

# THE EUCHARIST AND THE HUNGERS OF THE HUMAN FAMILY

## U.S. Bishop Statement on 41st International Eucharistic Congress

At Thanksgiving Americans join in gratitude to God for His gifts to this nation and its people. The act of giving thanks is one in which Catholics are privileged to participate in a special way in the celebration of the Eucharist. The word, eucharist, means "thanksgiving," and the Eucharist is the supreme act of thanks in which Christ offers perfect worship to the Father and gives Himself as the perfect gift of love to those who believe in Him.

Next August the 41st International Eucharistic Congress will be celebrated in the United States at Philadelphia. In the intervening months we Catholics of the United States will be preparing for that great event, which will constitute a magnificent public witness to our faith in Jesus Christ Our Lord in the Eucharist and our love for Him. The preparation will be primarily spiritual, as we work together to renew ourselves and the Church.

The Eucharistic Congress gives us a special opportunity for spiritual and intellectual growth focused on the Eucharistic liturgy, which is simultaneously "a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us" (Vatican Council II **Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy**, 47). In the Congress we are offered means to manifest publicly our faith and love for this great gift. Coming as it does during our nation's bicentennial anniversary, the Congress also affords Catholics an occasion to invite others to join them in affirming the religious and spiritual heritage of America. It renews and strengthens our commitment to the work of spreading Christ's reign of justice and charity in the world.

We should all seize this opportunity, not only by participating, if possible, in the Congress itself, but also by participating fully in the programs of spiritual renewal which will be offered by dioceses and parishes throughout our nation.

As this season is an appropriate time to begin intensive preparation, it is also a fitting time to recall that there are many persons in our nation and our world who experience profound hungers which crave to be satisfied. There is no one of us who does not hunger in some way, or in many ways: for, besides physical hunger, human beings have deep emotional, intellectual and spiritual hungers.

Pleasure, power or possessions may temporarily quiet the pangs of some hungers. They cannot satisfy us on the deepest levels of our personhood. Only God can do that. "You have made us for Yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You." (St. Augustine, **Confessions**, 1.1)

God the Father loves us so much that He sent His only Son to become one of us and redeem us. Jesus loves us so much that, even after His death, resurrection and ascension, He remains with us. He is, after all, Emmanuel, "God with us," but now through His living, sanctifying Spirit. We now encounter Him in new ways: in other human beings; in any place where people gather in His name (Matt. 18:20); in the inspired words of Holy Scripture; in His Church, particularly her liturgical celebrations; in the person of His minister; and especially in the sacraments, pre-eminently the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

In the Eucharist, which is Jesus really present, God satisfies our deepest hungers. The Sacrifice of the Mass is Christ's supreme act of reconciliation. "Truly partaking of the body of the Lord in the breaking of the Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with Him and with one another. 'Because the bread is one, we though many, are one body, all of us who partake of the one bread' (1 Cor. 10:17.) In this way all of us are made members of His body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:27), 'but severally members of one another' (Rom 12:15)." (Vatican Council II, **Dogmatic Constitution on the Church**, 7) The Eucharist is indeed the Sacrament of Unity, "by which the unity of the Church is both signified and brought about." (Vatican Council II, **Decree on Ecumenism**, 2)

The theme of the Congress, "The Eucharist and the Hungers of the Human Family," reminds us that men and women hunger not only for food, but also for God, not only for bread in this life but for the bread of Life itself: for Christ, really present in the Eucharist, really received in Holy Communion, leading us to the Father. The Eucharist

responds to our needs and concerns — our many hungers — as human beings. The eight days of the Eucharistic Congress will be devoted to eight separate human "hungers" and the relationship of the Eucharist to them.

1. **Hunger for God.** If we lack God, it matters little what else we have. Estranged from God, we are estranged from our own destiny and fulfillment. Human life absorbed in itself is diminished and lacking in purpose. The Eucharist is a special means given to us by Jesus for overcoming our estrangement from God. It is as Christ tells us: "The man who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him." (John 6:56)

2. **Hunger for Bread.** Many persons today are physically hungry. Certainly the solution to starvation and malnutrition requires increased production and improved distribution of food. But it also requires "a concerted act of solidarity" by the nations and peoples of the world. (Synod of Bishops, 1974, **Statement on Human Rights and Reconciliation**) Our sharing in the Eucharist inspires us to such solidarity, as well as to actions which express it; for sincere celebration of the Eucharist "must lead to various works of charity and mutual help." (Vatican Council II, **Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests**, 6)

3. **Hunger for Freedom and Justice.** The quest for human freedom and justice is not optional for Catholics, nor is it a small part of the Church's mission. Participation in the struggle for freedom and justice is a duty for each one of us, as it is a central element of the Church's mission of redemption and liberation. In the Eucharist we find the source of our deepest commitment to the loving service of our brothers and sisters. It is especially timely for us to reflect on these facts at this season of the year, when we are called upon to express our solidarity with the poor and powerless of our nation through the Campaign for Human Development.

4. **Hunger for the Spirit.** In considering this theme, the Eucharistic Congress will focus in a special way on religious vocations and the need for commitment by the clergy and religious of the world. It is most appropriate that this be done in the context of the Eucharist, for it is the special role of clergy and religious to give witness to the transcendent, God-centered nature of human life and striving, which the Eucharist supremely expresses. This is no "perishable food but . . . food that remains unto life eternal, food which the Son of Man will give you." (John 6:27)

5. **Hunger for Truth.** Jesus proclaimed that He is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life." (John 14:6) We see, therefore, that knowledge of truth in the act of faith means more than just an intellectual understanding of abstract concepts. It also means commitment to a Person. Our most direct and profound encounter with this Person who is Truth occurs in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Here grace strengthens both our acceptance of what faith teaches and our loving commitment to the Person who stands at the center of faith.

6. **Hunger for Understanding.** Our times experience the tragedy of estrangement between nations, races, classes, churches, and even generations. Members of the same family are sometimes strangers to each other. Children feel that they are not understood by their parents; parents feel the same with respect to their children. The need for reconciliation is clear. How better achieve such reconciliation than at the Table of the Lord; for "the liturgy in its turn inspires the faithful to become of one heart in love." (Vatican Council II, **Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy**, 10)

7. **Hunger for Peace.** In an era of tension and violence, the limits of human instruments for peace are all too evident. Christ is our peace, and Christ Himself in the Eucharist provides us with both our model and best hope of peace. For it is He "who made the two of us one by breaking down the barrier of hostility that kept us apart." (Eph. 2:4) It is here, in the Eucharist, that "all education in the spirit of community must originate." (Vatican Council II, **Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests**, 6)

8. **Hunger for Jesus — The Bread of Life.** All men and women hunger for Christ, consciously or not. It is the Lord, worthily and maturely received in Holy Communion, who brings about our loving unity with one another and with Him. Without the Eucharist our lives in all their dimensions would be lacking in something essential; in the Eucharist we find means to conquer our weakness and tendency to sin and to live according to God's will for us. "Let me solemnly assure you if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in