

## CHAPTER 6

### THE EUCHARIST AS A SACRAMENT OF UNITY: TOWARDS BUILDING A EUCHARISTIC DIOCESE AT 20 AND BEYOND

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#### **Introduction**

In these age and time marked heavily by disunity, an exponential increase in cultural and class consciousness, it is especially urgent that we understand and embrace the full significance of the Church's Eucharistic teaching and its implications for all who partake in the Eucharistic food. St. Paul speaking to the church of Ephesus urged them to preserve the unity of the spirit through the bond of peace, since "we are one body and one spirit."<sup>1</sup> As a Eucharistic people, we are called to be a sacrament – a living and efficacious sign of unity- in a fractured world. In a world wounded by the claws of division, inordinate ambition, unhealthy competition, quest for position and craze for recognition and popularity; the Eucharist becomes a precious gift that can help heal the wounds that these cravings may inflict on human relationships.

Undoubtedly, at the heart of the Church's life is the Eucharist, the sacrament of unity and charity. The Eucharist is a share in the banquet of the Lord's sacrificial love. Some ancient Christian writers will often say, "The Eucharist makes the Church". This goes to say that the church cannot exist without the Eucharist.

Obviously, in this world, the Church's unity will always be imperfect. This makes the admonition of St. Paul that we all strive for unity, incontestable. This is the more reason why we are encouraged to open our hearts anew to the Eucharist, the source of our unity and strength which we need to build up the unity of the church, the Body of Christ, in our diocese. This chapter, therefore, brings a general understanding of the concept of unity, the Eucharist, the character of a Eucharistic Diocese and some pastoral strategies to keep the Diocese of Auchi in her existing Eucharistic life.

### **Unity: General Understanding**

Unity entails absence of diversity. It means unvaried or uniform character. Unity involves not only being one in spirit. Unity is a "state of being one; singleness. A whole made up of separate elements for continuity of purpose and action. It is a quality or condition of being one in feeling, action and purpose.<sup>2</sup> This is to say, in unity there is a common life and a common mission. All who are united feel a sense of responsibility towards one another. It is an attitude of seeing the other as you; of working for the good of the other since unity entails togetherness. In unity what affects one affects the other.

It is a condition of appearing individually in collectivity. Even though there may be individual differences or uniqueness this does not become an obstacle rather, the common interest always ranks higher than individual interests, since the individual within this union belong to the whole.

The Diocese is a community. A territory defined by communion and mission. All in the diocese; Bishop, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful are to live a communitarian life. That which makes a gathering of people a community is not just the sharing of the same cup or the eating of the same food or the wearing of the same clothes or habits. Rather, the care of community life in the fraternal bond of charity, that unites the members disposing them to genuinely wish each other well, while making efforts not to hurt another member deliberately, but positively and concretely doing good to each other. The ability to corporate is shown in genuine appreciation of others.<sup>3</sup>

## **Cooperation as a Product of Unity**

The people of God in the Diocese are to see themselves as one, in vision and mission. Collaboration or cooperation is not a strange concept in ecclesiastical domain. Collaborative ministry is greatly extolled in the church of our time. Cooperation is necessary if the diocese is to achieve the common goal effectively. In the spirit of collaboration and cooperation the Diocesan Bishop is expected to encourage collaboration with his priests and the people of God.

Sheen while contributing to collaboration among priests in a diocese is of the opinion that this principle of collaboration among priest, implies joining together in a non-competitive, noncontrolling way, so that all who have dedicated themselves to the gospel may do this truth together in love, without blocking one another, without suppressing diverse talents and skills<sup>4</sup>

For Euart, collaboration in the Church is a serious business that requires direct personal effort, since the complexity of collaboration makes it something that can be easily avoided. It is not something that first happens, we must intend for it to happen, and work hard to make it happen.<sup>5</sup>

Collaboration requires invitation. It calls for first, communication and a good deal of humility. In the Eucharist we see the importance of collaboration. It should enhance our desire to be there for one another. To assist one another since we all have a common goal. Definitely, unity in the church is of great essence. In unity there is mutual assistance and benefit.

## **The Eucharist: Meaning and Implications**

The Eucharist is our new Passover. Just as the Passover recalled and made present the Exodus from bondage in Egypt, the new Passover recalls and makes present a new Exodus from the bondage of sin and eternal death<sup>6</sup> The Eucharist invites us to become like Christ. It is the food of the soul. It nourishes our souls and gives strength to our weak bodies drained by sin. When we eat physical food, it nourishes our bodies and the food becomes part of us. But in the Eucharist, our

spiritual food, it does not become part of us but we become the Eucharist, we become Christ that we consume. For example, when we eat rice we do not become rice, but when we consume the Eucharist, we become what we consume- Christ.

The Holy Eucharist occupies a position of primacy among the seven sacraments. This is evident in the teaching and practice of the Church dating back to the apostolic times. We are told that the first Christian community remained “faithful to the breaking of the bread”. Even the two disciples as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles who went to Emmaus recognized Jesus only at the breaking of the bread<sup>7</sup>. The council of Trent spoke extensively on the excellence of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist in her document, “*De Excellentia Sacctissimae Eucharistiae*”<sup>7</sup> The fathers of the second Vatican Council taught that the Holy Eucharist is the source and summit (*fons et culmen*) of the entire Christian life, because in it the faithful offer the divine victim to God and offer themselves along with it<sup>8</sup>.

In the teaching of the Catholic Church, the Holy Eucharist is the TRUE body and blood of Jesus Christ. In the Eucharist, Christ is fully, truly, substantially and permanently present. This teaching has its foundation in the words of Jesus on the night before he suffered, “Jesus took bread, said the blessing broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, Take and eat, this is my body. Then he took the cup gave thanks and gave it to them saying, drink from it all of you for this is my blood (Matthew 26: 26-28). Earlier on, Jesus had told the crowd that unless they eat his flesh and drink his blood they will not have life in them and after this many stopped following him. Jesus did not change the teaching so that they may come back to him; rather he turned to the twelve and said, do you also want to leave? ( John 6:22-68). Many today have left the church because of this belief.

It is Jesus who instituted the Holy Eucharist and we are to believe what he says that the Holy Eucharist is.

### **St. Paul on the Eucharist**

St. Paul in his letter to the church of Corinth states, “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the Blood of Christ?; the bread that we break, is it not a participation in the Body of Christ? Because

this loaf is one, we, though many are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.<sup>10</sup> As we partake in the Eucharist, we become Christ who loved the world so much that he died on the cross for our sake. This love of Christ shared on the altar of the cross of Calvary spurs us to become one with others. It calls us to share our lives in charity with others. In this sharing, there is mutual consideration. So that though we are many who partake in the Eucharist, yet we become one by the power of the One who we share in the one bread and the one cup. The Eucharist transforms us to become Christ who loved the world until the end, Christ who forgave all who crucified him. Christ who died so that we might live. Christ who sleeps on the cross so that we might wake up from our sleeps and so experience Eternal life. If we really understand what we consume and allow ourselves to be transformed by what we consume, we will become a Eucharistic diocese; a diocese, where bitterness will give way to forgiveness. We will become a people of God united in Christ, and then division will give way to unity, animosity and enmity will give way to love and oneness.

From the earliest Christian documents, such as the *Didache* the understanding follows this pattern: that the bread and wine that is blessed and consumed at the end of the Passover had a more real connection with Christ. The *Didache* emphasized the importance of a proper disposition if this is to have its effect. This includes “confessing transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure”<sup>9</sup>. Only the baptized were permitted to receive the Eucharist. No one was to eat or drink the thanksgiving (Eucharist) but them who have been baptized into the name of the hope.<sup>10</sup>

In his letter of 29<sup>th</sup> June, 2022 **Desiderio Desideravi (I have earnestly desired)**, Pope Francis desires that the church embraces the unity of the Eucharist. For him, The Eucharist is essential to the life of the church. In the Eucharist; we are guaranteed the possibility of encountering the Lord Jesus and of having the power of his paschal mystery reach us. He wrote, but this is done not as individuals but as a community. The liturgy does not say, “I but “we”<sup>11</sup> The Holy Father

connects the Eucharist to Pentecost. According to the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, the Christian community received the spirit after Jesus ascended into Heaven. “It is the community of Pentecost that is able to break the bread in the certain knowledge that the Lord is always risen from the dead, present with his word, with his gestures, with the offering of his Body and Blood. Citing Pope Leo the Great he says, “Our participation in the Body and Blood of Christ has no other end than to make us become that which we eat.”

Sadly, there is so much ignorance among Catholics about the teaching on the Holy Eucharist. Many still think that the purpose of the Eucharist is to make Christ present on the altar so that we can adore Him. The Holy Eucharist is far more than this. More importantly, the Eucharist is where the Christian community remembers the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, giving praise and thanks to the father, unite itself with the sacrifice of Christ and asks that the spirit transforms us into the body of Christ so that we can continue His mission on earth.

Our participation in the Eucharist initiates both a vertical and horizontal *Koinonia*. In the vertical dimension, it makes us one with the Divine mystery, while in the horizontal or ecclesial dimension; it is capable of uniting all who partake of the same table in a bond of love “we who are many are one body since we are partakers of the one bread”.<sup>14</sup>In the early church we are told that they devoted themselves to the teachings of the Apostles and fellowship; to the breaking of bread and prayers and all who believed were together and had all things in common.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> 1 Cor. 10:17

<sup>15</sup> Acts 2:42-44

The profound meaning of the Eucharist is deemed when it is celebrated without taking into account the demands of charity and communion. St. Paul decried the faction and division that existed in the church of Corinth and so asked“... is it is not the Lord’s Supper that you eat?”<sup>16</sup> That is why in the liturgy we pray, “Grant that we, who are nourished

by the body and blood of your son, may be filled with his Holy Spirit and may become one body, one spirit in Christ.<sup>17</sup>

### **The Eucharist: Sacrifice of the New Law**

As in other religions, in the Jewish religion, different types of sacrifices were offered. Often times, the victims offered to God were animals such as lambs or calves, as well as agricultural produce. Thus, Abel used to offer lamb from his flock and Melchizedek, priest and king of Salem used to offer bread and wine.

However, the great sacrifice which was pleasing to God was that of Christ, His Son. Under the New Law, Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross for us, and in his infinite mercy wanted this sacrifice to be re-presented and renewed in the mass. It is good to note here that, sacrifice is an act by which humans acknowledge God as Lord and creator of everything. The victims killed or destroyed in the sacrifice represent the offering of oneself in reparation for one's sins and to bring one's prayers before the Lord.

<sup>16</sup> 1 Cor. 11:20

<sup>17</sup> Eucharistic Prayer III

The sacrifice of the New Law or the sacrifice of the Cross, which began during the Last Supper that Jesus, had with his disciples, when at the time that he changed the bread into His holy Body, he told them, "This is my Body. This is the cup of my Blood. The Holy Body through which Jesus suffered his passion, and the Blood he shed in the sacrifice of Calvary, are also present under the species of the bread and wine he consecrated in the cenacle and offered up as the victim of his sacrifice.

The same sacrifice, initiated in the cenacle and consummated on the cross, is re-presented and renewed in a sacramental way and without shedding of blood at every mass which is celebrated, with the words, "do this in memory of me,"<sup>12</sup> Jesus clearly showed that he wanted this to continue until the end of time and instructed the Apostles and their successors to carry out his command. This therefore, is not

just a remembrance or symbol of the sacrifice of the passion and death of our Lord, but that sacrifice that once took place on Calvary is made present every time the Eucharistic sacrifice is celebrated.

The Eucharist brings about communion between Christ and the communicant and also with our neighbor, that is, with the members of the mystical Body of Christ. It is the best nourishment for the spiritual life of the communicant. Communion is a social sacrament as those who take part in this meal grow nearer to Christ and, at the same time, grow in unity among themselves.

Apparently, this sacrament requires a lot of preparation. St. Paul urges us to examine our conscience closely: “Anyone who eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will be behaving unworthily towards the Body and Blood of the Lord.”<sup>13</sup> In itself, the mass, with the readings from Sacred Scriptures and the beautiful liturgical prayers and, given that we take full and active part in it, can serve as an appropriate preparation for communion.

Catholics who receive communion strongly believe that Christ, truly present in the sacred host they receive at communion remain in them and it is appropriate for them to give thanks and ask for the graces they need. It is therefore not fitting for a communicant to leave church immediately after communion and totally forget that which has taken place within him through communion. Thus, after communion there should be some moments of silent reflection and prayer of thanksgiving. At the end of the mass, Jesus remains with us under the species of the consecrated Host which is kept in the tabernacle in our churches. As Pope Paul VI tells us in the **Declaration of Faith**, June 30, 1968:

After the sacrifice, the existence remains present in the sacred sacrament which is kept in the Tabernacle as the beating heart of all churches. Therefore, it is indeed a sacred duty for us to honour and worship in the sacred Host that we see with our eyes, the incarnate Word

himself that we cannot see and who, without leaving heaven, has become present to us.”

## **THE CHARACTER OF A EUCHARISTIC DIOCESE**

A diocese is a portion of the People of God (*portio populi Dei*) which is entrusted to a bishop for him to shepherd with the cooperation of the presbyterorum<sup>20</sup>. The diocese is made up of a bishop, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful. In the diocese, the Eucharist is celebrated. According

<sup>2020</sup> Canon 369

to St. Thomas Aquinas, it is the greatest of the sacraments given. It is the one in which the Son of God himself is present with his body, blood, soul and divinity. The Eucharist brings about communion between Christ and the communicant and also with our neighbors, that is, with the members of the mystical Body of Christ. The Eucharist is a social sacrament as those who take part in this meal grow nearer to Christ and at the same time grow in unity among themselves. Becoming a Eucharistic diocese is becoming a united people. A diocese where the Bishop, priests, and consecrated persons live in unity and consequently a diocese where there is regard and reverence for sacred persons, places or things. A Eucharistic Diocese can become a true reflection of unity in diversity. The Holy Eucharist is a sign or symbol of unity. It is both a representation and an efficacious sign of unity.

This unity that the Eucharist signifies is two dimensional that is, vertical and horizontal. In the vertical dimension, the Eucharist is a sacrament of union with Christ and, through him, with the Blessed Trinity. The Eucharist unites us in Christ since it is the sacrament of His Body and Blood so that, those who participate in the Eucharist are brought into an intimate communion and fellowship with Christ. Then in the horizontal dimension, all who receive Holy Communion are brought into union with one another. Jesus Christ reveals this when he declared:

“Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them. Just as the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father so whoever eats me live because of me.” (John 6:56-57)

The Conciliar Fathers were so emphatic about the unity symbolized by the Eucharist. The council declared for instance, that the faithful who have already been consecrated in baptism and confirmation are fully incorporated in the Body of Christ by the reception of the Eucharist.<sup>1415</sup>

In the Horizontal dimension, the Holy Eucharist is a sacrament of the unity of the faithful and those who participate in the Eucharist and receive Holy Communion are united among themselves.

This is exactly what St. Paul means when he says; “The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body; for all partake of the one bread”.<sup>22</sup>

The Conciliar Fathers, described the Holy Eucharist as “a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity.”<sup>16</sup> Going further, “really sharing in the body of the Lord in the breaking of the

Eucharistic bread, we are taken up into communion with him and with one another.”<sup>17</sup> Through Holy Communion, Christ gives himself in a full union, unrealizable elsewhere in all of human experience, and that those who eat and drink Christ become brothers and sisters on a supernatural level.<sup>18</sup> If the Holy Eucharist is a sacrament of unity and a sign and symbol of the unity, then it will be a great aberration to celebrate it where unity is absent. Those who are not in union with Christ are not to commune; reasonably, it is encouraged to commune in a state of grace.

In this vein, someone who is not united with his fellow believers should not participate in the Eucharist. That is why Jesus our Lord and master tells us, “so when you are offering your gifts at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave

your gift there before the altar and go, first be reconciled to your brother or sister and then come back to offer your gift.<sup>19</sup>

## **SOME PASTORAL STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING A EUCHARISTIC DIOCESE: Auchi Diocese in View**

As the diocese of Auchi celebrates 20 years of her celebration of the Eucharist, it is expedient we relook some of the ways to building a Eucharistic diocese. These ways or strategies are discussed below:

### **A. Strengthening the Basic Christian Communities**

According to Pope St. John II,

“Right from the beginning, synod fathers recognize that the church as family cannot reach her full potential as church unless she is divided into communities small enough to foster close human relationships.<sup>20</sup>

We must pay close attention to basic Christian communities. These communities must be built on love and mutual concern. The members of these communities are to see themselves as one. If this bond of unity is established and then sustained by the celebration of the Eucharist and reception of Holy Communion, we will be on the path of unity that all who partake in the Eucharistic food are expected to foster.

### **B. Welcoming worshippers at Mass**

This could be done on a weekly basis or monthly basis as the case may be. It makes worshippers feel belonged in the church community and can nurture unity. Let everyone feel welcomed at the Eucharistic celebration. This will increase sensitivity in the church. Since the church is a family, all who belong to the family want to feel the warmth of the family. They want to be recognized and accepted into the family. This pastoral initiative may just be a way of nurturing the ‘seed’ of unity in the Christian family.

**C. Constituting effective Reconciliation committees at the Parish and Diocesan levels**

Every parish in the Diocese is to set up a committee for peace and reconciliation. This committee is to be functional. It should be made up of men and women of character and high repute. Conflicts arising among parishioners who partake of the same Eucharistic food are to be brought before the committee to see how these conflicts could be resolved and future reoccurrence avoided

**D. A Day of the Holy Eucharist in the Diocese**

Just as the Diocese observe the Marian Carnival annually and go on Marian Pilgrimage to Igarra. So too, a day is set aside for the Holy Eucharist During this celebration, the people of God can be allowed to give testimonies on the wonders of the Holy Eucharist in their lives. This will no doubt engender and strengthen the faith of others who may still have a weak faith in the Eucharist. On this day, we are to seat and talk on the Eucharist. Adore and worship the Eucharist and tell the world that Jesus is really and truly present in the Holy Eucharist

**E. Day of the Sacrament of Penance in the Diocese**

A. The connection between the sacrament of penance and the Eucharist is so obvious. The sacrament of penance prepares us for a worthy celebration of the Eucharist. We are to come together annually to talk on this sacrament and celebrate it. The diocese is to set a day aside for this purpose. It is necessary to stress the connection between these two sacraments. This is more important today as we see some Catholics who do not go to confession any more but receive Holy Communion even in a state of grave sin. Today we see a very high number coming forward for communion but only a few go to confession.

In Africa, we have the notion of corporate personality, in virtue of which the individual does not and cannot exist alone, except

corporately. It is simply a part of a whole. The individual can only say “I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am.”<sup>21</sup>

As a people who value the human community as a place to actualize our personhood, it becomes less cumbersome to build a Eucharistic diocese. To make the Diocese a true reflection of an ideal human community, we must cultivate a Eucharistic spirituality which will help to enhance union with Christ and with one another, which the Eucharist symbolizes and effects.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The Eucharist, the source and summit of Christian worship, remains a veritable tool and source of unity for any gathering. In truth, no Eucharist, no Church. While the Savior is the noblest gift of the Father to humanity, the Eucharist is the noblest gift of the savior to humanity. In this fractured world, we are admonished to preserve the sacrament of unity (the Eucharist) as the ultimate panacea to our world. In doing this, this chapter underscores faithfulness to the practical pastoral strategies discuss above. There is no doubt it would bring people together, heal the gathered people and preserve them in the love which caused him his life. Since the past and the present of the diocese of Auchi has been sustained by the Eucharist, the chapter concludes that the diocese stays with the Eucharist with utmost vigilance, trust and obedience.

## **End Note**

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<sup>1</sup> Ephesian 4:4

<sup>2</sup> Webster’s dictionary 1078

<sup>3</sup> Mary Gerard Nwagwu *Rights and Obligations in the church* 100

<sup>4</sup> Rosetti Stephen, *The Joy of Priesthood*11

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Aniagwu John, *Reflections on priestly Life and Ministry* 22

<sup>6</sup> Pimentel, Stephen, The Today Sacrifice as pattern for the Eucharist Inside the Catholic News 16, no3 (2008) 44-47 <sup>7</sup> Luke 24:31

<sup>7</sup> *Concillium Tridentium, Decretum de ss. Eucharistia*. Cap.3(Ds 1639-1641)

<sup>8</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, (1324-1327) <sup>10</sup> 1 Cor.

10:16-17

<sup>9</sup> Jurgen § 8

<sup>10</sup> Chapter 9

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Reese, Religionnews.com assessed 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 2023

<sup>12</sup> Lk. 22:19

<sup>13</sup> 1 Cor. 11: 29

<sup>14</sup> *Presbyterorum Ordinis* 5

<sup>15</sup> Cor 10: 11-17

<sup>16</sup> *Sacrosanctum Concilium* C 47

<sup>17</sup> **Lumen Gentium** 7

<sup>18</sup> *Lumen Gentium* 132, 133

<sup>19</sup> Matthew 5:23-24

<sup>20</sup> *Ecclesia De Eucharistia* 89

<sup>21</sup> John Mbiti *African Religions and Philosophy* 108