

Chapter 14

I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH

We have already mentioned that the last articles of our profession of faith – about the Church, the communion of saints and the forgiveness of sins – are just an expansion of the fundamental profession “I believe in the Holy Spirit”. These statements specify the concrete way in which the Holy Spirit acts in history, through the Sacraments.

Let us consider this action of the Holy Spirit within the Church. To understand the way this article of the Creed is written, we must first be aware of the meaning of the terms church, holiness and catholicity. Many people feel bothered with this formula of our faith, since there is a general impression that the Church is neither holy nor catholic. Many are the reasons that lead to this conclusion, but the main one is that we’ve come to put the emphasis in the institution and hierarchy of the Church, forgetting about the pneumatological character.

The Church should not be defined either by its occupations nor its organization, but by the community who shares the table centered around the Risen One, Who summons and gathers it everywhere. The Church must be understood from the point of view of the Holy Spirit, it must be understood as His field of action in the world; that is to say, what’s important is not the grouping of people, but the gift of God which transforms man into a new being that he could not be by himself.

The Church – teaches Benedict XVI - is not called “holy” in the Creed because her members, collectively and individually, are holy, sinless men. The holiness of the church consists in the power of sanctification which God exerts in her in spite of human sinfulness¹.

The same can be said about the catholicity of the Church. Just in that being “catholic”, that is to say, in her plurality it corresponds to the demands of the Creed. In a world torn apart, she is to be the sign and means of unity; she is to bridge nations, races, and classes.² This concrete unity in the common faith, which is testified by the word and the common table, is the sign that the Church must present to the world.

With this introduction, and not intending to write a treatise on the Church, we are going to narrow down the meaning of what’s hidden in the statement “I believe in the holy catholic Church”, with a special reference to the Eucharist, the sacrament of the body of Christ, so we can explain the resonance this truth of faith has on the spiritual experience of Concepcion Cabrera and its projection on the Cross of the Apostolate.

The concept of “Church”

What is Church really? Why was this term “church” used to describe the community of disciples? The origin lies with the ancient notion of the “people of God”, as the Jews were called. In the New

¹ J. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 340-341

² J. Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 346

Testament this term refers both to the cultic assembly, and to the local community, gathered around the Risen Christ. The Lord gathers in Him His only people through His only sacrifice.

Jesus came to gather the children of God who were dispersed (cf. Jn 11:52). This is why, among the many images used to name the new people, one of the preferred images is that of the family of God: “For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mk 3:35). God is the Father in the family, Jesus is the Son, whoever is with Him is His sibling.

The key points which help deepen our understanding of the meaning of the Church are the Sacraments of Baptism and Eucharist. Church and Sacraments go hand in hand, they cannot exist separately. In the Sacraments the ecclesiology opens into its Trinitarian dimension. A Church without sacraments would be an empty organization; sacraments without the Church are just meaningless rites disconnected from one another.³ In particular, the sacrament of the “Eucharistic bread” signifies and at the same time fosters the unity of the believers, who make one body of Christ (Cf. 1 Co 10:17).

The Church, Body of Christ

Ecclesiology has its basis on two of St Paul’s expressions about the Church: “body of Christ” and “spouse of Christ”. The statement “body of Christ” makes reference to the First Letter to the Corinthians:

The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf (1 Cor 10:16-17).

The bread is the body of Christ, and this is why those who partake of it are transformed into the body of Christ; and just like the bread is only one, even while it’s made of many grains of wheat, just so the Christians are joined one to the other in the body of Christ⁴. In Holy Communion, Christ gathers everyone in Himself and He gives Himself totally to us. The insurmountable barrier of my ego is broken, because Jesus opened Himself up first.

This topic is better understood in contrast to what happens at an everyday meal; in the normal process of eating, the human body takes things in and they are assimilated into him. When we truly communicate, this means that we are taken out of ourselves, that we are assimilated into Him, that we become one with Him and, through Him, with the fellowship of our brethren⁵. That is to say, it is not Christ who is transformed into our body, but us into Christ. That is what St Augustine heard Jesus say in something like a vision: “I am the bread of the strong. Feed on me! But it won’t be you transforming me, rather I will transform you into me”⁶.

³ J. Ratzinger, *The Church, a community on the move*, (pg 18-41 in the Spanish edition)

⁴ Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 42

⁵ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *The Eucharist, the heart of life*, 78

⁶ St Augustine, *Confessions*, VII 10,16

In this way, the Eucharist builds the Church⁷; it's Christ who, in the Eucharistic sacrament, tears down the walls of subjectivity and groups us in a profound existential communion. The statement "the Church is the body of Christ" asserts that the Eucharist, where the Lord makes of us one body, is the place of uninterrupted birth of the Church: in the Eucharist the Church is herself in the most intense way⁸.

The Eucharist is the fountain par excellence of divine life; through her, the Spirit sanctifies and builds the Church, as He promotes in each individual soul the definitive construction of Christ, of the total Christ. In this way the Spirit not only introduces us into the Church, but makes each one of us Church, body, spouse and mother of Christ⁹.

The Church, Spouse of Christ

What we have compared with food becomes more transparent and understandable when we speak from the image of love. In the sacrament, as an act of love, two beings overcome their division and become fused into one. The Church is body of Christ the same way a wife and husband are one body and one flesh; in a union where there is no confusion between the two people. The Church does not simply become Christ; she is still the slave who He, in His love, elevates to the role of the spouse who searches for His face.

All of this in such a way that in the Eucharistic celebration "both" bodies of Christ, His *true* body, born of the Virgin Mary, who rose again and ascended into Heaven, and His *mystical* body, the Church: offer themselves up as one body, making up the total Christ. In other words, on the altar lies the *true* body of Christ; and also His mystical body is present *mystically*. The offering of the body of Christ at the Eucharist is not just of His own person, it is always accompanied by His mystical body, that is to say, *us*. In this way, the total Christ offers Himself up to the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It really is clear – says Benedict XVI – the relational and pneumatological character of the idea of the body of Christ and the spousal conception, as well as the reason the Church has never reached perfection, rather it is always in need of renewal. She is always on the journey toward union with Christ; and this also implies her own individual unity which, on the contrary, becomes more and more fragile the more she steps away from this fundamental relationship¹⁰.

The Church and the mystical experience

⁷ The Eucharist builds the Church and the Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth -which has been made clear in the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*- does not just tell of a daily experience of faith, but it contains the core of the mystery of the Church (EdeE 1).

⁸ Cf. Ratzinger, *The Church*, (page 33ff in the Spanish edition).

⁹ The Eucharist is fountain and summit of all Christian life. The sanctifying action of God and our worship of Him find their summit in the Eucharist. The Eucharist contains all the spiritual good of the Church: Christ Himself, our Easter. It expresses and produces communion in divine life and the unity of the people of God. (*Compendium*).

¹⁰ J Ratzinger, *The Church*, (36 in the Spanish editipn)

These past reflections have touched on topics related to the origin and nature of the Church. Let us now see how Concepcion Cabrera, who lived a profound intimate experience with God, understands herself as part of the Church.

Beginning in 1898 we find in the texts of her Account of Conscience passages speaking about Concepcion's love and attachment for the Church; even then she was delving into its mystery, contemplating it like a loving mother feeding her children:

I can experience now, as if faith was being born in my soul, a living faith I do not understand, and a certain courage to defend her even to the point of shedding my blood for my beloved Church. I contemplate her like a living mother, feeding her children with her holy doctrine. (AC 10, 190: May 28 1898).

This maternal approach to understanding the Church is explained not only from the basis of theology, but also from anthropology as a projection of Concepcion's maternal being. Maybe she was not able to pinpoint the concept back then; it was still a poorly understood experience, just an intuition. Since her own maternal experience was really strong in the beginning of the 1900s, she, who "belonged to the Church", could not see it any other way than like a mother, to whom she belonged.

I belong to the Church, with all my will. Starting today I offer myself as a victim in Her favor. Tell me, my Jesus, what would you have me do? And immediately I will set out to do your will. (AC 35, 42: February 7, 1911).

"This is my body"

Another aspect of Concepcion's insertion in the life of the Church is the experience she has of being herself "eucharist", a member of the "*body of Christ*". In an extension of what transpires at the eucharistic celebration, she repeats the words "*this is my body*", in union with Jesus' immolation. When Jesus offers His body and blood He offers not only His physical body, but His mystical body as well, and Concepción belongs to that mystical body¹¹. Namely, Concepcion offers herself in union with the ecclesial community, and she combines in her offering her own family, her children, who are also part of her body.

She shares with us in countless texts the rich eucharistic experience she had. Below are some examples:

For a while now I feel something extraordinary in my soul when I am in front of the Blessed Sacrament, something I rarely felt before. I feel in front of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist a very peculiar and unexplainable attraction. A divine attraction over which I have no control. It pulls me to the altar, especially during the consecration. When I receive Him in holy communion I feel that I get inside of Him instead of He in me.

¹¹ Eucharistic prayer III: "We may become one body, one spirit in Christ".

The divine Eucharist is truly a magnet for my soul. It is indeed the divine Sun which, more or less hiding among the clouds, then radiates majestically, showing all its splendor when it enters my soul. O my adored Eucharist [...] come give life to my soul... I can glimpse within You my most beloved Trinity, my three times Holy God... that Light, that Purity, that immensity of limitless perfections.

In accordance with St Augustine's thinking¹² "it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table", Concepcion Cabrera has lived the experience that her own mystery is on the altar and that there the goal of every Christian life is symbolized: to forge a priestly people, where presbyters and lay people, united, can be truly transformed into the Body of Christ, through the complete fusion of the eucharistic Mystery and the Mystery of the Church¹³.

Experience of the baptismal priesthood

Concepcion combines her maternal experience with the living of her priestly spirituality. By living in depth the mystery of Christ Priest and Victim, she lives it as a woman, and therefore, the eucharistic expression "*this is my body*" relates, at the same time, to the most characteristic element of her feminine being, her maternity. This is why she incorporates her children to the offering she makes of herself to God¹⁴.

The Eucharistic formula of the consecration "*this is my body*"; with which she unites herself to Christ's offering manifests the experience of her baptismal priesthood, it summarizes and expands the human and spiritual mystery of this woman, mother and wife. It combines her human person and history with the divine grace. It unifies her maternal relationship, her mystical experience and her apostolic activity.

Concepcion lives this aspect of surrendering, of offering – in union with the Victim who is Christ, and identified with Him – very intensely, because the Lord asks it of her:

"I want you to say often, and especially in your sorrows, these words with loving will, "this is my body, this is my blood", offering yourself to the Father in union with me. Do you not remember you are host and you must be victim?"

In this way she joins in Jesus' priestly intercession in favor of mankind, offering Himself to the Father inspired by the Holy Spirit:

¹² In light of this experience, we are able to see with new eyes the moment of the eucharistic consecration, just like St. Augustine says "*it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table*" (Sermon #272)

¹³ St Paul invites the faithful in Corinth to reflect about the true reality of the Eucharist, with the goal of making them return to the Spirit of fraternal communion: "The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf. (1 Cor 10:16-17). The Apostle says that it is "unworthy" of a Christian community to partake of the Lord's Supper amid division and indifference towards the poor. (Cf. EdE, 20)

¹⁴ "*Look, this is perfection in spiritual maternity, the union of your children with Me, and their immolation as victims who are sacrificed by you to the Father, in union with me, for His greater glory and the good of mankind. Your spiritual offspring will be numerous and holy*".

“I want you to be a host for me and that you wish, and renew that intention many times, night and day, to offer yourself up in union with me...

I want you transformed in Me by pain, love and virtues, so that, with you transformed into me through sorrow, love and this cry may rise up to Heaven from your soul in union with me: “This is my body, this is my blood”. In this way, my daughter, you will obtain graces for the world, offering me and offering yourself with the Holy Spirit, and through Mary, to the Eternal Father”.

When she offers her body in union to Jesus’ body and her blood in union with His blood to the Father, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, she offers in herself the immolation of all her children, present and future, in a special way for priests:

“This is your spiritual mission for Me – Jesus tells her – and for all your children... to offer them up in union with Me to the Father, in one only holocaust. This is why you are altar, priest and victim: victim who offers herself and offers the most painful, the most delicate fibers, the purest martyrdom in honor of the Father and in favor of the world, especially priests”.

Thus, the originality of Concepcion’s spirituality resides in her experience of an intimate relationship with Christ, an Eucharistic experience of identification with Him, which allows her to make hers the expression “*this is my body*”.

Throughout her writings you can grasp the difference between the meaning of Jesus’ words when pronounced by an ordained priest, and when they are uttered by all the baptized, who form the mystical body of Christ, as part of His ecclesial body:

“When I said: “Do this in memory of me” I was not just talking to the priests. It is true that only them, through the words of consecration, have the power to change the substance of bread into my Body and the substance of wine into my Blood. But when I join all the immolations into one, I do it for all Christians; all Christians are called to be absorbed by faith and actions to the Victim on the altar, because they are members of one body”.

In accordance with this doctrine, the Church, gathered in the Eucharistic assembly, can repeat, together with the priest, Jesus’ very words: “*this is my body*”, in an attitude of offering in union with Christ, just like Vatican II teaches: “Taking part in the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is the fount and apex of the whole Christian life, they offer the Divine Victim to God, and offer themselves along with It”¹⁵.

Saint Paul exhorted the faithful to offer their “bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God” (Rom 12:1); it was an invitation to do that which Jesus Christ had done, for them to become as well, in union with Christ, eucharist for God.

¹⁵ LG 11. The Council exhorts all Christians to: “by offering the Immaculate Victim, not only through the hands of the priest, but also with him, they should learn also to offer themselves” (SC 48, cf. EdE 13)

The priesthood and the Cross of the Apostolate

Following the format that we used in our presentation about the mystery of the Church, as it appears in the theological reflection and is lived in the Christian experience, let us now consider its reflection in the symbol of the Cross of the Apostolate.

One aspect to consider is the unity of the Church around the sacrament of the Eucharist. It is Christ, who with His only sacrifice, gathers into Himself all the children who were scattered. This aspect of the unity of the people of God, its social dimension represented in the Cross of the Apostolate, will be delved into in future pages. Now we will focus in the Eucharistic expression “this is my body”, with its very deep priestly meaning, namely, an offering pleasing to the heavenly Father.

The Cross of the Apostolate, as we have mentioned before, is a paschal cross which symbolizes at the same time Christ’s death and His resurrection; His death in the symbol of the heart crowned with thorns and pierced by the lance, and the resurrection through the fire that envelops the heart, which is live and beating; and all of this within a Trinitarian context.

The mystery of the Trinity which we see in the Cross of the Apostolate, is a symbol of what the Church performs in the Eucharistic celebration. There, the Trinitarian love becomes a life-giving experience. The Eucharist is a mystery of faith and a mystery of Trinitarian love; it is the expression of God’s love to mankind, a gift that the Father offers us by sending His Son to us; a gift of the Son who became incarnate and has offered Himself in sacrifice on the cross; and a gift of the Holy Spirit, Who has descended upon Mary, and Who also performs the transformation of the bread and wine into the body of Christ, and at the same time, He transforms the Church into a permanent offering.

This same Spirit is reflected as a dove above the Cross of the Apostolate, it ignites the heart of Christ and expands Himself through Himself, embracing mankind represented by the big cross. The light that envelops the Cross is the scope which introduces us to the mystery of the glory of God, which leads us to Christ, “etching” in us His image, so we can be transformed in a living memory of Christ, to form with Him one body (cf. 1 Cor 12:13).

The Cross of the Apostolate, by presenting the heart of Christ in immolation, becomes an invitation to join Christ in His eucharistic mystery, live with Him his oblation and to give up our lives; it’s an incentive to celebrate a grandiose Mass while exercising our baptismal priesthood. This is every Christian’s mission: “to mystically have one blood, so we can exclaim in unison with Christ and in Christ: “this is my body, this is my blood”. This is what we mean when we say to celebrate a grandiose Mass (cf. AC 44, 173B).

Christ’s promise to Concepcion was exactly that; that He would become “spiritually incarnate” in every person who “wants to live hidden within Him... inside that heart which is not

detached from the person of Christ, for, He used to tell her, “in the Cross of the Apostolate I am wholly present, though not in everybody’s sight; but anybody who can penetrate its bark or seep through its pores by embracing it, will surely find me” (AC 2, 42; April 1894).

This was Conchita’s experience. She embraced that cross, fixed her eyes on His side and there she experienced God’s love, there she found the mission of her living and her loving. She became for the Church a woman-mother, “source from where living waters pour forth” because she approached Christ first so she could drink from the primary and original source which is Jesus Christ, from whose pierced heart there flows love.

And so we end this reflection with an invitation to look at the Cross of the Apostolate, not the Cross outside of ourselves, but the one inside us, a cross of the apostolate where Jesus can become spiritually incarnate, through the work of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of the Father and salvation of mankind. In this way we offer our life to God and we give it to our brothers meaning it when we say: “this is my body, this is my blood”.