

# *THE SHAPE, SIGNIFICANCE AND ECCLESIAL IMPACT OF EUCHARISTIC CONGRESSES*

Presented by Archbishop Piero Marini, President of the Pontifical Committee for International Eucharistic Congresses, to the Irish Bishops' Conference (June 2009) in preparation for the 50<sup>th</sup> International Eucharistic Congress to be held in Dublin, Ireland (June 10-17, 2012).

## **I. THE SHAPE OF EUCHARISTIC CONGRESSES IN HISTORY AND AT THE PRESENT**

From the time they began in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, Eucharistic Congresses have had the scope of “making our Lord Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar ever better known, loved and served... and of working to extend his social reign in the world” (*General Rules of 1887*, art. 1). The historical root of Congresses consists, therefore, in this twofold dimension, represented by “**Eucharistic piety**” and “**the social aspect of the Eucharist**”. This twofold dimension has borne fruit in the International, National and Diocesan Eucharistic Congresses which in recent decades have characterised so many local Churches.

### *1. The development of “Eucharistic piety”*

The Work of International Eucharistic Congresses began in France in 1881 as a fruit of the Eucharistic apostolate of Saint Peter-Julian Eymard, “*the apostle of the Eucharist*” (1811-1868), and of other outstanding figures such as Blessed Antoine Chevrier (1826-1879), Léon Dupont (1797-1876) and Bishop Gaston Adrian de Ségur (1820-1880). Thanks to the insight and commitment of Miss Émilie-Marie Tamisier (1834-1910), her idea of “Eucharistic pilgrimages” gradually changed into Congresses of Eucharistic Works, which later came to be known as “Eucharistic Congresses”.

Immediately submitted to the Holy See, International Eucharistic Congresses appeared as public events focused on stimulating the faith of Catholics in the “Real Presence”, on promoting increased zeal for devotion to the Eucharist outside of Mass, and on proclaiming the social Kingship of Christ against the laicism then regnant.

Devotion to the Eucharist outside of Mass almost exclusively characterized the Eucharistic Congress movement up to the beginning of the twentieth century, when the movement became committed, under the impulse of Saint Pius X, to promoting frequent Communion and the First Communion of children.

During the pontificate of Pius XI, Eucharistic Congresses spread for the first time to countries outside Europe (the United States, Australia, Latin America, Asia...), combining Eucharistic piety with an emphasis on the missionary dimension of the Church.

In the aftermath of the Second World War, due to growing interaction between the Eucharistic Congresses and the movement of liturgical renewal, “Eucharistic piety” became definitively directed towards the celebration of Mass. The first Congress to benefit in a significant way from the influence

of the liturgical movement was that of Munich in 1960. From that time on, thanks to the intuition of Josef Andreas Jungmann, Eucharistic Congresses took the form of a *Statio: Statio orbis* or *nationis*<sup>1</sup>.

In recent decades, particularly as a result of the Second Vatican Council, “Eucharistic piety” was centred once again on the celebration itself, and thus became the attitude of the faithful who make the Eucharist – as the Paschal Sacrament of Christ sacrificed for the life of the world – the centre of their lives and the source of ecclesial communion. It is in this sense that the Ritual *De sacra communione et de cultu mysterii eucharistici extra Missam* has guided the “Eucharistic piety” of Congresses: “*Eucharistic Congresses have been introduced into the life of the Church in recent years as a special manifestation of Eucharistic worship. They should be considered as a kind of ‘station’ [‘statio’], that is, a pause of commitment and prayer, to which a community invites the universal Church, or a local Church invites other Churches of the same region or nation or even those of the entire world. The purpose is that the members of the Church join together in deepening some aspect of the Eucharistic mystery and express their worship publicly in the bond of charity and unity.*”(n. 109).

Consequently, a Eucharistic Congress, from its very preparatory stage, should give importance to:

- “*a thorough catechesis, adapted to the capacity of different groups, about the Eucharist, especially as the mystery of Christ living and working in the Church;*
- “*a more active participation in the liturgy, in order to encourage a reverent hearing of the word of God and the spirit of mutual love and community*” (ibid., 111).

The Ritual also offers clear guidelines about the way the Congress is to be celebrated:

- “*The celebration of the Eucharist should be the true centre and high point of the Congress, to which all the programs and the various devotional services should be directed;*
- “*Celebrations of the word of God, catechetical meetings, and public conferences should be planned to investigate thoroughly the theme of the Congress and to set out more clearly the ways for carrying out its practical implications in a concrete way;*
- “*There should be an opportune programme for people to gather for prayer and extended adoration in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament exposed at designated churches that are especially suited to this form of piety.*” (ibid., 112).

In a word, the Eucharistic *celebration* is now at the centre of the preparation and celebration of the Congress, and all the expressions of worship that traditionally characterise this international event (adoration outside of Mass, processions...) must be related to it. To this end, Eucharistic Congresses have the sensitive and decisive task of pioneering new forms and new ways of embodying Eucharistic adoration, which is indisputably the proper symbol of Eucharistic worship in the Catholic tradition.

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. E. Vecchi, *La dimensione sociale dell'Eucaristia. Storia, radici e tradizione dei Congressi Eucaristici*, Ponteranica 2004. [*The social dimension of the Eucharist. History, roots and tradition of the Eucharistic Congresses.*]

## ***2. The “social dimension” of the Eucharist***

The cultic aspect of Eucharistic Congresses was linked from the very beginning to the advancement of “the social reign of Christ”. This formula sought to open a path for the public affirmation of the faith and the mobilization of the Catholic laity, who were often oppressed, above all in France, by the movements of anticlericalism and laicism.

Pope Leo XIII himself gave his blessing to the Work of International Eucharistic Congresses and supported the celebration of national Congresses, the first of which was held in Naples, Italy, in 1891. He thus gave an effective impulse towards a renewed religious sense at the end of the century, to recovering essential Christian themes and to laying the foundations for a new Christian presence in society. In this way he reopened the way to the social commitment of Catholics who were often marginalised by the rise of a secularist culture.

The semantic range of the expression “social reign of Christ” is now understood in relation to the “social dimension” of the Eucharist and the social ethics arising from the fruitful celebration of this sacrament. The Body of Christ given for the life of the world is perceived as a summons to work for the building of a new world.

This call found full expression in the Congresses held in the wake of the Council, beginning with that of Bombay (1964), and then in Bogotá (1968) and Philadelphia (1976).

In today’s Church the social dimension of the sacrament is seen above all as:

- *a conviction that the Church has received in the Eucharist the genetic code of its identity, the complete gift that sets it before the world as the “Body of Christ”, the “sacrament of salvation”.*

From this comes the call to bring about not only a moral and interior transformation, but also a social and cultural one. It is thus correct to speak of a genuine Eucharistic *ethos*. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, the holiness of the Eucharistic gifts is nothing other than the epiphany of God’s holiness, the holiness of the Church and the sanctity of Christians with regard to all worldly realities.

- *an orientation of all dimensions of Christian living, including its social aspects, starting from the Eucharist, in the context of the conciliar ecclesiology and the correct relation of the Church to the world, on the basis of its “Eucharistic form” (Sacramentum caritatis, 70-83).*

- *a fostering of the centrality and dignity of the human person.*

Before the Lord of history and the future of the world, the suffering of the poor, the ever more numerous victims of injustice and all the forgotten people of the earth, cannot be alien to the celebration of the Eucharistic mystery, which commits baptised persons to work for justice and the transformation of the world in an active and conscious way (cf. *Message of the Synod of Bishops to the People of God*, 22 October 2005).

## ***3. The pastoral dimension***

To the twofold historical dimension of the Congresses (i.e., Eucharistic piety and social commitment), it is nowadays necessary to add the pastoral significance of every gathering as a *Statio*. This dimension represents a call to reinstitute the deep bond between Eucharist and Church, and to emphasise the fundamental role of this sacrament in every activity of the Church.

If the Church has its principle and form in the Eucharist, the Eucharist must be considered the principle and form which inspires pastoral action, of that “new evangelisation” which is the distinctive feature of the Church’s activity in these recent decades.

## II. THE MEANING OF A CONGRESS

The “*Statio orbis*” which the Irish Church – and Dublin in particular – is preparing, is a specific moment in the journey of the universal Church. It is an occasion for a pilgrim “gathering” of the faithful from every part of the world, an *authentic sign of faith and charity in communion* offered by the believers of this country to all mankind. This sign will be all the more effective in so far as the following points are taken into account.

### ***1. The IEC calls for an ongoing renewal of Eucharistic life***

The International Eucharistic Congress (IEC) is not a triumphalistic manifestation of faith, a great act of homage shown to the Eucharist, but a grace for the ongoing renewal of the Eucharistic life of all the People of God. We are helped to appreciate this understanding by the following conciliar documents and recent statements of the Magisterium: the Instruction *De cultu mysterii eucharistici* (1967); the *Institutio generalis Missalis Romani* (1969); the Roman Ritual *De Communione et de Cultu Mysterii Eucharistici extra Missam* (1973); the Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (2003); the Instruction *Redemptionis Sacramentum* (2004); and the Apostolic Letter *Mane Nobiscum Domine* (2004). Furthermore, there is the teaching of the recent Synod on the Eucharist synthesized in the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Benedict XVI *Sacramentum caritatis*, in which the Eucharistic celebration and all its implications (“Eucharistic spirituality”, a “Eucharistic form” of life, “spiritual worship”...) are described as entrusted to God’s People so that they can become a life-giving reality.

### ***2. The IEC is at the service of the People of God***

The IEC is not a privilege bestowed on Dublin, but a service to the continuing journey of God’s People. Eucharistic life is not “something extra”, something that remains on the sidelines of the various activities that every Particular Church is called to carry out. Rather, it is the source and summit of the life and activity of all the baptised.

### ***3. The IEC is an opportunity for formation***

The celebration of a Congress is not restricted to its closing week, but is concretely expressed throughout at least a two-year journey of preparation. Along this journey what is celebrated in the concluding days is more deeply understood and lived out. Hence a special effort is necessary to ensure the formation of pastors and faithful by means of all the usual instruments of diocesan and parochial catechesis, by guidelines and well-chosen contacts, helped by the mass-media, so that the people of God can draw ever closer to an authentic appreciation of the sacrament given for the life of the world.

It should not be forgotten, however, that the closing week also must have a strong formative value by providing a solid catechesis, committed testimonies and exemplary celebrations of the sacred mysteries.

### **III. THE IMPACT OF EUCHARISTIC CONGRESSES ON ECCLESIAL LIFE**

#### ***1. On the fiftieth anniversary of the Second Vatican Council***

Every International Eucharistic Congress has a profound impact on the life of the Church, even if this is not always easy to measure. The impact of the Congress of Dublin will be all the greater, since it will be the fiftieth IEC, coinciding with the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. This is therefore an occasion to remember an ecclesial event that, in continuity with the tradition of the Church, was able to welcome the positive aspects of modernity and to evaluate them in the light of the Gospel, for the sake of proclaiming salvation to the women and men of our time.

Therefore, the Congress of 2012, precisely because of its international character, can become an important means of promoting an exemplary and fruitful celebration of the conciliar Liturgy; a renewed catechesis concerning the Eucharistic mystery and its social, ethical and cultural implications; and an ever more authentic worship of the Mystery of Faith, the source and summit of ecclesial life.

Apart from the significance of this particular anniversary, International Eucharistic Congresses have always had an impact on the life of the Church. The following are some memorable aspects that have been historically demonstrated.

#### ***2. The centrality of the celebration***

After focusing for the first thirty years on Eucharistic works, that is, on Eucharistic worship outside Mass and all related cultic and social activities, Eucharistic Congresses came to the support of the Magisterium's efforts to offer an ever-wider access to the grace of the sacrament. Thus, at the time of Saint Pius X, they encouraged the effort to lower the age for children to receive their First Communion and to promote frequent communion. Between the two World Wars they supported the missionary commitment of the Church by meeting for the first time in continents outside Europe and focusing on the Eucharist as a force for evangelization.

Beginning with the Congress of Munich in Bavaria in 1960 and the reflection developed at the Second Vatican Council, in a fruitful integration of the liturgical movement, Eucharistic Congresses have contributed to a fuller understanding of the Eucharistic Mystery. This was shown in: the appreciation of holy communion as full participation in the celebration of the Eucharist; the rediscovery of the celebrating assembly; a deepening appreciation of the relationship between the Table of the Word and the Table of the Bread; the emphasis on the social dimension of the sacrament; the connection of the Eucharist with the other sacraments; the renewal of Eucharistic worship outside of Mass...

Among the challenges still to be faced, we can mention here the need to involve and integrate into the movement of liturgical renewal and the new evangelisation the various forms of popular piety linked to the Eucharist, as well as the associations that under different headings draw their inspiration from the Eucharist (movements for perpetual or nocturnal adoration, the Confraternities of the Blessed Sacrament...)

The commitment to a constantly deeper appreciation of the Eucharistic mystery continues, even as we look to the coming event of the Congress in Dublin, which will have at its centre a reference to the Eucharist as the mystery of communion with Christ and with our brothers and sisters.

### ***3. The Eucharist and evangelisation***

The Eucharist and evangelisation constitute two inseparable realities that are part of the Church's essence. This is true not only in countries which have traditionally been the focus of missionary activity, but also in those countries evangelised long ago. One thinks, for example, of Europe, where some countries marked by a centuries-old Christian culture are now experiencing a progressive falling away from the faith, a distancing from the common roots of Christianity and a growing split between Gospel and culture.

In this context, the inculturation of the faith is one of the constitutive elements of the new evangelisation, the purpose of which is to make the person of Christ and his Gospel once again central, so that the Church can remain faithful to its mission and continue to be the seed of humanity's future and life.

To this end, Eucharistic Congresses can be the privileged setting for a more deeply understood link between Eucharist and evangelisation, or, in other words, between the convocation of the Church in the Eucharistic assembly and the mission entrusted by Christ himself to proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom. Thus it is necessary to ensure that the "assembly" of the People of God does not end up as a mere preliminary to another, equally essential aim: that of being "sent" into the world. "It is self-evident that only a people of God that allows itself to be gathered in unity and harmony is capable of convincing the world".<sup>2</sup>

The new evangelisation has been and will be an ongoing challenge for Eucharistic Congresses. The proclamation of the Gospel and the celebration of the Eucharist, in fact, not only give life to the Church, but they also constitute a visible sign of today's multicultural society. Moreover, the Gospel and the Eucharist remain the essential means of bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

### ***4. The Eucharist, ecumenism and interreligious dialogue***

The first thirty-seven International Eucharistic Congresses did not deal with the themes of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue, except at the Congress of Jerusalem in 1893 – although only partially and in a manner quite different from our approach today. The time had not yet come, but we can hope that coming years will see a greater openness to the essential link between the Eucharist and the communion of the Churches. If by its very nature the Eucharist manifests and realises the *forma ecclesiae*, it represents not only the goal, but also the way and means of attaining visible communion between the Christian Churches.

---

<sup>2</sup> G. Lohfink, *Dio ha bisogno della chiesa?*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo 1999, p. 78. [*Does God need the Church?*]

It was at Munich in 1960 that ecumenical relations began to take on their full importance at Eucharistic Congresses. Hardly had the preparations for the Second Vatican Council begun, than Blessed John XXIII decided to establish the Secretariat for the Promotion of Christian Unity. From then on, in the ecclesial context of Vatican II the movement towards Christian unity became part of the agenda of Eucharistic Congresses. This was followed in more recent times by interreligious dialogue, which has received such great attention in the Church since the first meeting at Assisi called by Pope John Paul II in 1986.

The ecumenical and interreligious dimension of every Congress depends on the characteristics of the host country, on the socio-cultural environment and the circumstances in which the Congress is celebrated. It is interesting to recall, for example, that the introduction of the new Eucharistic Prayers in the Roman Missal, with their epiclesis of consecration, has led to theological rapprochement with our Orthodox brethren, just as the attention given to the Word of God in Christian worship has led to the regular presence of representatives of the Reformed Churches at Eucharistic Congresses beginning in the 1970s. Thus, in the talks at the Congresses, the issue of ecumenical relations in general, including the issue of intercommunion, have been freely discussed.

As regards interreligious relations there were particular reflections on the relationship between Christianity, Islam and the Zoroastrian religions at Bombay in 1964; at Nairobi in 1985 John Paul II addressed Hindus and Muslims; at Seoul in 1989 there were meetings with Buddhists and Confucians.

\* \* \*

Following this brief account of the more significant effects of Eucharistic Congresses on the life of the Church, one can realize more fully that the richness of the Eucharistic mystery is inexhaustible and that the International Eucharistic Congresses are not an end in themselves, but a means for the Eucharistic mystery to be ever better understood. The Eucharist, in its celebration, is the Church's greatest treasure.

+ Piero Marini