

Assistant Pastor's Column

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SUNDAY, APRIL 1, 2007

The Pope's New Document: *Sacramentum Caritatis* *Post-Synodal Exhortation on the Eucharist... Important for Holy Week*

Many of you by now have probably heard about the Pope's recent document on the Eucharist. They call it a "post-synodal document." A synod is a gathering of some sort under ecclesiastical authority. It's etymological root is Greek; it corresponds to the Latin word *concilium*, which is translated usually as either "council" or "committee."

When a synod or council includes the Pope and all the bishops of the world – even if a fraction are absent – it is referred to as "ecumenical." There have been 21 ecumenical councils, and the latest of these was Vatican II. Councils at Nicea and Constantinople, for example, in the first centuries gave us the Creed we pray every Sunday.

On October 23, 2005, Pope Benedict XVI concluded a Synod convened to discuss the Eucharist. An immediate document was produced, with the promise that a much more developed document would follow. You may remember the immediate document, because the Synod fathers had included, among a long list of points, the reiteration of Church discipline, as stated in Canon Law, that those who live in public scandal should not be admitted to communion. By doing so, of course, the Church distinguishes those in grave sin, who should themselves refrain from holy communion until they have confessed; and those who cause grave scandal. This item was all over the news, and those handful of American Bishops who dissented from this norm caused great sadness to the whole Church. Since this media event, the Synod and its effects have been treated with silence.

This new document, named *Sacramentum caritatis* ("Sacrament of Charity") promulgated only weeks ago, summarizes and re-proposes the

Church's teaching on the Holy Eucharist. The Pope, by the request of the Synod bishops, took care to draw the link between the Eucharistic mystery itself, the liturgical action, and the worship of the sacrament of charity. Many had hoped that in this document the Pope would free the Tridentine Mass, so that any priest could use the 1962 Missal instead of the Vatican II order of the Mass at will. Others

hoped this document would address the countless scandals, heresies and abuses of the Eucharist and of Mass. Rather than present itself as a disciplinary document, SC re-states the timeless and immutable teachings of the Church regarding the Eucharist, in the manner of a magnificent summary and fabulous spiritual reading.

I encourage you, Gentle Reader, to take some time, especially during Holy Week, to read what the Pope offers. The great liturgy of Holy Week, starting with Palm Sunday and finishing with the Resurrection on Easter is surrounded and impregnated with Eucharistic worship. The Last Supper was, in fact, the first Mass, by which Jesus mystically anticipated his sacrifice on the cross; even Jesus' washing of the Apostles feet was foretold by the ablutions of the Levitical priesthood before they offered the sacrifice in the temple. The Eucharist is the source, summit and goal of everything in the Church, for in the Eucharist, God is present in the most unique way. God is present to everything in the universe as cause; he is present to those who are baptized and in grace as divine indwelling; he is present in the Eucharist as substance. Yes, in the Eucharist, we see and touch our God and Creator!

May this Holy Week, then, be full of both devotion to the Holy Eucharist and Charity, the two themes our Holy Father has so strongly stressed since the very beginning of his pontificate.



Jacopo Bassano, *Last Supper*, 1542; Oil on canvas; Galleria Borghese, Rome