

## **HOMILY BY CARDINAL RODRÍGUEZ MARADIAGA**

*"There is a profound relationship between celebrating  
the Eucharist and proclaiming Christ"*

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The Liturgy tells us that the saints fulfil a triple function in the Church: the example of their lives, the help of their intercession and the sharing of their destiny.

The first reading can be applied to the life of Saint Anthony who was anointed at Baptism, Confirmation and Priestly Ordination to 'bring the good news to the poor, to heal the broken-hearted, to comfort the afflicted' and to spread the Grace of the Lord. Like the disciples of the Gospel, he left his native Portugal and as an authentic follower of Saint Francis, enriched thousands of Christians through his own poverty. There are many edifying examples in his life but in the context of a Eucharistic Congress, I wish to concentrate on the following theme. – 'Saint Anthony of Padua lived an intimate and passionate personal relationship with the Eucharist; This Divine Sacrament marked his days, filling them with confident hope'.

Face to face with the movement of the Cathars which rejected the sacraments, Saint Anthony was a witness to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist: 'Yes, I firmly believe and vocally profess that that body which was born of the Virgin, hung on the cross, lay in the grave, was raised up on the third day and ascended to heaven to the right hand of the Father, that same body was truly given to the Apostles and this very same reality is brought about each day by the Church and given to the faithful.....'.

To counteract the influence of the Patarina Heresy (a reformist movement that began in the North of Italy) and which had disfigured the dogma of the Real Presence, reducing the Eucharist to a simple historical evening meal, 'just a mere memory', Saint Anthony, preaching one day in Rimini fully illustrated the reality of the presence of Jesus in the Sacred Host. However, the leaders of the heresy did not accept the reasoning put forward by the Saint, and tried to discredit his arguments. One of the leaders said to him. 'Fewer words now: if you want me to believe in this mystery, you will have to do the following miracle: I have a mule. I will keep her without food for three consecutive days. When the three days are passed we will come before her together, I with the grass and you with the sacrament. If the mule disregards the grass and goes and kneels and adores 'your bread', I will then adore it myself. The Saint accepted the challenge and went away to implore God's help through prayer, fasting and penances.

For three days, the heretic deprived his mule of all food and then brought her out to the public square. At the same time, Saint Anthony came into the square on the opposite side, carrying in his hands a monstrance with the Body of Christ; all this in the presence of a multitude of people eager to know the result of this extraordinary challenge accepted by the Franciscan saint. Saint Anthony faced the hungry animal, and speaking to her, said: "In the name of that Lord whom I, although unworthy, hold in my hands, I command you to come and show reverence to your Creator, so that the malice of the heretics may be confounded and that all understand the truth of this most holy Sacrament which we the priests handle at the altar and (by which) all creatures are subject to their Creator".

While the Saint spoke these words, the heretic was throwing barley to the mule so that it would eat, but the mule giving no attention to the food came forward step by step as if it had the use of reason and respectfully genuflected on both knees before the Saint who

held elevated the Sacred Host and remained in that position until Saint Anthony gave it permission to get up.

The heretic, Bonvillo by name, fulfilled his promise and converted with all his heart to the catholic faith: The heretics recanted their errors and Saint Anthony, after giving the blessing with the Blessed Sacrament amid great applause and cheers, carried the monstrance in procession to the church where he gave thanks to God for the miracle and the conversion of so many brothers.

Beyond a spectacular miracle, what Saint Anthony taught regarding the Eucharist is the doctrine of the Church. First of all, it is a gift of the Lord, of which the priest is not the owner but the servant. The Eucharist is the most splendid Sacrament of the Presence of Christ; it is inevitable that the Eucharist has a transformative action in the heart of anyone who lives it. The Eucharist is a gift of love which will be only fully understood in eternity.

Blessed John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter 'Ecclesia de Eucharistia' (2003) recalls that the church 'draws her life from the Eucharist and has placed this sacrament at the centre of its pastoral ministry. In the Eucharist, Christ gives his body and his blood for the life of humanity. And those who are nourished in a dignified way at the table become living instruments of His loving, merciful and peace-bringing presence.

Saint Paul reminds the Christians of Corinth that the evening meal of the Lord is not just a fellowship event; it is also a memorial of the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. "So, then, whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes". Who so ever takes part in it, is united to the mystery of the death of the Lord and is transformed into being its 'missionary'.

There is a profound relationship between celebrating the Eucharist and proclaiming Christ. To enter into communion with Him means, at the same time, to be transformed into missionaries of the event that the celebration makes real. It involves making it contemporary in every age, until the Lord comes.

For that reason the saints, each one in a unique way in his or her own particular context, reveals or manifests Christ. Saint Anthony of Padua lived an intimate and passionate personal relationship with the Eucharist; which marked his life, filling it with confident hope'.

The life of Anthony of Padua, so rich in supernatural gifts and in extraordinary happenings, was founded on a radical Eucharistic piety. The expression 'You yourselves, give them something to eat' (Lk.9:13) had a great significance in his own life, since in the many situations in which a multiplication of bread did happen, there was to be seen a consistent extension of his intense union with Christ and of his uninterrupted prayer.

Christ, 'the living bread that has come down from Heaven', is the only one who can alleviate the hunger of the human person at all times and in all places of the earth. He cannot do it alone, however, and for that reason, as in the multiplication of the bread, He involves the disciples: "He then took the five loaves and two fish and, raising His eyes to heaven, pronounced a blessing over them; He broke them and gave them to the disciples to distribute to the crowd". (Lk.9:16). This powerful sign is an image of that wonderful mystery of love which is renewed every day in the Holy Mass: through the ministry of the priest. Christ gives His body and His blood for the life of humanity. And those who are

worthily participate at the table become living instruments of His loving, merciful and peace-bringing presence.

Saint Anthony was the first to teach theology in the Franciscan Order. For him, to preach Christ is to understand and explain Him through the mystery of the Eucharist, by living in complete consistency, his union with Christ alive and present in the Most Holy Sacrament. He used to say “he endeavours in vain to spread the Christian doctrine who contradicts it by his works”: hence his long hours of contemplation and profound loving silence before the presence of Jesus in the Tabernacle. His personal devotion was the most convincing way of preaching what he believed: that Jesus is present in the most Holy Sacrament of the Altar. The strength and the abundance of miracles in his life, have their source and deep foundation in his profound Eucharistic life. The Eucharist, celebrated and adored, is the beginning of the configuration with Christ.

In our times we do not, perhaps, have the heresies of the past, but rather praxis of indifference. The Sacred Eucharist is simply ignored and does not occupy an important place for the great majority of people, who may not say it in words but they bring to mind the words of the Israelites in the desert “We are disgusted with that bread without yeast”. (Num.21.5) The purpose of an International Eucharistic Congress is to help us live better every day the faith of the Church in the Blessed Sacrament. Through the intercession of Saint Anthony may we be able, day by day, to give to the Sacrament of the Altar a more central place in our lives, and may we nourish through that Sacrament a Christian way of life which bears fruit in love and solidarity. Just as we requested in the opening prayer of the Mass: “Grant that with the assistance and intercession of this outstanding preacher, as we follow the teachings of the Christian life, we may know your help in every trial”. Amen