33</sup>.

The text of the Testament of Siena, written in the spring of 1226, also shows how Francis always wanted to participate at Mass, possibly every day:

«(Francis) then told them: “Call me Brother Benedict of Piratro”. He was a brother priest, discerning and holy, an elder in religion. He sometimes celebrated for blessed Francis in that cell, since, although he was sick, he always wanted, gladly and devoutly, to hear Mass whenever he was able»<sup>34</sup>.

When the Saint was residing in hermitages which were far away from churches, such as when he would stay on La Verna for the period of fasting and prayer between the feast of the Assumption and that of Saint Michael the Archangel, he would always try to participate in Mass, or at least to meditate upon the Gospel text which would be read in the Mass of that particular day:

«Another time, while he was keeping a lent on Mount La Verna, his companion lit a fire at mealtime one day in the cell where he ate. Once the fire was lit, he went to blessed Francis, who was in the

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<sup>32</sup> The Rule of Saint Clare III,14, prescribed that the Poor Ladies could receive Holy Communion seven times a year, namely on Christmas Day, Holy Thursday, Easter Sunday, Pentecost, the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, the feast of Saint Francis and that of All Saints.

<sup>33</sup> Inscription of Brother Leo, FAED II,773.

<sup>34</sup> AC 59, FAED II,162. Parallel text in SP 87, FAED III,335.

cell where he usually prayed and slept, to read him the holy Gospel that was read in the Mass of that day. Whenever blessed Francis was unable to hear Mass, he always wanted to hear the Gospel of the day before he ate»<sup>35</sup>.

We note the detail of Francis who listens to the Gospel of the Mass of the day just before the mid-day meal. It seems that the Saint united together the preparation for the meals, through the meditated reading of the Gospel, with the meals of the fraternity which, in a certain sense, became a reminder of the Mass. We find the same method used in the moment of the *transitus* of Saint Francis, when he wanted to listen to the Gospel and afterwards broke the bread and gave it to the brothers present.

The text from Thomas of Celano which we have presented at the beginning of this section also speaks about some external manifestations of the Eucharistic piety of Saint Francis. First of all, we find a reference to his love towards France, which is described as «a friend of the Body of the Lord». We know that, during the Pentecost Chapter of 1217, Francis also wanted to go and preach, and he chose France, probably because of the devotion which this country showed towards the body of the Lord:

«At the time of the general chapter celebrated in that same place, in which the brothers were sent for the first time to regions overseas, when the chapter had ended, blessed Francis staying in that same place with a few brothers, said to them: “Dearest brothers, I must be a model and example to all the brothers ... Therefore go and ask the Lord that He may allow me to choose that region which will give more praise to the Lord and for the profit and salvation of souls and good example to our religion” ... The brothers, therefore, went off to pray and when their prayer was finished they returned to him. He said to them: “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, of his glorious Virgin Mother and of all the saints, I choose the region of France, in which there is a Catholic people, especially because of the other Catholics of the holy Church. They show great reverence to the Body of Christ, which pleases me very much. Because of this, I will gladly live among them”»<sup>36</sup>.

The second element of Eucharistic devotion regarded Francis’ wish to provide for the poor churches in the countryside round Assisi, by donating *ciborium*s and other precious sacred vessels for the Eucharistic celebration. He wanted to send his friars to carry out this gesture, which reminds us of the exhortations which Francis gives to his cleric brothers in his Letters. It shows how Saint Francis felt it was his duty to indulge in an apostolate which we can call «liturgical», and which would be as eloquent as the preaching of the Word of God. In the concrete gestures of respect towards the body of the Lord, Francis and his brothers could educate the clergy and people regarding the veneration which should be shown towards the Eucharistic mystery, within the historical context which we have mentioned above, in which this sensibility was lacking among the laity and even among the clergy. For this reason the Legend of Three Companions speaks about the «Eucharistic formation» which Francis used to give to the brothers:

«He zealously used to admonish the brothers to observe the holy Gospel and the Rule which they had firmly promised; and particularly to be reverent and devoted about divine services and ecclesiastical regulations, hearing Mass devotedly, and adoring the Body of the Lord even more devotedly. He wanted priests who handle the tremendous and greatest sacraments to be honored uniquely by the brothers, so that wherever they met them, as they bowed their heads to them, they would kiss their hands. And if they found

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<sup>35</sup> AC 87, FAED II,191. Parallel text in SP 117, FAED III,365.

<sup>36</sup> AC 108, FAED II,214. Parallel text in SP 65, FAED III,309.

them on horseback, he wanted them not only to kiss their hands but, out of reverence for their power, even the hooves of the horses upon which they were riding»<sup>37</sup>.

The final aspect of Celano's account regards the person of the priest who is the instrument of the consecration of the bread and wine into the body and blood of the Lord. We cannot analyze the Eucharistic devotion of Saint Francis without seeing how it is united in an intimate way to his devotion towards the person of the priest.

### **The respect which Francis showed towards poor priests and churches**

We have already referred to various Writings of Saint Francis which speak about the profound respect that the Saint would show towards the priests and clerics of the Church of Rome. From the style of the Writings it seems that Francis expresses himself as a layman would do. We know that he was never ordained a priest, and nowadays there is discussion as to whether he was ever ordained a deacon, even though some episodes of his life, like the Christmas Mass of Greccio in 1223, point to the fact that he acted as a deacon<sup>38</sup>. We do not know the reason why Francis did not want to be ordained a priest, because the Sources never speak about this in an explicit way. We have the witness of Ubertino da Casale in the *Arbor vitae crucifixae Iesu*, but this is a late text and seems to refer only to the fact that Francis wanted to remain in an attitude of profound humility<sup>39</sup>.

In the Testament Francis speaks about his profound respect towards «impoverished priests of this world» in the parishes where they lived. He did not want to preach against their will, and neither would he want to consider sin in them, because in them he discerned the same Son of God. At the beginning of his conversion we know that he had built a friendly relationship with a poor priest who resided at San Damiano. After the episode of the Crucifix of San Damiano Francis immediately offered money to this poor priest in order to buy oil for the lamp which burned in front of the icon of Christ Crucified<sup>40</sup>.

This attitude of respect was motivated in a unique way by the fact that the priest consecrates the body and blood of the Lord. Francis was so convinced of the dignity of priesthood that, more than once, he did not want to consider the moral lack of dignity of some priests who were accused of celebrating the Eucharist without being morally worthy. The accusations came particularly from the heretical movements who, as we have already seen, linked the validity of the sacrament which was being celebrated with the moral state in which the minister of God would find himself when he was celebrating

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<sup>37</sup> L3C 57, FAED II,101. Parallel text in AP 37, FAED II,52.

<sup>38</sup> Regarding the supposed ordination of St. Francis as a deacon, cfr. A. CALLEBAUT OFM, «Saint François lèveite», *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 20 (1927) 193-196; MARIANO D'ALATRI OFMCap, *San Francesco d'Assisi diacono nella Chiesa*, Istituto Storico dei Cappuccini, 1977, 3-5; CONFERENCE OF THE GENERAL MINISTERS OF THE FIRST ORDER AND TOR, «The Identity of the Franciscan Order at the Moment of Its Foundation», *Greyfriars Review* Vol. 13,3 (1999) 231-263.

<sup>39</sup> UBERTINO DA CASALE, *Arbor Vitae Crucifixae Iesu*, Lib. V, ACp. 3: Jesus, who brings forth Francis, FAED III,156: «The humble Francis, in order to keep himself on the lowest possible level and to confound the ambitions of the future, had no desire to be promoted to the priesthood. As he saw it, up to the manifestation of the Church's sixth *status*, the guidance of souls was not to be conducted through prelacy, if it were to be beneficial, but rather to be committed to the spirit of poverty».

<sup>40</sup> L3C 13, FAED II,75-76; AP 7, FAED II,36, which says that the priest's name was Peter.

Mass. We find two parallel episodes in the witness of the Dominican friar Stephen of Bourbon (1250-1261), regarding Francis' respect towards priests. Here we quote the first one of the two:

«I have heard that once, while Saint Francis was travelling through Lombardy, he entered into a church to pray, when a certain man ran up to him. Now this man, who was a Patarine or a Manichean, was aware of the reputation for holiness that blessed Francis had among the people, and so he decided to take advantage of his visit to attract people to his own sect, subvert their faith, and bring the priestly office into contempt. For the parish priest there was notorious for his immoral life, it being known throughout the district that he kept a concubine. And so this man said to the saint: "Look, should we believe what a priest says and reverence the sacraments he administers, when he maintains a concubine and his hands are polluted from touching the flesh of a whore?"

The holy man, realizing the evil intent of the heretic, went up to the priest in the presence of all the parishioners, knelt down before him and said: "I do not know whether these hands are such as this man says they are. But even if they were, I know that they can in no way lessen the power and efficacy of the sacraments of God. These hands remain the means through which many of God's benefits and graces flow to the people. That is why I kiss them, out of respect for the things they administer and out of reverence for Him by whose authority they do so". Having said this, he knelt down in front of that priest and kissed his hands, to the confusion of the heretics and their adherents who were present»<sup>41</sup>.

The Sources which speak about the formation of the first brothers echo the same ideas we have found in the Testament, regarding Francis who would teach his brothers how to have respect towards the person of the priest, not because of any personal merit on his own part, but for the fact that the priest is the meaningful sign of the presence of the Lord, particularly during the celebration of Mass.

The simplicity of the first brothers was such that they did not want to see any sin in priests. Thomas of Celano presents an episode which is proof of the profound sense of simplicity of the first brothers, who thought that a priest could not possibly sin because he could not tell lies. The episode is truly a faithful picture of the simplicity and deep faith of the first Franciscan fraternity:

«They often used to confess their sins to a certain secular priest, even when his wickedness had been reported to them by many people. He had a very bad reputation and was despised by everyone else because of the enormity of his misdeeds. But they did not wish to believe it; so they did not stop confessing their sins to him as usual, nor stop showing him proper reverence.

One day he, or another priest, said to one of the brothers: "Watch out, brother, don't be a hypocrite!" The brother immediately believed that he was a hypocrite because of the priest's statement. For this reason, he was crying and weeping day and night, moved by deep sorrow. When the brothers asked him what caused such grief and unusual gloom, he answered: "A priest told me something that has upset me so much that I can hardly think about anything else". The brothers kept trying to console him and urged him not to believe it. But he said: "How can you say that, brothers? A priest told me this. Could a priest lie? Since a priest does not lie, we must believe what he said". Remaining for a long time in this simplicity, he finally gave in to the words of the blessed father who explained to him the priest's statement and wisely excused his intention»<sup>42</sup>.

Francis would excuse the sinner, but certainly he did not think twice when it was a question of denouncing sin, also in priests. The Sources insist that he often admonished the clerics to life in a coherent life according to their calling, in the spirit of the words he

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<sup>41</sup> Testimony of Stephen of Bourbon, FAED III,787-788.

<sup>42</sup> 1C 46, FAED I,223..

wrote in the Letter to the Entire Order, when he exhorted the priests to consider their own dignity. Francis knew very well that the miserable state in which the churches and the altars were left by certain priests was also a result of ignorance on their part, particularly in the case of impoverished priests who lived in the country parishes and did not have any stable means of income for their livelihood:

«At one time while blessed Francis was staying at Saint Mary of the Portiuncula, and there were still only a few brothers, blessed Francis sometimes used to go through the villages and churches in the area around the city of Assisi, proclaiming and preaching to the people that they should do penance. And he would carry a broom to sweep the churches.

For blessed Francis was very sad when he entered some church and saw that it was not clean. Therefore, after preaching to the people, at the end of the sermon he would always have all the priests who were present assembled in some remote place so he could not be overheard by secular people. He would preach to them about the salvation of souls and, in particular, that they should exercise care and concern in keeping churches clean, as well as altars and everything that pertained to the celebration of the divine mysteries»<sup>43</sup>.

With the same spirit of affection and veneration towards the sacred mysteries which the priests celebrate during the liturgical action, Francis tried hard to come to the aid of the poor churches. From his Testament we know that the first brothers tried to live close to the poor churches, since the sacred edifice was for them a living sign of the presence of the Lord, as was the person of the priest who celebrated the divine mysteries:

«Showing due honor, he often gave liturgical vestments to poor priests, even to those of the lowest rank. As he was to be entrusted with the mission of an apostle, he was completely Catholic in faith. From the very beginning he was full of reverence for God's ministers and ministries»<sup>44</sup>.

In the life of Saint Clare we find the famous episode of the Saint who would weave corporals and altar-linens and would send them by means of the brothers to the poor churches, so that the Eucharistic mystery could be celebrated in the most dignified and sublime way<sup>45</sup>.

## **The Eucharist at the centre of the evangelical calling of Saint Francis**

The period of conversion of Saint Francis was marked in a particular way by a sentiment of respect and love towards churches and impoverished priests, as we have already noted. Francis repaired the derelict churches in the countryside around Assisi, since he understood his initial calling from the Crucifix of San Damiano as being that of a church builder. His loving gestures in restoring the churches of San Damiano, San Pietro della Spina and the Porziuncola were a true act of faith in the living presence of the Lord «in all the churches throughout the whole world». No wonder then that it was precisely at the Porziuncola chapel, within the context of the celebration of Mass, that Francis understood once and for all his specific calling to follow Christ according to the *apostolica vivendi forma*, the apostolic way of life:

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<sup>43</sup> AC 60, FAED II,162-163. Parallel text in SP 56, FAED III,300-301.

<sup>44</sup> 2C 8, FAED II,247-248. Parallel texts in L3C 8, FAED II,72-73; LM I,6, FAED II,534-535.

<sup>45</sup> Process of Canonization of Saint Clare, I,11 (Witness of Sr. Pacifica de Guelfuccio).

«One day the gospel was being read in that church about how the Lord sent out his disciples to preach. The holy man of God, who was attending there, in order to understand better the words of the gospel, humbly begged the priest after celebrating the solemnities of the Mass to explain the gospel to him. The priest explained it all to him thoroughly line by line. When he heard that Christ's disciples should not possess gold or silver or money, or carry on their journey a wallet or a sack, nor bread nor a staff, nor to have shoes nor two tunics, but that they should preach the kingdom of God and penance (Mt 10:9-10; Lk 9:2; Mk 6:12), the holy man, Francis, immediately exulted in the spirit of God (Lk 1:47). "This is what I want", he said, "this is what I seek, this is what I desire with all my heart"... For he was no deaf hearer of the gospel; rather he committed everything he heard to his excellent memory and was careful to carry it out to the letter»<sup>46</sup>.

Francis participated at Mass in the Porziuncola on the feast day of Saint Matthias (24<sup>th</sup> February 1208). During the reading of the Gospel text he felt the inspiration to understand better the words he was hearing, and therefore, after the celebration of Mass, he asked the priest for a more profound explanation of the text. Francis' attitude is the humble attitude of a layman who does not feel able to understand in a profound way what he feels in his heart during the reading of the Word of God at Mass, and therefore trusts in the ministry of preaching in the Church, which the priests accomplish in direct relationship to their ministry of presiding the Eucharist.

We can affirm that the Gospel calling which Francis felt to the apostolic life was born exactly within the context of the celebration of Mass. He was not a deaf hearer of the Gospel, and therefore he opened his heart, and in the living presence of Christ who speaks in His Word, Francis felt his inner calling, strengthened by the context in which he was finding himself at that moment, namely the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

The invitation to follow Christ which Francis heard during Mass became for him a life-long commitment which would be translated into concrete gestures, like that of leaving behind him all things which would hinder him from being an itinerant disciple of the Lord. It was a question of seeing the celebration of Mass not only as a moment of prayer or mystical union with the Lord, but also as an invitation to act, which is born out of the Word proclaimed and believed during the celebration of Mass. Here we find the *novitas*, the newness, of Saint Francis, who inaugurates a new way of religious life in the Church, namely that of the *apostolica vivendi forma*. It was a new way which was born

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<sup>46</sup> 1C 22, FAED I,201-202. Parallel texts in L3C 25, FAED II,84; LM III,1, FAED II,542. In the *Fioretti*, c.2, FAED III,568, we find another episode which refers to the discovery of the Gospel calling of Francis, this time together with Bernard of Quintavalle, after they heard Mass at San Nicolò in the main piazza or *forum* of Assisi (and not at the Vescovado, as the *Fioretti* affirm): «Thus, when morning came, (Bernard of Quintavalle) called Saint Francis and said this: "Brother Francis, I am fully prepared in my heart to abandon the world and to follow you in what you will command me". Hearing this, Saint Francis rejoiced in spirit and said: "Sir Bernard, what you say is such a great and difficult thing that our Lord Jesus Christ must be asked for counsel. Pray to Him that He be pleased to show us His will about this, and to instruct us how we may put this into action. So let us go together to the bishop's residence, where there is a good priest, and we will have him say Mass and then we will stay in prayer until terce, praying to God that after three openings of the missal He may show us the way that pleases Him that we choose". Sir Bernard replied that this pleased him very much, so they got up and went to the bishop's residence. And after they heard Mass and had stayed in prayer until terce, the priest, at the request of Saint Francis, took the missal and, after making the sign of the most holy Cross, opened it three times in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. And at the first opening there occurred that word that Christ said in the Gospel to the young man who asked about the way of perfection...».

during the celebration of Mass in a wayside chapel, and after listening to the explanation of the Gospel from the mouth of an impoverished priest of this world.

### **The Eucharist as a representation of the mysteries of Christmas and Easter**

The Sources present two episodes which regard the theme of the Eucharist, one within the context of Mass and the other within that of a fraternal meal. Both episodes occurred at the hermitage of Greccio, and are linked to the two principal feasts of the liturgical calendar, Christmas and Easter. The first episode is that of the celebration of Christmas at Greccio, while the other one is that of Saint Francis who begs for alms from his own brothers seated at table at the hermitage of Greccio on Easter Sunday or, according to other Sources, on Christmas Day.

Thomas of Celano gives us the oldest account of the Christmas Mass at the hermitage of Greccio (1223):

«We should note then, as matter worthy of memory and something to be recalled with reverence, what he did, three years prior to his death, at the town of Greccio, on the birthday of our Lord Jesus Christ. There was a certain man in that area named John who had a good reputation but an even better manner of life. Blessed Francis loved him with special affection, since, despite being a noble in the land and very honored in human society, he had trampled the nobility of the flesh under his feet and pursued instead the nobility of the spirit. As usual, blessed Francis had John summoned to him some fifteen days prior to the birthday of the Lord. “If you desire to celebrate the coming feast of the Lord together at Greccio”, he said to him, “hurry before me and carefully make ready the things I tell you. For I wish to enact the memory of that babe *who was born in Bethlehem* (Mt 2:1-2): to see as much as is possible with my own bodily eyes the discomfort of his infant needs, how he *lay in a manger* (Lk 2:7), and how, with an ox and an ass standing by, he rested on hay”. Once the good and faithful man had heard Francis’ words, he ran quickly and prepared in that place all the things that the holy man had requested.

Finally, the day of joy has drawn near, the time of exultation has come. From many different places the brethren have been called. As they could, the men and women of that land with exultant hearts prepare candles and torches to light up that night whose shining star has enlightened every day and year. Finally, the holy man of God comes and, finding all things prepared, he saw them and was glad. Indeed, the manger is prepared, the hay is carried in, and the ox and the ass are led to the spot. There simplicity is given a place of honor, poverty is exalted, humility is commended, and out of Greccio is made a new Bethlehem.

The night is lit up like day, delighting both man and beast. The people arrive, ecstatic at this new mystery of new joy. The forest amplifies the cries and the boulders echo back the joyful crowd. The brothers sing, giving God due praise, and the whole night abounds with jubilation. The holy man of God stands before the manger, filled with heartfelt sighs, contrite in his piety, and overcome with wondrous joy. Over the manger the solemnities of the Mass are celebrated and the priest enjoys a new consolation.

The holy man of God is dressed in the vestments of the Levites, since he was a Levite, and with full voice sings the holy gospel. Here is his voice: a powerful voice, a pleasant voice, a clear voice, a musical voice, inviting all to the highest of gifts. Then he preaches to the people standing around him and pours forth sweet honey about the birth of the poor King and the poor city of Bethlehem. Moreover, burning with excessive love, he often calls Christ the “babe from Bethlehem” whenever he means to call Him Jesus. Saying the word “Bethlehem” in the manner of a bleating sheep, he fills his whole mouth with sound but even more with sweet affection. He seems to lick his lips whenever he uses the expressions “Jesus” or “babe from Bethlehem”, tasting the word on his happy palate and savoring the sweetness of the word. The gifts of the Almighty are multiplied there and a virtuous man sees a wondrous vision. For the man saw a little child lying lifeless in the manger and he saw the holy man of God approach the child and waken him from a deep sleep. Nor is this vision unfitting, since in the hearts of many the child Jesus has been given over to oblivion. Now he is awakened and impressed on their loving memory by His own grace

through His holy servant Francis. At length, the night's solemnities draw to a close and everyone went home with joy.

The hay placed in the manger there was preserved afterwards so that, through it, the Lord might restore to health the pack animals and the other animals there, as He multiplied his holy mercy. It came to pass in the surrounding area that many of the animals, suffering from various diseases, were freed from their illnesses when they ate some of this hay. What is more, women who had been suffering with long and hard labor had an easy delivery after they placed some of this hay upon themselves. Finally, an entire group of people of both sexes obtained much-desired relief from an assortment of afflictions.

At last, the site of the manger was consecrated as a temple to the Lord. In honor of the most blessed Francis, an altar was constructed over the manger, and a church was dedicated. This was done so that were animals once ate the fodder of the hay, there humans henceforth for healing of body and soul would eat the flesh of the immaculate and spotless lamb, our Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us with supreme and indescribable love»<sup>47</sup>.

This episode is of the utmost importance in order to understand the link which Francis makes between the mystery of the Incarnation and the mystery of the Eucharist in his Writings. The episode is a representation of the Nativity, which is unique in its kind, within the context of a Eucharistic celebration. This celebration of Mass on a manger seemed so out of the ordinary, that Saint Bonaventure, in his Major Life of Saint Francis, feels it is his duty to explain that Francis had first asked for, and obtained, permission from the Holy See in order to organize this particular celebration<sup>48</sup>.

The symbolic representation of the Nativity presents the framework in which the liturgical action takes place. The manger filled with hay provided the altar of the Mass, while the scene was enriched with the traditional animals of the crib. The celebration took place in the light of torches and candles. The most striking aspect, however, is the proclamation of the Gospel by Francis, «dressed as a Levite». Although the physical environment reminds one of a drama representation, the biographer reminds us that at the forefront of the event there is the liturgical celebration in its key moments of the proclamation of the Gospel and the Eucharistic sacrifice. We can state that the two most eloquent symbols are the book of the Gospels, from which Francis reads the account of the Nativity, and the hay in the manger, which provides the altar of sacrifice for the Eucharistic celebration. On this hay the Child Jesus appears, and Francis wakes it up from a deep sleep. This is a very clear reference to the real presence of the Lord in the Eucharist during Mass. The hay upon which Mass is celebrated becomes a food of salvation for all the sick animals that are fed with it after the celebration.

The celebration of Christmas in Greccio, therefore, does not have the aim of being simply a representation of the Nativity scene, as so many often believe. Its true meaning lies in the fact that it is a representation within the context of the celebration of Mass, and therefore the Word and the Eucharist remain at the centre of the celebration of Christmas at Greccio.

Another episode which is full of meaning for its links with the Eucharist is that of the fraternal meal in the hermitage of Greccio on Easter Sunday (according to Thomas of Celano and Saint Bonaventure), or on Christmas Day (*Pascha Nativitatis*, according to the Assisi Compilation and Mirror of Perfection). Because of the profound link of this

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<sup>47</sup> 1C 84-87, FAED I,245-257. Parallel texts in 3C 19, FAED II,411; LM X,7, FAED 610-611.

<sup>48</sup> LM X,7, FAED II,610: «So that this would not be considered a type of novelty, he petitioned for and obtained permission from the Supreme Pontiff».

account with the Gospel episode of Emmaus on Easter Sunday, we choose the text from Celano's Memorial in the desire of a Soul:

«On a certain Easter Day the brothers in the hermitage of Greccio set the table more carefully than usual, with white clothes and glassware. The Father came down from his cell and went to the table. He saw that it was elevated and elaborately decorated, but he did not smile at all at that smiling table. He secretly tiptoed away, put on his head the hat of a poor man who was there at the time, and with a staff in hand, went outside. He waited outside, at the door, until the brothers had started eating. They were accustomed not to wait for him when he did not come at the usual signal.

As they began to eat, that true poor man cried out at the door: "For the love of the Lord God, give alms to his poor, sick pilgrim!" And the brothers replied: "Come in, man, for the love of Him you invoked". He quickly came in, and showed himself to those dining. You can imagine the surprise the pilgrim provoked in those home-bodies! The beggar was given a bowl and, sitting on the ground by himself, placed his dish on the ashes. "Now", he said, "I am sitting like a Lesser Brother!" And he said to the brothers: "The examples of the Son of God's poverty should move us more than other religious. I saw here a table and all prepared and decorated, and recognized it as not the table of poor men who go door to door".

The chain of events proves that he was like that other *pilgrim who was alone in Jerusalem* on that same day. And he certainly made *the hearts* of his disciples *burn as he spoke* (Lk 24:18,32)<sup>49</sup>.

This episode does not happen within the context of the Eucharistic celebration, and there is no reference to Mass. However, one cannot help noticing a «Eucharistic content» in Celano's account. The occasion is that of Easter Sunday. The environment in which the action happens is that of the hermitage of Greccio, and the time is the lunch hour, when the brothers would gather to share the food they had begged with humility. It is very interesting to know that, when Francis speaks about begging alms in his Testament, he uses the expression «table of the Lord»:

«And when we are not paid for our work, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord, begging alms from door to door»<sup>50</sup>.

The episode is structured upon the Gospel account of Luke 24:13-35, that is, the meeting of the Risen Lord with the two disciples on the road from Jerusalem to Emmaus. Francis wanted to teach his brothers the lesson of poverty, by imitating Jesus Christ who appeared on the road to the two disciples in the guise of a poor pilgrim. The attitude of

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<sup>49</sup> 2C 61, FAED II,287-288. Parallel texts in LM VII,9, FAED II,582-583; AC 74, FAED II,175-176; SP 20, FAED III,270-271.

<sup>50</sup> Test 22, FAED I,125-126. The expression recurs also in 2C 44, FAED II,276: «Meanwhile, *the table of the Lord* (Mal 1:7; Lk 13:25) took pity on the table of his servants». The link between begging alms and the Eucharist is evident in ANGELO CLARENO, *Book of Chronicles or of Tribulations of the Order of Friars Minor*, Prologue, FAED III,385-386: «(In his Testament Francis showed that) it is great humility, ineffable dignity, and participation at the table of the King of glory Himself to have recourse to the table of the Lord and seek alms from door to door when they are not paid for their work. Blessed Francis had learned from Christ that it is a great dignity and incomparable honor according to God and man for the evangelical poor to seek alms for the love of the Lord God, because all things created both in heaven and on earth cannot be compared to the love of God, for all things which the heavenly Father created for human use out of love for His beloved Son, after sin, have been given, free, as alms, to the worthy and the unworthy. Therefore, what is asked and given for the love of the Lord God and the love of Christ Jesus His Son, *who became poor for us* so that by His poverty He would make *us rich* (2Cor 8:9) in present grace and sanctify us as blessed in future glory, can be called *the bread of angels* (Ps 78:25) rather than the food of the body».

welcome of the disciples became for them an illumination of faith, first with the help of the Word of the Risen Lord who opened their hearts to understand the Words of Scripture, and then with their generosity in sharing with Him the broken bread, fruit of their loving and hospitable hearts. The Eucharistic context of this episode is evident, and it is in this context that Thomas of Celano wants to present Francis who, dressed as a poor pilgrim, wants to give a lesson on Lady Poverty to his brothers sitting down for a special meal on Easter Sunday.

Francis wants to recognize in the brothers' table the table of the poor people who go begging alms from door to door at the Lord's table. In this way the brothers also celebrate their passage, their Easter, with Christ. The food begged for the love of God at His table becomes for them a sign of the true food of eternal life which the Lord Himself offers in His great mercy during the celebration of the Eucharist.

### **The last supper of Saint Francis**

In the Memorial of the Desire of a Soul, Thomas of Celano presents us with new insights regarding the passing away, or *transitus*, of Saint Francis. In a particular way, he speaks about the desire of the Saint to relive the great mystery of Christ who lays down His life for the disciples on the cross, and anticipates this offering with the institution of the Eucharist during the Last Supper:

«As the brothers shed bitter tears and wept inconsolably, the holy father had *bread brought* to him. He *blessed and broke* (Mt 14:17; Mt 26:26) it, and gave each of them a piece to eat. He also ordered a Book of the Gospels to be brought and asked that the Gospel according to Saint John be read to him starting from that place which begins: *Before the feast of Passover* (Jn 13:1). He was remembering that most sacred Supper, the last one the Lord celebrated with his disciples. In reverent memory of this, to show his brothers how much he loved them, he did all of this»<sup>51</sup>.

The Assisi Compilation helps us to understand more profoundly the motives behind the gesture of Francis of which we are speaking:

«Just as the Lord desired to eat with the apostles on the Thursday before His death, it seemed to those brothers that, in a similar way, blessed Francis, before his death, wanted to bless them and, in them, all the other brothers, and that they should eat that blessed bread as if in some way they were eating with the rest of their brothers. And we can consider this obvious because, while it was a day other than Thursday, he told the brothers that he believed it was Thursday. One of the brothers kept a piece of that bread, and after the death of blessed Francis some people who tasted it were immediately freed from their illnesses»<sup>52</sup>.

Kajetan Esser explains this non-sacramental representation of the Last Supper of the Lord at the moment of the death of Saint Francis as a natural inclination to re-enact the Gospel. «It was a childlike inclination to play – I can only express myself in these terms, - which remained with Francis till the day of his death: he “plays” doing the part of the beggar, he “plays” as a pilgrim, he “plays” the Christmas story, he “plays” the Last Supper. All his life was an action of play in the highest meaning of the term, it was an

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<sup>51</sup> 2C 217, FAED II,377. Parallel texts in AC 22, FAED II,135; SP 88, FAED III,336-337.

<sup>52</sup> AC 22, FAED II,135.

action of playing in which the following of Christ was transformed into an imitation of Christ, into a sharing of His life and an experience of it to the very sacrifice of Golgotha»<sup>53</sup>.

The sacred representation contains in itself all the elements of the Last Supper of the Lord. There is the rite of the breaking of bread in a context of brotherhood. There is the reading of the Gospel text, which is particularly in place with the moment of the Last Supper of the Lord according to Saint John's version, where Christ's death is presented as a passage from this world to the Father. There is finally the same witness of the life of Saint Francis, who wants to experience his own *transitus* within the context of a familiar celebration to which he had assisted so many times during his life. It was during the Mass of the Apostles in the Porziuncola that he had discovered for the first time his specific calling. Now it was during the re-enactment of the Last Supper of the Lord with his Apostles, also in the Porziuncola, that Francis crowned his following of Jesus Christ according to the *apostolica vivendi forma*.

## Summary

The episodes of the life of Saint Francis in the medieval Sources speak abundantly about the respect which the Saint showed towards the sacrament of the Eucharist, as well as towards priests, churches and all other objects which, in a certain way, pertain to the Eucharistic sacrifice. One can find a strong link between the statements of Francis in his Writings and the episodes which the biographers present.

Francis follows in a faithful way the liturgical reform of the Church after the Fourth Lateran Council. He makes many simple gestures, but which are full of meaning, and which help us to focus on the centrality of the Eucharistic cult in his life. The Sources present Francis as an assiduous church-goer, and he himself restores abandoned churches with a sense of love and respect. The poor churches of the countryside around Assisi, as well as the impoverished priests of this world in their parishes, were for Francis eloquent signs of the presence of Christ in His Church. Francis' gestures of respect and veneration are a sign of his deep faith in the Eucharistic mystery, which is rendered present through the action of mediation of the minister of God. Francis goes beyond the simple consideration of the moral worthiness of the priest who celebrates Mass. Moreover, he also tries to combat the heretics who worked hard to confound the simple faith of the common people in the power and validity of the Eucharistic sacrifice *ex opere operato*, as later theological expressions would say. Although he recognized the weakness of the ministers of God, Francis continued to place in priests a concrete act of faith, not because of any merits they could call their own, but because of what their persons signified during the celebration of the divine mysteries. Francis formed the first fraternity of brothers in a school of great respect and gentleness towards the Eucharistic mystery, and in the care of all that which comes into contact with the body and blood of the Lord.

The evangelical and apostolic vocation of Francis and the Friars Minor is born within the context of the celebration of Mass. The episode of Francis who listens to the Gospel text at the Porziuncola during the celebration of Mass marks the focal point of his

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<sup>53</sup> K. ESSER, *Temi Spirituali*, 283.

journey of conversion and of his awareness regarding the specific vocation which he and the brothers were called to live.

For Francis the Mass is part and parcel of the principal mysteries of faith, and particularly of the mysteries of Christmas and Easter. The episodes which we have analyzed help us to understand that, for Francis, the Eucharist was a representation of a mystery, a mystery which is alive, which is rooted in a historical and living person. We can also affirm that the places, persons, words, gestures, signs and all actions which the liturgy accomplishes, spoke to Francis of the experience of Christ which he wanted to live. It could be that the same journey to the East which Francis did in 1219-1220 could have helped him to return with a new energy to celebrate the mysteries of redemption in a more eloquent way. For Francis and the people gathered on Christmas night of 1223, the tiny hamlet of Greccio becomes a new Bethlehem. Francis preaches about the Child of Bethlehem with tones which evoke the inner sentiments he might have felt when he could have visited the Holy Places some years before. That is why Francis does not hesitate to represent the mystery of Christ during Mass in a vivid and original way, as he does in Greccio. He even sees the power of the celebration of Mass in other moments of his life, which are only seemingly remotely linked with the Eucharist. Examples include the link which Francis established between the begging for alms and the table of the Lord. The attitude of the poor and itinerant Christ who gives Himself as Word and Bread of life becomes for Francis emblematic in order to explain to the brothers the value of being mendicants and the value of poverty which he held so dear to his heart.

The moment of Francis' death also becomes for him a living representation of the *transitus* of Christ from this world to the Father. He wanted to live for the last time together with the brothers the culminating moment of the life of the Master, which is represented in a sacramental way in the sacrifice of the Mass. He does this by repeating typical gestures of the Eucharistic celebration, such as the proclamation of the Gospel and the breaking of bread with the brothers.

The life of Saint Francis thus represents a vision of faith opened wide to gaze upon the humility of God who becomes present to us in the bread of the Eucharistic sacrifice. The humanity of God in the mystery of the Incarnation becomes the great mystery which Francis contemplates in a particular way when he looks at the «sanctified» body of the Lord on the altar in the hands of the priest. His vision is a vision of meditative wonder, which is never a prey to the daily routine of liturgical celebrations, but which becomes an attitude of joy, a «playful» attitude with the sacred reality, in a spirit of gratitude for the great mystery of salvation which becomes true every time we meet to eat of the same bread and drink of the same cup.

## **CONCLUSION: THE EUCHARIST IN FRANCISCAN LIFE TODAY**

The aim of our reflection upon the Eucharist in the Writings and in the Life of Saint Francis of Assisi has been that of providing the basis for a renewed commitment in our Franciscan life regarding the centrality of the Eucharistic mystery. We are living in a post-conciliar context, just as Francis himself was living after the celebration of the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215. Many of us still call to mind that we have assisted at the liturgical reform of Vatican II in the context of theology, spirituality and pastoral

practice, particularly with the insistence upon the return to the biblical and patristic sources. The journey of the Church has been marked with many authoritative documents and teachings of the *Magisterium*, from the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of Vatican II on the Liturgy to the recent documents of John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* and *Mane nobiscum Domine*, as well as the *Lineamenta* of the next Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist in the life and mission of the Church. This abundant material must be an object of study and reflection in a particular way during this year dedicated to the Eucharist, for all Christians, and particularly for us, as religious and Franciscans.

The General Constitutions of the Order of Friars Minor speak clearly about the centrality of the Eucharist within the context of the priority of prayer and devotion, which marks one of the landmarks of our Gospel commitment in the world today. The General Constitutions speak about the Eucharist in Article 21, which we quote as a basis for our concluding reflection:

«Following the example and teaching of Saint Francis, the friars are to have “all possible reverence and honour” (EpOrd 12) for the Sacrament of the Most Holy Body and Blood of the Lord, because in it is contained the entire spiritual good of the Church (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 5). The friars are to foster in themselves by suitable means the love and diligent care for this great Mystery (cf. Test 11).

All friars who live in the same place or who happen to be there are to make every effort to celebrate the Most Holy Eucharist in common every day, purely and with reverence, so that it may be truly the centre and source of the whole fraternal fellowship (cf. EpOrd 12.30-33; CIC 663,2; 902).

Right up to his death Saint Francis wanted “these most holy mysteries to be honoured above all things and to be revered and to have them reserved in precious places” (Test 11; CIC 608). Following his example, the friars are to have at least an oratory in every house wherein to reserve the Most Holy Eucharist so that fraternal fellowship and devotion towards so great a mystery may be fostered»<sup>54</sup>.

The texts which are quoted in this Article regard two Writings of Saint Francis, which we have already analyzed, namely, the Letter to the Entire Order and the Testament. There is a reference to the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis* of Vatican II and some quotations from the Code of Canon Law<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> *Regula et Constitutiones Generales Ordinis Fratrum Minorum (The Rule and the General Constitutions of the Order of Friars Minor)*, Curia Generale O.F.M. 2004, Art. 21, p. 82-83: §1. «Secundum exemplum et doctrinam S. Francisci, fratres “omnem reverentiam et omnem honorem” (EpOrd 2) erga Sanctissimi Corporis et Sanguinis Domini sacramentum habeant, quia in Eo totum bonum spirituale Ecclesiae continetur (Cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 5), et amorem et sollicitudinem diligentem tanti Mysteriorum in seipsis aptis mediis foveant (Cf. Test 11). §2. Omnes fratres qui in eodem loco commorantur vel inveniuntur, quotidie pro viribus pure cum reverentia Sanctissimam Eucharistiam in communi celebrent, ita ut vere sit centrum et fons totius fraternae communionis (Cf. EpOrd 12.30-33; CIC 663,2; 902). §3. Sequentes exemplum S. Francisci, qui usque ad mortem voluit “haec sanctissima mysteria super omnia honorari, venerari et in locis pretiosis collocari” (Test 11; CIC 608), fratres in qualibet Domo habeant saltem oratorium ubi Sanctissima Eucharistia asservetur, ut foveatur fraterna communio et devotio erga tantum mysterium».

<sup>55</sup> CIC, Canon 608: «A religious community must live in a legitimately established house under the authority of a superior designated according to the norm of law. Each house is to have at least an oratory in which the Eucharist is to be celebrated and reserved so that it is truly the centre of the community»; Can. 663, §2: «Members are to make every effort to participate in the Eucharistic sacrifice daily, to receive the most sacred Body of Christ, and to adore the Lord himself present in the sacrament»; Can. 902: «Unless the welfare of the Christian faithful requires or suggests otherwise, priests can concelebrate the Eucharist. They are completely free to celebrate the Eucharist individually, however, but not while a concelebration is taking place in the same church or oratory».

The references to the Writings of Saint Francis give importance to two elements which we have already analyzed, namely, the centrality of the body and blood of Christ in Franciscan spirituality, and the care which the brothers should show towards the Eucharistic ministry with their solicitous efforts to keep sacred places (churches, altars, altar-linens, corporals, etc.) clean and to provide precious sacred vessels for the celebration of the Eucharist.

We Friars Minor are invited by our legislation to assume the same attitude of contemplation of the mystery of the body of the Lord in the consecrated bread which the first Admonition underlines. In the spirit of this text we are invited to assume a vision of faith, to «look at the humility of God» in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrament. It is not by chance that our Constitutions speak about the importance of the *community* or *fraternity* celebration of the Eucharist, as the most eloquent sign of fraternal communion in Christ. Our legislation speaks about the *daily* celebration of the Eucharist in the fraternity, in such a way that the Mass of the fraternity becomes truly the culminating moment of the daily prayer life of the brothers. From the celebration flows the Eucharistic cult also outside Mass, seen in the reference of the Constitutions to the oratory or sacred place in which the Eucharist is kept within the fraternity, in order to be the physical focus which reunites all the brothers in prayer.

The Eucharist as fountain and summit of the entire life of the Franciscan fraternity can also be considered as the basis of the priorities of our Order, which is a fraternity in mission in the Church and in the world of today.

The spirit of prayer and devotion finds its centre in the celebration of the Eucharist by the fraternity, and also within the context of the participation of the people of God in the same Eucharist. During this year dedicated to the Eucharist it might be very helpful for us all to rediscover the central dimension of the community Mass and all the other paraliturgical celebrations which derive from the Mass, such as silent adoration in front of the Blessed Sacrament, community adoration with Eucharistic benediction, celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours in the context of a Eucharistic adoration, particularly during times of retreat.

Fraternal life in community has to be nourished by the Eucharist. Fraternal communion is not built only by simple human gestures, even though these are to be praised and are very important as a basis for fraternal living. Fraternal life also needs a theological foundation, which can be found only when we are convinced that our life as brothers and sisters makes sense in reference to Christ. The vital power of the Eucharistic banquet nourishes the spirit of unity and reciprocal love in the fraternity, and has the power to bring us to forgive one another, to show mutual esteem and understanding, and to go beyond any barriers of culture and language.

Following the example of Francis who had recourse to the table of the Lord to beg for alms and saw in this practice a concrete sign of his life of poverty, and who celebrated the providence of God in creation, we Friars Minor are called to rediscover the «Eucharistic sense» of our life in minority, poverty and solidarity. We have to be conscious of our state as pilgrims and strangers journeying towards the Kingdom. During this journey we need the spiritual food which nourishes us, and which is given to us *gratis* by the Father if we depend upon Him. Mary and the apostles followed the Lord and begged alms together with him (it is the picture of the apostolic community which Francis depicts in the Earlier Rule). In the context of this view of the evangelical

fraternity of brothers we can discover in the Eucharistic bread the most eloquent sign of what it means to be grateful for the bread broken and shared in a spirit of charity between ourselves and especially with the poor who are our teachers.

The Eucharist is the daily food of the fraternity in mission, of the brothers who feel called to be sent to announce the good news in the Church and in the world. In this way the Eucharistic celebration will not remain a privileged and ideal moment of feeling ourselves to be a fraternity, as if this gift were a private property of the ones who enjoy it. If it were thus, our Eucharist will make us look as rich people in front of God, and maybe also in front of the others. The Eucharist is, instead, an invitation to go out into the world, to celebrate and thank the Lord for the gift of creation, of humanity, of the world which is always asking us to give an explanation for the reason of our hope. We are called to share the bread of the Word and of the Eucharist with others, to open our arms to reach for others in a spirit of dialogue of reconciliation and agreement in the fields of ecumenical encounters, in solidarity with the poor, in the struggle for social justice, for peace, for the respect for creation, which is the altar on which all persons can offer to God a universal cult of thanksgiving and praise.

Finally, the Eucharist forms the community, it builds our being a fraternity in mission. The Eucharist is the soul of initial formation, leading young Franciscans to discover the centrality of the joyful celebration of Franciscan life, as well as being the soul of every sincere gesture of ongoing formation. If we are aware that we are the actors of our formation, that we have to programme a personal and fraternal project of life, we should also be convinced that these efforts cannot be realized without reference to Christ, without that look at the humility of God who is ever present in the person of Jesus Christ, the one and only Teacher of all, the Word and the Bread of our journey into God.