

50th INTERNATIONAL EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS
Second Article: From Monsignor Stephen Robson, National Delegate.

As well as being the year of the 50th International Eucharistic Congress, this coming year, 2012, will be the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the Second Vatican Council. One of the key themes around which Vatican II was clustered was that of the **Church as Communion**. As I mentioned in my last SCO article, the central theme around which the 50th International Eucharistic Congress is presented is also the theme of communion: communion in the family in the diocese and parishes in baptism in ministry and consecrated life. Is this a coincidence or of divine providence? An exercise in re-inforcing a key message for our time? I believe it is all of these things. It also gives us an opportunity to explore what it means to live this communion in the Church in practice.

So what is this communion that the Second Vatican Council and the International Eucharistic Congress wants to speak so much to us about? How does it come about? Where does it come from?

This Communion among us in the Church is based on a sharing in holy things: Christ, who is the source of our communion makes us holy. Our baptism gives us the call to holiness through the Spirit of the Lord that, as St Paul says, 'makes us cry out 'Abba!', 'Father!'" And through our Holy Mass, Christ sustains us, feeds us, fills us, draws us even closer to him and empowers us to share our communion with Christ and with others as our brothers and sisters in Faith. The result is a network of relationships in Christ. In the Eastern Church's Liturgies, as the priest or Bishop shows the consecrated elements to the people for adoration and Communion he says: Holy things for a Holy People! Jesus, our Eucharistic Lord, by bringing us closer to Him, brings us also close to each other and we participate in his holiness.

This closeness with Christ has many effects on us as individuals and as a Catholic people. This unity with the Lord opens us to a deeper unity with others. In the Church we experience communion in the faith, communion in the sacraments that enable us to participate in God's life, communion in the charisms that the Holy Spirit adorns us with to build up the communion of the Church and, above all, draws us all closer to him bringing us to a communion in charity; in other words to share our goods, both spiritual and material with others. And our communion in Christ isn't limited to those of us on earth either, it reaches forward to those who've gone before us 'signed with the sign of faith' and purified with the love of God and who are now with the saints. In other words: our communion with the Lord starts in time but continues into eternity. The great teacher on the Eucharist, St Thomas Aquinas, reminds us that the Holy Eucharist we receive is a foretaste and a promise of those new heavens and the new earth where our life of communion will be unending. We profess this truth at each Sunday Mass when we declare before each other: 'I believe....in the communion of Saints'.

So our union with God in Christ through the Spirit is at the heart of Communion; the New Testament calls it *koinonia*, a unified togetherness in Christ. In other words what we are speaking of is the mystery of the Church. Vatican II said that the Church was like a sacrament of the unity of Mankind and of the Kingdom already growing among us. And so it is by the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Sacraments, that all the baptized are brought into communion with the source of *koinonia*: the Holy Trinity, the Triune God Himself.

Therefore it is because of this that the theme of communion speaks to us today as a

People and to a People with a mission. And then, when we meditate on what mission means, we discover how costly the brokenness in communion of the body of Christ strikes at the heart of the Church's evangelising mission. Because of our brokenness and sinfulness, Christ must work through us: His grace working through our fallen nature. Paradoxically only Christ can raise us from this fallen-ness and empower us to spread his word: in other words, he not only **is** the Word of evangelisation, but he is **also the power** and the **animating force** behind its preaching.

It is precisely because of this realization of the fragility and brokenness of the human heart called to apostleship that the Eucharistic Congress will attempt to try to promote a spirituality and an ecclesiology of communion centred on our encounter with the Person of Jesus Christ. In other words, Christ seeks us out and calls us into intimate communion with himself as individuals: this is our personal vocation. And in discovering it, we realize that in union with our brothers and sisters our missionary paths coincide and we learn to 'bear one another's burdens' as St Paul reminds us. In what is perhaps one of the strongest descriptions of communion ever found in a Papal Document addressed to the whole Church, Pope John Paul II shared with us some of the key features of what a 'spirituality of communion' might look like, a spirituality that must lay at the root of all our vocations.

First of all a spirituality of communion involves **discovering the mystery of the Holy Trinity dwelling in us**, and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the face of the brothers and sisters around us'. This means offering them deep and genuine friendship. It means realizing our vocations of being brothers and sisters in Christ, or realizing our 'divine filiation': we are, all the baptized, adopted children of God.

Secondly, a spirituality of communion implies also **the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God**. Too often in our friendships we see our 'glass half empty rather than half full' and can be too quick to see negatives in others rather than positive things. We might be attracted to see what we might want in others than what they actually have to bring to friendship in Christ.

Thirdly, Pope John Paul II points to the need to know **how to 'make room' for our brothers and sisters in our lives, bearing 'each other's burdens'** (Gal 6:2). We cannot afford again to shut the Lord out in others by their finding 'no room at the Inn'.

Summing up, Pope John Paul II concludes his advice on a spirituality of communion saying, 'Let us have no illusions: unless we follow this spiritual path, external structures of communion will serve very little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, "masks" of communion rather than its means of expression and growth'.

Once we have grasped these basic features of the spirituality of communion being lived among us, we can and must begin to see what implications this may have for us in our life lived in the Church. I believe that if we try to live a spirituality of communion in the Church as the basis of our 'personal vocations' – especially to flesh out what it means to be a daughter or a son of God in Christ - we shall begin to see what our responsibilities in the Church might be. Among these, we shall discover first, **a new commitment to listen to the voice of the Master**, the Word of God, a new attentiveness to listen as a disciple. Then, secondly, **we shall find our place in the Church in collaboration and in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the Faith** – caring for one another and realizing why we care and who we are serving in them. Thirdly **we shall begin to see and seek out the poor and the marginalized**

like the *anawim*, the 'poor ones' of St Luke's Gospel: those who, like us, know their need of God and, in humility, seek it. Fourthly we shall recover the purpose of the sevenfold gifts we received in baptism and which were fanned into a flame at Confirmation **as gifts to be used for the building up of the communion of the Faith**, the Church. Finally **we shall realize that the Church is an organism, primarily, a Body, the Body of Christ**; not primarily as an institution to be criticized and become distanced from, but a parent, a Mother to whom we are intimately and irreversibly bound by the Holy Spirit.

This period of preparation for the Congress between now and next June - is also a time to look again **at the significance of our weekly Sunday Mass in terms of communion with Christ and with one another**. At Mass, the family, as the 'domestic Church', plays a primary role in the Church's life. The mutual self-giving of a man and woman creates a new reality of communion, of a shared life that overflows into the life of society and of the Church as parish and diocese. Blessed Pope John Paul II often spoken of the nuptial character of the Eucharist, the sacrament of Christ the Bridegroom and His Bride. For this reason the Church manifests her particular spiritual closeness to all those who have built their family on the sacrament of Matrimony'. The contribution of loving marriages and stable family life to the common good is immeasurable.

And so Church as Communion is the theme which lies at the heart of the Second Vatican Council's theology and it is offered to us as an opportunity for renewal in Faith in the Real Presence of the Lord in the Holy Eucharist at the 50th International Eucharistic Congress next year in June 2012. Pope Benedict XVI also calls us next year to pray about the New Evangelisation which is needed to re-enliven and re-ignite the Faith of Church, especially where it has grown cold in Europe. Faith grows cold where and when our identity with Christ in prayer and adoration is weak. The old Roman axiom: *nemo dat quod non habet* – no one can give what he does not have - is an important reminder to us here. The encounter with Christ which is the beginning the middle and the end of our gift of Faith is nourished all along with our individual encounters with him in the Holy Eucharist. That is why our Mass is rightly called the source (*fons*) and summit (*culmen*) of the Church's evangelizing activity. Since the Lord always calls and knocks at the door of our hearts, how can we not let him in now?

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