

Trinity XI – Ordinary Sunday 19 – Year B

As most of us know, John Chapter 6 deals with the gift of the Eucharist and we are refreshing our understanding and appreciation of the Eucharist this month, in a threefold analysis: **Eucharist as the Body of Christ**, was preached last week and today we look at the **Eucharist as Thanksgiving**. Toward the end of the month, we will look at it as **the Banquet of Eternal Life**.

“Thanksgiving” is one of the various genres of prayer, together with blessing and adoration, petition, intercession, and praise.

In prayers of thanksgiving, we express to God our appreciation for the many blessings that he has given to us through nature, as well as through the supernatural graces won for us by Christ. By offering our prayers of thanksgiving to God, we fulfill the exhortation of St. Paul: “Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you” (1 Thessalonians 5:18)

Through the celebration of the Eucharist, the prayer of thanksgiving has a particularly prominent role within the Christian Faith. The very term *Eucharist* is derived from the Greek word *eucharistein*, which means “thanksgiving.” This word is used in the New Testament in a way that recalls “the Jewish blessings that proclaim—especially during a meal—God’s works: creation, redemption, and sanctification” (Luke 22:19 and 1 Corinthians 11:24).

This sacrament is called the Eucharist precisely because it is a thanksgiving offered to God for these gifts. The Sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist is “the source and summit of the Christian life”, and as such, it is the highest form of thanksgiving that we can offer.

Of course, there is a meal aspect to the Eucharist. The Eucharist, however, is much more than a common meal; it is first and foremost a holy sacrifice. **“The Eucharist is a sacrifice of thanksgiving to the Father, a blessing by which the Church expresses her gratitude to God for all his benefits, for all that he has accomplished”.**

The connection between the Eucharist and thanksgiving is more than linguistic; *as I said earlier Eucharist means thanksgiving in Greek*; there is a profound connection between the Eucharist established by Christ and the fulfillment of the Old Covenant in the New. Now, for good reason, Christians are often aware of the connections between the Eucharist and Passover.

Yet, there is another Old Testament precursor to the Eucharist that many are not aware of. Before he became Pope Benedict XVI, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger wrote a marvelous book, *Feast of Faith*, in which he offers a wonderful explanation of how the Eucharist fulfills *toda* sacrifice of ancient Israel.

Like the Greek *eucharistein*, the Hebrew word *toda* means “thanksgiving.” The *toda* sacrifice was a thanksgiving sacrifice that, like Passover and the Last Supper, also included a meal. What is more, the *toda* sacrifice—in addition to the sacrificial victim—is also “the only form of sacrifice which is concerned with unleavened bread.”

Quoting the work of the Old Testament scholar Hartmut Gese, Ratzinger explains the circumstances that called for *toda* sacrifice:

*Gese describes it like this: ‘The thanksgiving sacrifice presupposes a particular **situation**. If a man is saved from death, from fatal illness or from those who seek his life, he celebrates this divine deliverance in a service of thanksgiving*

which marks an existential new start in his life. In it, he ‘confesses’ . . . God to be his deliverer by celebrating a thankoffering. . . . He invites his friends and associates, provides the sacrificial animal . . . and celebrates . . . together with his invited guests, the inauguration of his new existence.’

In other words, the *toda* was a sacrifice and meal celebrating liberation from death and the beginning of a new life. **So is the Eucharist.**

Note that during the institution of the Eucharist Jesus “gave thanks” (Luke 22:19), which is reflected in the prayers of consecration at Mass. **In the Eucharist, the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary is made present, not a new sacrifice, but the One and Only Sacrifice of Christ is made present!** But this sacrifice also includes the anticipation of the Resurrection, the event of Christ’s humanity being raised to new life, which is the foundation of our own salvation. It is by Jesus’ Passion, death, and Resurrection that we, too, are granted new and everlasting life. Thus, the Most Holy Eucharist is our sharing in *toda* sacrifice of Christ, where we give thanks to God for delivering us from bodily and spiritual death. **“As Gese sums it up: ‘The Lord’s Supper is the *toda* of the Risen One’”** (*Feast of Faith*, 57).

Our participation in Jesus’ *toda* sacrifice during the Divine Liturgy also fulfills a prediction made in the Jewish tradition. “The *toda* of Jesus vindicates the rabbinic dictum: **‘In the coming (Messianic) time, all sacrifices will cease except the *toda* sacrifice.** This will never cease in all eternity” (*Feast of Faith*, 58).

The Eucharist is the last remaining religious sacrificial offering in the Judeo-Christian tradition. What is more, as predicted, it will never end in all eternity because the Eucharist is a participation in the heavenly liturgy described

in the book of Revelation (Revelation 19:6-9). **The Eucharist is not just the making present of the past (the Sacrifice of Christ); it is also the making present of the final and definitive future (the Wedding Feast of the Lamb). The Mass is a foretaste of the heavenly kingdom.**

The Eucharist truly is the sacrifice by which we give thanks to Almighty God for saving us from death and giving us new and eternal life. We should therefore celebrate every Divine Liturgy with an even greater sense of gratitude and sincerity of heart. So Thanksgiving is an important aspect of our Eucharistic Sacrifice! We need to contemplate this often neglected aspect of the Eucharist. May these reflections lead to a deeper appreciation of what the Eucharist truly is. May we who are blessed to participate in the Most Holy Sacrifice of the Altar humbly and sincerely give thanks to Almighty God, the source of all grace and goodness!

