Ars Celebrandi: Theological and Ecclesiological Foundations

On October 5, Very Rev. Patrick Beidelman, STL of the Archdiocese of Indianapolis addressed the members at the national meeting in New Orleans. He offered an examination of the theological and ecclesiological foundations of the notion of ars celebrandi, blending Church documents with endearing narratives regarding the power of ritual. What follows is the full text of his presentation.

I am one of many cousins in my family, and we have a favorite story that we tell. My immigrant, maternal grandma, Agnes Casey, is remembered, among other things, for her homemade Irish bread. She and my grandfather arrived in Indiana in November of 1922, after fleeing the effects of the Irish Civil War in their native County Kerry. Now having raised eight children during the depression in Indianapolis, my grandmother made her own bread twice a week in a huge wash pan, letting it sit over the register atop a metal stool so that the heat of the coal furnace would help it to rise. In her later years, with Alzheimer’s beginning to pursue her, she made her bread only for special occasions like Easter. Having never seen her use any measuring equipment, my mother and her sister thought it best to sit her down and get the recipe once and for all before Grandma passed on to her eternal home. So, one evening, they sat down at the worn Formica kitchen table. My mother asked the questions. The other one was prepared with notepaper and pen.

The simple ingredients were all taken from their usual places in the kitchen, and my grandmother effortlessly began the ritual of making the bread. Well, one thing led to another, and not much of a recipe emerged. You see, Agnes Casey was a consummate storyteller, and it seemed that every question about the particulars of the bread recipe led to a story, stories about her disdain of electric stoves, about the times she would have to look over and above my uncle’s car in the garage to get at the wash pan, accompanied by loosening her girdle and the occasional and mild expletive. The stories and some laughter filled the snug kitchen, as open concept wasn’t a thing yet. And then, suddenly, as if time had stood still, the bread was in the big pan over the register and my grandmother stood up and walked out of the kitchen. My mother and my aunt looked at one another in dismay. The one said to the other, “what did you get?” My note taking aunt replied, “all I got was that you have to make sure not to use the electric stove, make sure the coal furnace is stoked and when you’re climbing over the car in the garage say ‘damn’ one time.” So much for the bread recipe! They decided simply to observe Grandma the next time she made the bread, and now we can make it and eat it in her memory. In a sense, she is present to us in the bread.

My dear friends, as we gather for this important national meeting of our colleagues and friends and as we continue our journey on a three-year Eucharistic Revival in our country (what a blessing and privilege!), I had to begin my reflections today with a story that is quintessentially eucharistic while at same time beautifully illustrates the ars celebrandi, the art of proper celebration. You see my mother and my aunt thought they could make my grandmother’s Irish bread if they just had the recipe, but as they discovered in their first formation session (and as most seasoned cooks and bakers can tell you), something more was required. Something more is required than the rubrics, and the ars celebrandi seeks to inspire and challenge us to go there.
Theological and Ecclesiological Foundations of the Ars Celebrandi

My focus this morning will be to explore the theological and ecclesiological foundations of the ars celebrandi, the liturgical principle first translated as the art of proper celebration, within the church teaching within the last century or so. Any analysis of the statements of the Magisterium regarding the principle of the art of proper celebration prior to the promulgation of the apostolic exhortation from 2007, Sacramentum Caritatis, yields several interesting facets regarding its development in the life of the Church. First, there are no explicit references to the ars celebrandi prior to 2007, but the thought and theology of this principle can be traced back to before the Second Vatican Council. Second, as we know, it is actually the liturgical principle of active participation that held the central place in the motivations and goals of the modern liturgical movement, as was expressed definitively in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, as “the aim to be considered before all else.” (SC, no. 14) And third, and as was finally articulated succinctly in Sacramentum Caritatis, there is a connection between the principle of active participation and the art of proper celebration that must be recognized and utilized in our worship of God.

Consistent with my second point, it should be noted that in recent times there has been much more written about the principle of active participation. Because it is explicitly mentioned in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, it features prominently in the reflections of many on the teachings of the Council and the implementation that followed. However, with the conciliar restoration of the Sacred Liturgy, a new dimension emerged. Where before the celebration of the sacred rites was governed strictly by rubrics that allowed few choices or options for adaptation, now the liturgy allowed some flexibility, if you will, to alter parts of a rite to enhance the people's understanding and participation. What resulted was a tendency at times to go too far in adaption, leading many away from the proper celebration of the rites themselves. So, prior to the Second Vatican Council the teachings that support the principle of ars celebrandi were not mentioned frequently. However, as the reforms of the Council were implemented, many became aware of the need to address the importance of the art of proper celebration and its intrinsic link with the principle of active participation. So, in more recent years the theology of the ars celebrandi has been discussed more often. It even became the focus of a National Meeting of the FDLC!

Introduction

And so, we begin. Any discussion about the liturgical principles of active participation and the art of proper celebration must at least begin with a brief analysis of the origins of the modern liturgical movement. The principle of active participation is mentioned in papal documents on the liturgy from the earliest days of the movement. It could be argued that the principle of the ars celebrandi, even though it is not mentioned as such, is implied and promoted together with many of the statements regarding active participation. Perhaps this is so because the ars celebrandi was already at least in part imbedded in the Church’s consciousness within the liturgy, while those working for the renewal of liturgy were trying to rediscover and restore the principle of active participation. In other words, the Church, especially since the Council of Trent, was actively promoting an ars celebrandi by requiring the celebrant of a liturgy to strictly follow liturgical rubrics and norms and to strive for an authentic liturgical piety themselves. There was little or no room for interpretation or adaptation of liturgical guidelines. A firm adherence within the Rites of the Church emerged as a predominant focus. On the other hand, the role and participation of the faithful in the liturgy was often neglected and, at times, even understood in a deficient way. The Second Vatican Council was a time when this fundamental dimension of worship was restored and promoted.

An additional understanding regarding these principles is also important. While the references to these principles in the liturgical sphere increased dramatically following the Second Vatican Council and its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, the beginnings of their use in discussions of liturgical theology and in Church teaching originated many years before the council. As mentioned above, we will see that the principle of active participation was mentioned explicitly, and the principle of the art of celebration was either implicit within the documents of the Church or at the very least partially assumed within the thought of liturgical theology at the time.

The Modern Liturgical Movement

While there is some disagreement among scholars regarding the actual beginnings and most primary goals of the Modern Liturgical Movement, I am most stuck by the reference to it by then Cardinal Ratzinger before his election as Pope:
“Cardinal Ratzinger in the preface to his 1999 work called *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, claimed that in 1918 at the conclusion of the First World War, when the distinguished German theologian Romano Guardini wrote the first *The Spirit of the Liturgy* which began the Liturgical Movement in Germany, the Roman liturgy was rather like a fresco, which had been preserved from damage but was almost completely overlaid with whitewash. That fresco was laid bare by the Liturgical Movement and especially by the Second Vatican Council.” (G. PELL, *Cardinal Reflections*, 1.)

This metaphor acknowledges that the Roman liturgy was in need of restoration and renewal and is a vivid description of what in fact occurred. Cardinal Ratzinger goes on in his preface to describe how this fresco was exposed to certain conditions and factors over the years of the implementation and application of the values of the Liturgical Movement and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council and that damaging influences began threatening the liturgy itself. As we have seen, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict and Pope Francis, as custodians of tradition, all have striven to preserve and protect the beauty and depth of the liturgy that was “laid bare” at the Council and through Liturgical Movement.

**Pre-conciliar Papal Pronouncements**

While the work of the Holy Spirit regarding these liturgical principles was widespread throughout the Liturgical Movement from many theologians and monasteries in places like Belgium, Germany, France and Italy, and in statements of Roman Pontiffs like Pope Pius X in *Tra le solicitudine* and Pope Pius XI in *Divini Cultus*, it was the promulgation of the encyclical *Mediator Dei* by Pope Pius XII that would set the stage for their fuller promotion at the Second Vatican Council. For our purposes here today, I call our attention to paragraph no. 23 of *Mediator Dei*, which states that the notion of participation in worship “in its entirety” is to be both exterior and interior. The encyclical shows that it is exterior because worship is an incarnated activity. The reason for this is that the human person is composed of body and soul in a unified whole. The expression of every impulse of the heart is given expression through the senses. This quality crosses over into the worship of God because it involves the whole human community. Therefore, religious activity must be organized and manifested outwardly, and the ceremonies of our tradition draw us toward God from whom we receive all mercy and grace. In the words of the encyclical,

“...exterior worship, finally, reveals and emphasizes the unity of the mystical Body, feeds new fuel to its holy zeal, fortifies its energy, intensifies its action day by day: for although the ceremonies themselves can claim no perfection or sanctity in their own right, they are, nevertheless, the outward acts of religion, designed to rouse the heart, like signals of a sort, to veneration of the sacred realities, and to raise the mind to meditation on the supernatural.” (*Mediator Dei*, no. 23)

The encyclical also places significant emphasis on the interior dimension: “The chief element of divine worship must be interior. For we must always live in Christ and give ourselves to Him completely, so that in Him, with Him and through Him the heavenly Father may be duly glorified.” (*Mediator Dei*, no. 24) Just as we see an emphasis on the exterior and the interior in the Sacred Liturgy and our participation in it, so too, does there emerge an external and internal dimension to the ars celebrandi. Rooted in this theological foundation, and this is a little bit of teaser, I like to define the ars celebrandi as celebrating the rites as fully as possible (in all their richness) while putting your whole heart into it! In part, this description flows from these per-conciliar foundations of the liturgical principle.

Following this encyclical of Pius XII, the liturgies of Holy Week were revised and, in some places, Masses in which the priest would pray the prayers in an audible voice and in which the people would answer the responses were allowed. And as was rightly asserted by Fr. Kevin Seasoltz, “It was under Pius XII’s leadership above all that the liturgical movement became a pastoral apostolate.” (R. K. Seasoltz, *A New Liturgy: A Documentation 1903 – 1965*, xxxiv.)

**Sacrosanctum Concilium**

Turning our attention to the Second Vatican Council then, we remember that the principle of active participation was a primary pathway for accomplishing the most important goals of renewing the liturgical life of the Church, while at the same time striving to restore to the Sacred Liturgy to its full richness.
Yes, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy deals most extensively with the promotion of the active participation of the assembly in the liturgical celebration. Yet, within the first articles of Sacrosanctum Concilium we find the most decisive theological basis for the ars celebrandi: “The liturgy is considered as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. In the liturgy the sanctification of the man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs; in the liturgy the whole public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and His members.” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 7)

Already establishing the inherent connection between the two principles by their placement together in this constitution, the document then addresses active participation in approximately one third of its 131 paragraphs! In addressing the interior disposition of the faithful who come to the liturgy, paragraph 11 highlights the responsibility of pastors of souls with a direction regarding what is a significant part the principle of the art of proper celebration:

“But in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds should be attuned to their voices, and that they should cooperate with divine grace lest they receive it in vain. Pastors of souls must therefore realize that, when the liturgy is celebrated, something more is required than the mere observation of the laws governing valid and licit celebration; it is their duty also to ensure that the faithful take part fully aware of what they are doing, actively engaged in the rite, and enriched by its effects.” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 11)

A reminder is then given in article 12 about the need for a devout and rich personal prayer life that forms the context in which one participates in the liturgy.

“The spiritual life, however, is not limited solely to participation in the liturgy. The Christian is indeed called to pray with his brethren, but he must also enter into his chamber to pray to the Father, in secret; yet more, according to the teaching of the Apostle, he should pray without ceasing. We learn from the same Apostle that we must always bear about in our body the dying of Jesus, so that the life also of Jesus may be made manifest in our bodily frame. This is why we ask the Lord in the sacrifice of the Mass that, ‘receiving the offering of the spiritual victim,’ he may fashion us for himself ‘as an eternal gift’. ”(Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 12)

Talk about putting your whole heart into it! That sets the stage for paragraph 14. Can we repeat it enough?

“Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy. Such participation by the Christian people as ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people (1 Pt. 2:9; cf. 2:4-5), is their right and duty by reason of their baptism.” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 14)

It is important to note that baptism is that which directs all the faithful to worship, and their participation is their right and duty. This paragraph continues with an instruction regarding the implementation of the reform:

“In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy, this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit; and therefore pastors of souls must zealously strive to achieve it, by means of the necessary instruction, in all their pastoral work.” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 14)

Finally, both the necessity for pastors to be “imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy (so crucial for the ars celebrandi – we must always read paragraph 14 with this in mind) as well as the need for them to be wholeheartedly committed to the liturgical formation of the faithful is discussed:

“Yet it would be futile to entertain any hopes of realizing this unless the pastors themselves, in the first place, become thoroughly imbued with the spirit and power of the liturgy, and undertake to give instruction about it. A prime need, therefore, is that attention be directed, first of all, to the liturgical instruction of the clergy.” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 14)
This instruction given to pastors is made even more specific in article 19: “With zeal and patience, pastors of souls must promote the liturgical instruction of the faithful, and also their active participation in the liturgy both internally and externally, taking into account their age and condition, their way of life, and standard of religious culture. By so doing, pastors will be fulfilling one of the chief duties of a faithful dispenser of the mysteries of God; and in this matter they must lead their flock not only in word but also by example.” In the section entitled, “Norms drawn from the hierarchic and communal nature of the Liturgy” the ecclesial dimension of participation is defined. In particular, the roles of pastors are highlighted. This will become a critical part of promoting the ars celebrandi years later in many documents addressing the misunderstandings that will arise regarding the principle of active participation. This continues in paragraph 26:

“Liturgical services are not private functions, but are celebrations of the Church, which is the ‘sacrament of unity,’ namely, the holy people united and ordered under their bishops. Therefore, liturgical services pertain to the whole body of the Church; they manifest it and have effects upon it, but they concern the individual members of the Church in different ways, according to their differing rank, office, and actual participation.” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 26)

And the Constitution does not stop there. It goes on to recognize the preference for communal celebrations. “It is to be stressed that whenever rites, according to their specific nature, make provision for communal celebration involving the presence and active participation of the faithful, this way of celebrating them is to be preferred, so far as possible, to a celebration that is individual and quasi-private.” (Constitution, no. 27) This section also contains an exhortation that all who perform a function in a liturgical celebration, whether they be a minister or a layperson, must do all that which pertains to his office and that they be well-trained and serve “with sincere piety and decorum.” Finally, the interior and exterior dimensions of participation are referenced. “To promote active participation, the people should be encouraged to take part by means of acclamations, responses, psalmody, antiphons, and songs, as well as by actions, gestures, and bodily attitudes. And at the proper times all should observe a reverent silence.” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 30) Again, it is significant that “reverent silence” is mentioned as a part of one’s active participation in a liturgical celebration.

So, the implementation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy following the Second Vatican Council brought new life and vigor to the liturgical celebration of the mysteries of faith. However, many abuses and misinterpretations regarding the principle of active participation led some celebrants and congregations away from that which was originally sought. Frequently, the ‘vertical’ dimension of the liturgy was neglected; in some places there was a misunderstanding that participation was merely ‘external’ and not also intensely ‘internal’; sometimes, there was a blurring of the distinctions between the role of the celebrant and that of the faithful; at times, there was a diminishing of the centrality of the focus on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and occasionally there even emerged a culture that made an inattentiveness to the instructions for the liturgical rites acceptable and even encouraged.

As the application of the principle of active participation continued through the pontificate of John Paul II, it continued to be refined in documents such as Ecclesia de Eucharistia, Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy, Redemptionis Sacramentum, and the General Instruction of the Roman Missal (2002). It is within these writings that the development of the teachings that serve as the foundation of the principle of ars celebrandi also begin to be explained and encouraged as well.

Sacramentum Caritatis

In the period just prior to the Year of the Eucharist and XI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, primarily during the pontificate of Pope John Paul II there developed a stronger focus on the principle of the art of proper celebration. While not explicitly stated as such, the thought of the ars celebrandi, its importance for liturgical celebrations and its crucial connection to active participation, were beginning to be identified. Presented in the Church’s teaching from the beginning of the liturgical movement and in the papal and Conciliar writings prior to Sacramentum Caritatis, the theological foundations and the practical implications of the art of proper celebration were mainly implicit and held a place of developing importance in the Church’s writings and directives.
So, we turn our attention now to the vehicle through which the Church would express the importance of the principles of ars celebrandi and actuosa participatio and the crucial connection they share within liturgical celebrations and, indeed, the whole life of faith. The celebration of the Year of the Eucharist from October 2004 to October 2005 gave the Church the opportunity to pray and reflect more intensely on this divine gift of God’s grace and mercy and to seek to be formed more completely to Jesus Christ. It would be within and following the XI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops at the end of the Year of the Eucharist that the many fruits of this time of prayer and reflection would be given expression. Pope Benedict XVI’s post-synodal apostolic exhortation, Sacramentum Caritatis, is the culmination of both that time and of the many years of the Church’s thought regarding and practice of the art of celebrating and active participation in the Sacred Liturgy. In Sacramentum Caritatis, the principle is articulated in this way:

“In the course of the Synod, there was frequent insistence on the need to avoid any antithesis between the ars celebrandi, the art of proper celebration, and the full, active and fruitful participation of all the faithful. The primary way to foster the participation of the People of God in the sacred rite is the proper celebration of the rite itself. The ars celebrandi is the best way to ensure their active participation. The ars celebrandi is the fruit of faithful adherence to the liturgical norms in all their richness; indeed, for two thousand years this way of celebrating has sustained the faith life of all believers, called to take part in the celebration as the People of God, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (cf. 1 Pt 2:4-5, 9)” (Sacramentum Caritatis, no. 38).

While recalling the ‘baptismal’ priesthood of all believers, the right and duty of all the faithful which comes from baptism, the document defines the art of proper celebration as “the fruit of faithful adherence” to all that the Tradition provides for instruction and guidance for the celebration of the Liturgy. What is particularly powerful about this passage is that it articulates for the first time an important link: the proper celebration of the rites we have received leads us to fullest participation of all the faithful!

**Benedict XVI on the ars celebrandi**

Pope Benedict XVI gave an answer to a question from the priests of the Diocese of Albano in Italy during a meeting on August 31, 2006, at the papal summer residence of Castel Gandolfo right before the release of Sacramentum Caritatis that was/is very significant. The Holy Father responded to a question from a priest who asked for an explanation about the ars celebrandi. In this important response, he gave his own perspective on the principle, and his words and explanation are slightly different (and are perhaps deeper) from those that would be a part of the post synodal exhortation. They are very pastoral but are infused with the theology that lies at the principle’s foundation. The Pope began by acknowledging that there are different dimensions of the art of proper celebration. First, he stated that the Mass is “prayer and a conversation” between God and us. The priest must enter well into this “colloquy” with God. Knowing the structure of the liturgy and understanding its formulation contribute to helping the celebrant to enter more fully into the prayer of the Church. (BTW, this is why I encourage priests and deacons to re-read the instructions for the rites occasionally.) “To the extent that we have interiorized this structure, comprehended this structure, assimilated the words of the liturgy, we can enter into this inner consonance and thus not only speak to God as individuals, but enter into the ‘we’ of the Church, which is praying. And we thus transform our ‘I’ in this way, by entering into the ‘we’ of the Church, enriching and enlarging this ‘I,’ praying with the Church, with the words of the Church, truly being in conversation with God.” This is critical in understanding the Holy Father’s approach to the ars celebrandi: The art of proper celebration calls us to be ‘with’ the Church in conversation with God. When this happens, we draw others to prayer.

Pope Benedict then makes an important distinction about interiorizing the words of liturgy and striving for a “harmony between what we say with our lips and what we think with our heart.” He says, “The ars celebrandi is not intended as an invitation to some sort of theater or show, but to an interiority that makes itself felt and becomes acceptable and evident to the people taking part. Only if they see that this is not an exterior or spectacular ars -- we are not actors! -- but the expression of the journey of our heart that attracts their hearts too, will the liturgy become beautiful, will it become the communion with the Lord of all who are present.”

He continues by acknowledging that in addition to this interior dimension there are also external things that are a part of the art of celebration. The words must be said or proclaimed properly. With this appeal for correct
articulation of the prayers of the liturgy, he adds this caution about the need for silence: “It is difficult for the faithful to follow a text as long as our Eucharistic Prayer…this is a moment that also invites others to silence with God and to pray with God. Therefore, things can only go better if the Eucharistic Prayer is said well and with the correct pauses for silence, if it is said with interiority but also with the art of speaking.”

The Holy Father concludes with this statement: “the fundamental element is this art of entering into communion with the Lord, which we prepare for as priests throughout our lives.” Here, Holy Father focuses us again on both the interior and exterior dimensions of the *ars celebrandi*, and I believe this applies to the active participation of the faithful.

**Desiderio Desideravi**

Since the promulgation of *Sacramentum Caritatis*, the art of proper celebration has begun to be incorporated into seminary formation and liturgical formation in many other settings. Recently, in his newly released apostolic letter, *Desiderio Desideravi*, Pope Francis has called our attention again to the critical importance of the *ars celebrandi*, and he gives thirteen new paragraphs of reflections on the principle. I call our attention today to paragraph 50:

“...the art of celebration is not something that can be improvised. Like every art, it requires consistent application. For an artisan, technique is enough. But for an artist, in addition to technical knowledge, there has also to be inspiration, which is a positive form of possession. The true artist does not possess an art but rather is possessed by it. One does not learn the art of celebrating by frequenting a course in public speaking or in persuasive techniques of communication. (I am not judging intentions, just observing effects.) Every tool can be useful, but it must be at the service of the nature of the Liturgy and the action of the Holy Spirit.”

(*Desiderio Desideravi*, no. 50)

The Holy Father continues in his letter to expand our understanding of utilizing the *ars celebrandi*, but he especially exhorts priests to embody and to possess in and to convey from their hearts what they celebrate.

**Practical Applications**

That brings us to a final reflection regarding some practical applications. I believe that it is no coincidence that Pope Francis gave us this expansion of thought on the *ars celebrandi* just as we in this country are beginning our three-year Eucharistic Revival. No doubt Divine Providence will be detected in all this. What can be done? Certainly, we all can engage in a liturgical examination of conscience, as I like to call it, assessing adherence to norms and guidelines so as to realign ourselves to the mind of the Church where we may have strayed. Definitely, we can engage in ongoing formation for ourselves and others, as our position statements and resolutions seek to do, teaching about the Holy Mass and other celebrations of the Sacred Liturgy. But I would contend, that this is a particular moment in which we are being invited into conversation, a Spirit-led transformation that helps us to accept our Lord’s invitation to sanctification through our worship of God and of our communion with God and one another. During this eucharistic revival, the dynamic principle of the *ars celebrandi* is beckoning us to a healthy obedience to the liturgical norms in all their richness while at the same time challenging us to discern ways to put more and more of our whole hearts into our divine worship. In this revival, if we are to truly “renew the Church by enkindling a living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist,” then we must give witness to the importance, the power, and the impact of the Real Presence of Christ in our lives. It is Christ who gives himself totally to our hearts, and he asks our whole hearts in return. Giving witness, offering testimony to what we personally have seen and heard of Jesus helps cultivate the *ars celebrandi* with us. So, here goes.

After almost three years into my first assignment as a young priest, I was nearing what I expected to be the end of my first assignment, which I had grown to love immensely, and what I expected to be a new assignment, which would probably be as a pastor. I was very blessed in my first assignment as an associate pastor and a chaplain of a high school. The people I worked with and the people I served were great. It was a fruitful and fulfilling beginning in active ministry, and, of course, I wasn’t real sure I wanted it to end. In fact, I was detecting a little frustration and anger (along with some disappointment) that I might be in for a change. All this came to a head when I went on my annual retreat in the winter before the summer moves. I was put in contact with a spiritual director out at St. John’s Seminary in Boston during the seminary’s winter break, so I practically had the place to myself. I met with the director once a day, which was also peppered with some rest, daily Mass and some periods of quiet
prayer. I brought my struggle with an anticipated new assignment with me there, and I was detecting some resistance and some sadness in my heart. On about the third day of the retreat, while sitting in a cozy chapel with just one light shining on our Lord reserved in a beautiful but simple tabernacle, I entered into what I thought would be a routine prayer period after dinner. I was a little sleepy, but I felt settled. And with my eyes closed and my heart now beginning to be open, I entered in my mind’s eye into an encounter with our Lord in a meditation. Here’s how the meditation unfolded: After moving through a dark passageway with many twists and turns, I came to a dimly lit, actually candle lit, room that was more like a crypt chapel. It had a marble altar with a reredos on one side and across from it was a cushioned bench. At one side of the altar, Jesus was standing there. And on the altar, there was a pear and a small carving knife. As I stood at the entrance of the small cavern of a room, Jesus motioned for me to sit down on the bench. (When Jesus instructs you to sit down, you sit down.) Then, he proceeded to pick up the knife and the pear, and just like a skilled parent might do for a child, he began to patiently carve out a wedge of the pear. I, of course, was giving Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe, my undivided attention. But then, Jesus took the first wedge of the pear that he had cut, and with his thumb holding it to the edge of the knife, handed it to me where I was sitting. Now, you probably don’t know what I was thinking at that moment, so I will tell you. I thought, “What is Jesus doing, he knows that I don’t like pears?” And I didn’t like pears. But when Jesus hands you a pear to eat, you take it and eat it. So, I did. And when I bit into the pear, it was as if it was bursting with the sweetest, most succulent juice, I was stunned about how delicious it was and was delighting in its taste. Then, I noticed that Jesus had continued and carved out another wedge of the pear, but this time he ate it himself. He cut another wedge for me and then one for himself, and as we ate that sweet fruit together, my eyes opened, and I was gazing at our Lord’s place of reservation in the chapel.

Now, some things were brought to my attention later with the help of that spiritual director: First, we confirmed that I was not a mystic but just a still-green diocesan priest who had been given a grace. Next, just like in the stories of the Sacred Scriptures, usually when Jesus is eating with others, he’s telling you something about the Eucharist. And finally, when we are given a share in the Cross of Christ, the Lord can make it sweet because he will be with you through it all. My dear friends, I can’t celebrate the Eucharist without remembering that what the Lord gives us is so sweet and that he is eating with us. Friends, to practice the art of proper celebration, let us give witness to power of our Lord’s Presence in our lives. Thank you for listening.

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