

## O Sacrum Convivium

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fr. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P. - ANGELICUM

[\(YouTube video\)](#)

Elevation is needed. So, let's go up, if you don't mind, to 325 meters of altitude, in a very steep town, a little south of Florence about 167 km (according to Google map), the beautiful town of Orvieto. And to this virtual journey in space we add another journey, equally virtual, in time. Let's transport ourselves to Orvieto in the year of our Lord 1264. Here, in the modest convent of the Dominicans, already founded about thirty years ago, Master Thomas Aquinas teaches. In fact, after obtaining the supreme title of Master *in Sacred Page* in the prestigious Parisian university and after teaching there for some time, Friar Thomas returned to his province of origin, the Roman province, and the chapter of September 1261 assigned him as a reader in Orvieto. In fact, every Dominican convent, no matter how small it might be, is a school in which a teacher (called a lector, because he "reads" i.e. comments on the Bible) teaches the friars the Sacred Scripture and the theology necessary for the ministry of preaching and penance on a daily basis. We are perhaps tempted to think of a total set aside. From the University of Paris, where the bread of Christendom is baked (as a pope of the time said) to the small convent of Orvieto, what a fall! We do not know why. Perhaps the chapter wanted to leave Br Thomas in a quiet place, without too many obligations, so that he could continue his intellectual production? In any case, Providence had other plans. Shortly after being elected pope in Viterbo, Urban IV, in October 1262, moved to Orvieto with the whole Curia so that Orvieto became for some time the center of Christianity. In effects, to that epoch, the popes were not in any place less in safety than in Rome. Therefore, they went to different places in Lazio (Anagni, Viterbo, Orvieto...). However, in Orvieto, in the persons of Urban IV and Thomas Aquinas, two souls deeply in love with the Eucharist met.

In fact, the thirteenth century is a golden age for Eucharistic devotion. The 12th century, especially with the Cistercians, had emphasized the humanity of Jesus Christ. Christ is true man and it is necessary to contemplate, love and imitate him in the mysteries of his life and especially of his Passion. This devotion to the humanity of Christ extends very logically to Christ really present in the Eucharist. Those who love the humanity of Jesus are necessarily drawn to the mystery of the Eucharist in which Jesus is truly present. In Belgium, in the diocese of Liège, in 1246 holy women obtained from their bishop the first celebration of a feast in honor of the Eucharistic Body of Christ. Four years later, the papal legate in Germany, who was none other than the future Dominican cardinal, Hugh of Saint-Cher, a great friend of Saint Thomas, extended the feast to all of Germany.

Now, a French archdeacon, James Pantaléon, takes part in these celebrations in honor of the Holy Sacrament. He would remember this when he was elected pope in 1261 under the name Urban IV. As for Thomas Aquinas, the Eucharist is certainly at the center of his spiritual life. I do not know if it is true that he came to introduce his head into the tabernacle when he had theological difficulties to resolve, but his piety towards the Eucharist is well attested by all the witnesses of his life. It is expressed first of all in the daily celebration (which was not obvious at that time) of the "private" or rather "read" Mass (there is no private Mass: the Mass is always an act of the Church), at the end of which Thomas with great humility acted as altar boy for his companion and secretary Reginaldo di Priverno. During the elevation, looking at the host, he usually recited the verse of the *Te Deum*: "Thou king of glory, Christ, Thou art the eternal Son of the Father, Thou didst not disdain the Virgin's womb to free man" and so on. Therefore, it is not surprising if on the point of death he gave free rein to his Eucharistic devotion with a magnificent prayer in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, brought to him as a viaticum: "I receive you Christ, the price of my redemption... For your sake I have studied. For your sake I have kept vigil. For your sake I have worn myself out. I have preached to you, I have taught you. I have never said anything against you." And according to his biographer Tocco, it would be precisely at that time that Thomas would have composed the famous *Adoro te devote*.

So, Urban and Thomas, two souls already ready to ignite for love of the Eucharist. The spark that ignites the fuse is (perhaps - historians do not agree among themselves) the Eucharistic miracle occurred in 1263 in Bolsena, near Orvieto. During the celebration of Mass by a Bohemian priest, Peter of Prague, who had doubts about the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, blood dripped - miracle ! - from the host onto the corporal and even onto the altar. But beware. This miracle was only the visible sign of the true and daily miracle : transubstantiation, that is to say the fact that, beyond all the laws of nature, all the substance of the bread and all the substance of the wine are changed into the Body and Blood of Christ; the miracle is the fact that the accidents of the bread and wine (form, color, taste...) remain without being inherent in the substance of the bread and wine.

Whatever the role of the miracle of Bolsena, Urban IV with the bull *Transiturus* of August 11, 1264 institutes the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ and as he has in hand in the person of Thomas Aquinas, a prominent theologian (whom he has already used for other very demanding works), asks him to compose the liturgical office of the feast. It contains the texts of St. Thomas best known to the Christian people: the *Tantum ergo*, the *Panis angelicus*... But now I would like to focus on a passage from Vespers that is perhaps less well known: the antiphon of the *Magnificat*. A text which in its own way contains all the Eucharistic theology of St Thomas. Here is the text in Latin and English : *O sacrum convivium* (O Sacred Banquet)! *in quo Christus sumitur* (in which

Christ is our food) / *recolitur memoria passionis ejus* (the memory of his Passion is recalled) / *mens impletur gratia* (the soul is filled with grace) / *et futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur* (and to us is given the pledge of future glory!). Let us pause on each of the parts of this liturgical passage

### **1/ O sacrum convivium !**

The Eucharist is presented primarily as a banquet, a meal. Sometimes the Eucharist as sacrifice is contrasted with the Eucharist as meal, that is, the altar against the table ! But the two aspects are inseparable. Indeed, they require each other. Already in the Bible, most sacrifices end with a meal in which the participants commune with the victim and through the victim with God to whom it has been offered. The Eucharist is meant to be eaten. This is why adoration of the Eucharist is not an end in itself: it prepares us for Eucharistic communion, for the food of life.

Thus, when St. Thomas in the *Summa of Theology* presents to us the organism of the sacraments (the seven sacraments form a unity), he bases himself on the analogy between "natural" human life and spiritual life. Between the dynamic development of natural life and that of supernatural life. In that context, the Eucharist is clearly identified with the food we absolutely need to live and grow.

"In fact, the life of the spirit has a certain analogy with the life of the body [...]. Now, in physical life there are two perfections that the individual must achieve: one with respect to his own person; the other with respect to the society in which he lives, man being by nature a sociable animal. With respect to himself, man in his bodily life perfects himself in two ways: first, directly (*per se*) by acquiring any perfection; second, indirectly (*per accidens*), by freeing himself from that which threatens life, that is, from infirmities and other similar things. The direct perfecting of bodily life has three stages. The first is generation, whereby man begins to be and to live. And in the life of the spirit it corresponds to baptism, which is a spiritual regeneration [...]. The second is growth, whereby one reaches the fullness of his stature and strength. And in the life of the spirit it corresponds to confirmation, in which we are given the Holy Spirit to strengthen us. [...] The third is nourishment, by which man preserves in himself life and strength. And in the life of the spirit the Eucharist corresponds to it. Hence the Gospel words: 'Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you will not have life in you'..." (*Sum. theol., IIIa, q. 65, a. 1*).

### **2/ In quo Christus sumitur**

The food of our spiritual life is none other than Jesus Christ himself, the bread of life. Now, it is Christ himself, really, substantially, present, in his humanity and in his divinity that the believer receives when he communicates.

I will not insist on the mystery of transubstantiation and the real presence of the Risen Christ in the Eucharist, which St Thomas helped so much to illuminate, but I would like to focus on one of its consequences: the fact that the Eucharist is the first of the sacraments. In fact, the Eucharist possesses a quality that is not found in the other sacraments. All the other sacraments contain and produce grace, that is, shared divine life. Through the sacraments, Jesus Christ prolongs his own saving and sanctifying action. Now, the Eucharist contains not an effect of grace, not a stream, but the very source of grace: Jesus Christ, from whom all graces derive.

"Absolutely speaking, the sacrament of the Eucharist is the greatest of all the sacraments. This results from three considerations [I consider only the first and the second that derives from the first] First of all because it contains Christ Himself substantially: whereas the other sacraments contain a certain instrumental power which is a share of Christ's power [...]. Now that which is essentially such is always of more account than that which is such by participation.

Second, this results from the order existing among the sacraments: all the other sacraments are in fact ordered to the Eucharist as their end. It is clear, for example, that the sacrament of Holy Orders aims at the consecration of the Eucharist. The sacrament of baptism aims at Eucharistic communion. In other respects, man is also disposed to this by confirmation, so that he does not abstain from the Eucharistic sacrament out of shame. Thus penance and extreme unction prepare man to receive worthily the body of Christ. Marriage then relates to the Eucharist at least by its symbolism, since it represents the union of Christ with the Church, whose unity the Eucharist represents" (*Sum. theol.* , *IIIa*, q. 65 a. 3).

Therefore, all sacraments are in some way ordered to that which is the sacrament par excellence, the Eucharist, therefore called the Most Holy. All sacraments are holy, but that one is most holy because it contains the Holy One, that is, Christ himself. The Eucharist is like the sun around which all the other sacraments gravitate. Everything in sacramental life comes from the Eucharist and everything leads to the Eucharist.

### **3/ *Recolitur memoria passionis ejus***

Let us return to the antiphon and observe that, for St. Thomas, the Eucharist in some way summarizes the three dimensions of our time: the past (*recolitur memoria passionis*), the present (*mens impletur gratia*) and the future (*futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur*). In some way, in the celebration of the Eucharist, all times come together. We can approach the antiphon and the acclamation of the faithful after the consecration. When the priest proclaims : "Mystery of Faith," the faithful respond : "We proclaim your death Lord (past), we proclaim your resurrection (present, since the risen Christ is presently alive) as we await your coming (future)."

Thus, the Eucharist recalls, revives, the memory of the Passion. In the same way, in the *Adoro te*, Saint Thomas qualifies the Eucharist as "*Memoriale mortis Domini*". Indeed, the Eucharist represents the Passion of Christ. Already, on the level of the sacramental sign, the double consecration - consecration of the bread then consecration of the wine - evokes Christ's death on the Cross. On the Cross, there was the body on one side and on the other side the shed blood, separated from the body. In the same way, at Mass, the body and blood are represented as if they were separate. The celebration of the Mass therefore invites us to keep ever present, under the eyes of the heart, the Passion of Christ as the supreme manifestation of the love of God and the charity of Christ. In a beautiful sermon on the Symbol of Faith (chosen by the Church as the liturgical reading for the memory of St. Thomas), St. Thomas explains that the Passion contains all the moral and spiritual teaching to which we must conform:

"The passion of Christ is sufficient to direct our whole life. Whoever wishes to live in perfection should do no more than despise what Christ despised on the cross, and desire what he desired. For no example of virtue is absent from the cross. If you are looking for an example of charity, remember: 'Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends' (Jn 15:13). This is what Christ did on the cross. And so, if he gave his life for us, it should not be burdensome for us to bear any ill will for him. If you are looking for an example of patience, you will find a most excellent one on the cross, and so on..."

But beware, 'memorial' means much more than recollection. In the memorial, a past event is represented in the sense of being made present and operative in the present. In the celebration of the Mass, the sacrifice of Christ (as the supreme act of love) is made present, so that the Mass is truly a sacrifice. Not a different sacrifice from the one made by Christ on the Cross, but this same sacrifice of the Cross entrusted to the Church so that she can associate with it and so that it becomes her sacrifice.

The celebration of the Eucharist makes present among us the paschal mystery of Jesus so that we may subjectively perceive the fruits of the redemption objectively accomplished by Christ on the cross. Perceiving the fruits of salvation does not mean being exempt from suffering but being made capable of suffering and giving our lives with Christ for our salvation and that of our brothers and sisters. If we unite ourselves to the Cross through participation in the Eucharist we participate in the redemption of the world. Extraordinary mission ! Therefore, we must be aware that coming to church for Mass is very dangerous (not only because of the Covid) because we all run great risks in coming to expose ourselves, without any precautions, to the action of the Lord Jesus in the Eucharist. Covid contamination seems like a joke compared to the radiant, contagious power of the Eucharist. In fact, anyone who participates in the celebration of the Mass is immediately threatened by a terrible disease: acute christification. We run the risk of becoming like

Jesus, that is, marked, like him, by an incurable tropism of love that makes us go out of ourselves and pushes us towards the Father and towards men, our brothers. The Mass is by no means a spectacle, more or less successful, that we could observe as if we were behind an armored window, in a neutral way, without committing ourselves. No, whoever comes to Mass must know that he does so at his own risk. Indeed, what is the Mass if not the action in which the Risen Christ makes himself present among us - and when Jesus is present, he cannot fail to act: he takes us with him, he draws us to him, he draws us into his own offering of love. This is why during the celebration of the Eucharist, I should be attuned to what is really happening at the altar. From the depths of my heart (and not from my lips) I should associate myself with the offering that Jesus makes of his own life. For him, with him, and in him I must daily pass from this world to the Father. "With my arms outstretched on the cross," says the Lord Jesus in the *Imitation*, "the whole body naked, I freely offered myself to God the Father, for your sins [...]. In the same way you too (in the sacrifice of the Mass) must voluntarily offer yourself to me, with all your strength and with all your enthusiasm, from the depths of your heart, in pure and holy oblation. What more can I desire from you than that you try to offer yourself entirely to me? Whatever you give me, except yourself, I have for nothing, because I do not seek your gift, but you. "This is how we participate in the Mass, this is how, day after day, communion after communion, we let ourselves be eaten by Jesus, assimilated, transformed by Him, so that our life may become what it must be: a Eucharist in the great and eternal Eucharist of the Son.

#### **4/ Mens impletur gratia**

This assimilation to Christ is precisely the meaning of the formula that might seem abstract: 'mens impletur gratia'. Grace is not just a little help from the Lord. It is the very life of God, communicated to us by Christ, who in his own humanity anointed by the Spirit is full of grace and therefore able to be the source of all graces for humanity. Saint Augustine helps us to understand how the Eucharist sanctifies us by assimilating us to Christ, the source of divine life. He heard Christ say, "I am the food of the great. Grow up, and you will eat me. And it will not be me who will be transformed into you, as the food of your flesh; but you will be transformed into me" (*Confessions* VII, 10, 16). In nature, it is the strongest who eats the weakest, that is, transforms him into himself. Consequently, it is we who are "eaten" by Christ, who become members of his body when we communicate. This assimilation to Christ is the key to all the effects attributed to Eucharistic communion, as described by Saint Thomas, for example, in *Sum. theol.*, IIIa, q. 79, a. 1 :

"The effect of this sacrament must be deduced first and foremost from what is contained in this sacrament, namely, from Christ. He, as coming visibly into the world brought life to it, according to the words of the Gospel: 'Grace and truth have been given by Jesus Christ'; so

coming sacramentally into man produces *the life of grace*, in accordance with the words of the Lord: 'Whoever eats me shall live by me' [...]. [...].

Second, the effect of this sacrament is deduced from what the sacrament represents, that is, from the passion of Christ [...]. That is, the effect that the passion of Christ produced in the world, this sacrament produces in the individual man. [...].

Third, the effect of this sacrament can be detected by the manner in which it is offered, that is, in the form of food and drink. All the effects, therefore, that material food and drink produce in the life of the body, that is, sustenance, development, repair and taste, this sacrament also produces in the spiritual life. [...]. This is why the Lord himself said: 'My flesh is true food and my blood is true drink'.

Fourth, the effect of this sacrament can be inferred from the species under which it is given to us. St. Augustine observes in this regard: 'Our Lord entrusted his body and blood to us by using substances that owe their unity to a plurality of things: the first in fact', that is, the bread, 'becomes one substance from many grains; the second', that is, the wine, 'becomes it from the confluence of many grains of grapes'. And for this reason elsewhere he exclaims: 'O sacrament of piety, sign of unity, O bond of charity!'. ”

The Eucharist signifies and produces the unity of the Church (*res signata et non contenta*). We form one (mystical) body because we participate in the one body of Christ received in communion. Therefore, concrete fraternal communion among those who take communion is not an option. It is simultaneously a requirement (a disposition) and an effect of the Eucharist. Participating in a banquet is not the same thing as eating one's sandwich alone in a corner. Therefore, the Eucharistic celebration has links with the sharing of the (profane) meal. Hence the fraternal agape of the first Christians around the Eucharist. Hence the sacralization of meals in religious life. It is not just a matter of nourishment, but of implementing fraternal communion. It is not by chance that the Dominican Order has chosen the theme "At Table with St. Dominic" to celebrate its centenary. St. Dominic performed a miracle precisely in the refectory as the "sacred" place of the community, the effect of Eucharistic communion.

## **5/ Futurae gloriae nobis pignus datur**

The life of grace is a dynamic reality. It is like a seed destined to blossom into eternal life for the soul as well as the body. The Eucharistic meal is therefore all ordered to the eschatological banquet. There is, in fact, at least one common point between these two masterpieces of world literature, I mean on the one hand the Bible and on the other *the adventures of Asterix the Gaul*. Both always end with a sumptuous banquet. The only difference is that in the Bible even the bards and bad singers participate. Indeed, festive meals are the quintessential symbol of joy in unity and

fellowship. That is why the new world prepared by God for us - the Kingdom of God - is presented to us in the form of the marriage supper of the Lamb. However, since we are already peckish down here and need to gather strength to walk, the wedding supper is anticipated, we anticipate it in the celebration of the Mass.

To conclude, I would like to point out a verse of the Song of Songs which at first glance seems quite trivial but which seems to have nourished the Eucharistic devotion of Saint Thomas. You may know that for the patristic and medieval tradition the three books of Solomon - Proverbs, Ecclesiastes or Qoelet and the Song of Songs - correspond to the three stages of spiritual life. Beginners (*incipientes*) use Proverbs to get their lives ethically right. Progressives (*proficientes*) use Qoelet to correctly evaluate the things of down here and detach themselves from them. Finally, the perfect (*perfecti*) already enjoy the union to God expressed by the union of lovers in the Song. Thus, the Canticle is the culmination of the spiritual journey. Now, St. Thomas often quotes *Ct* 5:1 - "Eat, O friends, and drink, and be inebriated, my dearly beloved" (13 occurrences in his work) - to emphasize the link between the Eucharist and the perfection of the spiritual life. In fact, in the first place, the verse invites to eat and drink, which evokes the twofold matter of the Eucharistic meal: bread and wine, which become the Body and Blood of Christ. Secondly, the invitation is doubly associated with the theme of love: on the one hand, it is addressed to friends, to loved ones, and, on the other, the drink leads to intoxication, which, according to Thomas, is one of the greatest effects of love, that is, the ecstatic character (love brings us out of ourselves). It is therefore not surprising that this verse from the Canticle is evoked in the *Summa of Theology* to signify the effect of grace of Eucharistic communion. Thomas intends to show that the Eucharist not only gives us the capacity to love but also impels us to love:

“Through this sacrament, as far as its power is concerned, not only is the habit of grace and of virtue bestowed, but it is furthermore aroused to act, according to 2 Cor. 5:14: "The charity of Christ presseth us." Hence it is that the soul is spiritually nourished through the power of this sacrament, by being spiritually gladdened, and as it were inebriated with the sweetness of the Divine goodness, according to Cant 5:1: "Eat, O friends, and drink, and be inebriated, my dearly beloved." (IIIa, q. 79, a. 1, ad 2).

