

## Jesus - Our Eucharistic Love

By Fr Stefano M Manelli FI

### The One Who Gives us Jesus

Who is the one who prepares the Holy Eucharist for us and gives Our Lord to us? It is the priest. If there were no priests, there would be no Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, nor Holy Communion, nor the Real Presence of Jesus in the tabernacle.

Who is the priest? He is the "man of God" (2 Tim. 3:17). It is God alone who chooses him and calls him from among men for a very special task. "No man takes the honour to himself; he takes it who is called by God, as Aaron was" (Heb. 5:4). God sets him apart from everyone else "to preach the Gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1). God signs him with a sacred character that will endure forever, making him "a priest forever" (Heb. 5:6) and bestowing on him the supernatural powers of the ministerial priesthood so that he is consecrated exclusively for the things of God. The priest, being "taken from among men, is ordained for men in the things that appertain to God, that he may offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins" (Heb. 5:1-2).

### Virgin, Poor, Crucified

By his ordination the priest is consecrated in soul and body and becomes a being totally sacred and likened to the Divine Priest, Jesus. The priest is thereby a true extension of Jesus --- sharing in Jesus' vocation and mission. He fills Jesus' role in the most important works of universal redemption, namely, Divine worship and the spread of the Gospel. In his own life he is called to reproduce completely Jesus' life - the life of the One who was a virgin, of the One who was poor, of the One who was crucified. It is by thus making himself like Jesus that he is "minister of Christ Jesus among the Gentiles" (Rom. 15:16), "a guide and instructor of souls" (Mt. 28:20).



St Gregory of Nyssa wrote, "One who yesterday was one of the people, becomes their master, their superior, a teacher of sacred things and leader in the sacred mysteries." This happens by the work of the Holy Spirit; for "it is not a man, nor an angel, nor an archangel, nor any created power, but it is the Holy Spirit which bestows the priesthood on a person" (St John Chrysostom). The Holy Spirit makes the priest's soul a likeness of Jesus, empowers the priest to fill the role of Jesus so that "the priest at the altar acts in the same Person of Jesus" (St Cyprian), and "has charge of all of God" (St John Chrysostom). Who will be astonished, then, if the priestly dignity is declared "heavenly" (Cassian), "divine" (St Dionysius), "infinite" (St Ephrem), the "summit of every greatness" (St Ignatius Martyr), something "lovingly venerated by the very angels" (St Gregory Nazianzen), so great that "when the priest conducts the Divine Sacrifice, angels station themselves about him and in a choir they chant a hymn of praise in honour of the Victim who is sacrificed" (St John Chrysostom). And this happens at every Mass!

### Respect and veneration

We know that St Francis of Assisi was unwilling to become a priest because he considered himself unworthy of such a high vocation. He honoured priests with a special devotion, considering them his "lords," because in them he saw only "the Son of God." His love for the Eucharist blended with his love for the priest who consecrates and administers the Body and Blood of Jesus. He paid special veneration to the priest's hands which kneeling he used always to kiss very devoutly. He used even to kiss a priest's feet and even the footprints where a priest

had walked.

St John Bosco exhorts all in this manner: "I urge you to have the highest respect for priests; take off your hats as a sign of reverence when you speak with them or meet them in the street, and kiss their hands respectfully. Keep especially from showing contempt for them in word or deed. Whoever does not respect these sacred ministers should fear a great punishment from the Lord."

The veneration of the priest's consecrated hands, reverently kissed by the faithful, has always existed in the Church. It is noteworthy that during the persecutions of the first centuries, an outrageous cruelty practised in particular on bishops and priests consisted in cutting off their hands so that they could no longer perform the consecration nor give blessings. Christians used to search out those amputated hands and treating them with spices preserved them as relics.

Kissing the priest's hands is also a delicate expression of faith and love for Jesus who the priest represents. The more faith and love one has, the more he will venture to kneel before the priest and kiss those "holy and venerable hands" (the Roman Canon), in which Jesus lovingly makes Himself present every day.

"Oh! The venerable dignity of the priest," exclaims St Augustine, "in whose hands the Son of God becomes incarnate, as He did in the Virgin's womb!" The holy Cure of Ars said, "We attach great value to objects that are handed down and kept at Loreto, as the holy Virgin's porridge bowl and that of the Child Jesus. The priest's fingers which have touched the adorable Body of Jesus Christ, and which have been put into the chalice where His Blood was and into the ciborium where His Body was, might anything be more precious than these fingers?" Perhaps we never thought of it before but it is really so. The examples of the saints warrant this affirmation.

#### **She Kissed both hands**

In ecstasy the Ven. Catherine Vannini saw angels gather about the priest's hands during Mass and support them at the elevation of the Host and the chalice. We can imagine the reverence and affection with which this Venerable Servant of God used to kiss those hands!

The Queen, St Hedwig, every morning attended all the Holy Masses that were celebrated in the Chapel of the court - - showing herself to be very grateful and reverent toward the priests who had celebrated Holy Mass. She used to offer them hospitality, kiss their hands devoutly, see that they were fed and show them every honour. She would show deep feeling, exclaiming, "God bless the one who made Jesus come down from Heaven and gave Him to me!"

St Paschal Baylon was porter in a monastery. Each time a priest arrived, the holy lay brother knelt and reverently kissed both his hands. People said of him - as they did of St Francis - that "he had devotion for the consecrated hands of priests." He judged that those hands had power to ward off evils and draw down blessings for the one who treated them reverently, since they are hands that Jesus uses.

It was edifying to watch Saint Pio of Pietrelcina affectionately kiss a priest's hands -- sometimes suddenly seizing them unexpectedly. We are impressed, too, by the example of another Servant of God --- the priest Don Dolindo Ruotolo -- who would not admit that any priest could refuse "the charity" of letting him kiss his hands.

We know that God has often rewarded this act of veneration by means of true miracles. We read in the life of St Ambrose, that one day after he had celebrated Holy Mass, the Saint was approached by a woman afflicted with paralysis who wanted to kiss his hands. The woman had great faith in those hands that had consecrated the Eucharist; and she was cured at once. Like-



wise at Benevento a woman who had suffered paralysis for fifteen years asked Pope St Leo IX to let her drink the water he had used during Holy Mass to wash his fingers. The Holy Pontiff granted the request, so humbly made, like that of the Canaanite woman who asked Jesus for "the crumbs that fell from the table of their master" (Mt. 15:27). She, too, was instantly healed.

#### **First the Priest, then the Angel**

The faith of the saints was something that was truly great and produced results. They lived "by faith" (Rom. 1:17) and acted on a faith and a love that recognised no limits in the treatment of Jesus. For them the priest represented nothing more nor less than Jesus. "In priests I see the Son of God," said St Francis of Assisi. The holy Cure of Ars remarked in a sermon, "Every time I see a priest, I think of Jesus." When she would speak of a priest, St Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi used to refer to him as "this Jesus." Because of this esteem St Catherine of Siena and St Teresa of Avila used to kiss the floor or the ground where a priest had passed. One day St Veronica Giuliani saw the priest mount the stairway of the monastery to take Holy Communion to the sick. She knelt at the foot of the stairs, and then climbed the steps on her knees, kissing each step and moistening it with tears that her love produced. What examples of love!

The holy Cure of Ars used to say, "If I met a priest and an Angel, I would first pay my respects to the priest, and then to the Angel... If it were not for the priest, the Passion and Death of Jesus would not be of any help to us... What good would a chest full of gold be if there were no one to open it? The priest has the key to the heavenly treasures..."

Who causes Jesus to come down in the white Hosts? Who puts Jesus into our tabernacles? Who gives Jesus to our souls? Who purifies our hearts so that we can receive Jesus? It is the priest, only the priest. He is the one "who serves the tabernacle" (Heb. 13:10), who has the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:18), "who is for you a minister of Jesus Christ" (Col. 1:7) and who is a dispenser "of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1). Oh, how many instances could be reported of heroic priests sacrificing themselves in order to give Jesus to their flock! We recount here one instance out of many.

#### **"Farewell till we meet in Paradise"**

Some years ago in a parish in Brittany, an old pastor was lying on his deathbed. At that time one of his parishioners was also nearing the end of his life, one who was among those that had strayed from God and the Church. The pastor was distressed because he could not get up and go to him; so he sent the assistant pastor to him, admonishing him to remind the dying man that once he had promised that he would not die without the Sacraments. The parishioner, hearing this, excused himself with the words, "That promise I made to the pastor, not to you." The assistant pastor could do nothing but leave the dying man, and report his answer to the pastor. The pastor was not discouraged and though he realised he himself had only a few hours left, he arranged to be carried to the home of the sinner. He was brought into the house, succeeded in hearing the dying man's confession and gave him Our Lord in Holy Communion. Then he said to him, "Farewell till we meet in Paradise!" The courageous pastor was carried back to his rectory on a stretcher. When he arrived, the covers over him were raised, but the priest did not move. He had already died.



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St John Mary Vianney