

LOVE AS THE CHRISTIAN FORM, PART 2

1. Last class, I argued that the entire Christian life is a response to God's love. It is a response that demands that we return our love to God; this response is measured by God's Yardstick, that is, the measure of God's love on the Cross. On the Cross, God gave loved us with his whole life; he loved us "to the end" (Jn 13:1), "to the point of death, even death on a Cross" (Phil 2: 8). Thus, our response is measured precisely by us giving our whole life "to the end."
2. This brought us to our second point: If the entire Christian life is a response to God's love, then what is the 'form' of a Christian? What does a Christian 'look like'? Or what is 'Christian' about a Christian person? — When the question is posed this way, we realize the corner that we have been backed into. Love can be measured by nothing other than itself. This gives the impression that we can't say: "*Look, that's what a Christian is supposed to be!*" because ... love seems to be formless. Work, faith, suffering, sacrifice, or even subjective experiences of God are not sufficient in themselves to measure what is truly Christian, or to serve as measures of love. Each of these can occur outside of an authentically Christian form. Love alone can be its own measure. So, what do we do?
3. It is in this apparent formlessness that we realize what it means to be a Christian: **the 'form' of a Christian is the response of love to God who first loved the world, which includes me; this love is an unconditional assent to and readiness for God's will, whether this will has expressed itself yet or not; love is a fundamental and unconditional Yes to whatever may come—whether it be the Cross, or being plunged into absolute abandonment, or being forgotten, or utter uselessness and meaninglessness; this love is a complete and total self-surrender, self-pouring, self-emptying, and self-gift to God in obedience. This means that the willingness to die for the One who died for you is the yardstick by which we are measured—that is, a 'love to the end' in response to his 'love to the end.'** Of course, this does not mean that we are necessarily called to a 'bloody martyrdom,' but it does mean that the Christian life is a 'spiritual martyrdom,' in which, even amidst our ordinary existence, even amidst our day-to-day tasks, we pour ourselves into whatever God calls us *out of love for Christ*, with our whole selves. It means that we should be thankful with the whole of our being because he sacrificed his being for ours, and the only way to express our thanks is with our whole being.
4. A shorter way of saying all of this is to say that the Christian 'form' is **Catholic**. We must be Catholic because Jesus is Catholic; and Jesus is Catholic because God's love is Catholic. Catholic comes from the Greek words *κατά* and *όλος*, meaning 'according to the whole.' God gives his *whole* self for the *whole* world, that is, *all*; and this love that gives its whole self demands a response of our whole selves in love. The entire purpose of Church teaching, dogmas, doctrines, is to preserve the 'Catholicity' of God's love, and to exclude *only* whatever diminishes the Catholicity of God's love. If you were to look at every heresy, it is a heresy *precisely because* it diminishes some aspect of the catholicity of God's love. Moreover, every 'rule' that *seems* to exclude people (e.g., exclusion from communion, etc.) should only be understood as an *exclusion of exclusion itself*, and thus, as a 'rule' to safeguard the catholicity of love, the complete and total self-surrender involved in that gift.

[Think about this: mortal sin effaces ‘charity’ (i.e., love), the very love by which we can respond to God’s complete gift of love with our whole selves; thus, we would be receiving God’s gift without offering ourselves as gift in return --- do you see how that follows? Etc.]

5. To be a Catholic is to stand under the ‘cloak’ (Rev. 12) of Mary, who said, on behalf of the whole Church, “Let it be done unto me according to your word” (Lk 1:38). Mary is the archetype of the Church’s response to Christ. In her, we see what it means to offer one’s self in unconditional assent and obedience to God’s love *par excellence*, and in such a way that we can share in that response. We also see the ‘fruitfulness’ of such a surrender to God: ‘blessed is the *fruit* of your womb’! [We will discuss this more below].

This raises some questions. Let’s put this into a conversation between two people:

6. *Questioner*: “If this is the ‘form’ of being a Christian, if a Christian may have to undergo all those things described above (i.e., suffering, abandonment, being forgotten, uselessness, meaninglessness, etc.), why should I be one? I thought the purpose of being a Christian is to be ‘happy’ or to benefit from *his* work so as to go to heaven, but not to undergo any of that myself. If I have to undergo all of that, what’s the whole point? I think I might take my chances with that ‘nice guy in the clouds, with the long white beard’ rather than your so-called ‘God of Love.’ I repeat, Why should I be a Christian?”
7. *Responder*: **The Christian ‘form’ is a total self-surrender in love and obedience because *there* we find our Beloved, the One who first surrendered himself in love and obedience out of love for the world, and thus, for me. Here, the meaning of ‘happiness,’ of ‘fulfillment,’ of ‘meaning’ undergoes radical transformation. Joy, here, means intimacy and communion with the One who has first loved me with his whole life; and so, even if I may have to undergo suffering in order to share in his suffering, even if I may have to undergo abandonment in order to share in his abandonment, even if I may have to undergo being forgotten as a share in his being forgotten, even if I may have to experience utter uselessness in order to share in his experience of utter uselessness, even if I may have to experience meaninglessness in order to share in his experience of meaninglessness—I will do so with a *joy* that is deeper than any of those sufferings because in each of these *I am with my Beloved and He is with me*. In the coldness of life, and even more so, in the frigidity of the darkness of the night of suffering, it is only the *fire of his love* that warms our hearts and vivifies us. Christ has turned each of these experiences that he underwent—that is, each of these salvific sufferings for the world—into prayer, into dialogue, into a communion-amidst-abandonment, and thus changed their meaning radically by his love.**
8. *Questioner*: Okay, I get it; if that’s where Christ *is*, then I suppose that’s where I have to go to meet him. But why is he *there*? Didn’t he already conquer death? Isn’t the Cross in the past? Isn’t he Resurrected and at the “right hand of the Father”? Doesn’t that mean that he took on all the suffering and pain *so that I wouldn’t have to*? Doesn’t that mean that I can lay upon him all the burden, and be content that he already did that, and reap the benefit of his achievement in my place?

9. *Responder*: I think that you misunderstand the relationship between the Cross and the Resurrection, as well as the way that ‘past’ and ‘present’ work regarding these mysteries. Let’s begin with the first, that is, the relationship between the Cross and the Resurrection. I can explain the relationship between the two in the following steps and with the following illustration:

**[SEE ILLUSTRATION ON OTHER SHEET TO FOLLOW ALONG, ENTITLED:
“THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CROSS AND THE RESURRECTION”]**

9.1. The Cross is the self-glorification of the love of God in the world.

- 9.1.1. This can be understood *only* if one takes into consideration and fully believes in the hidden meaning of the Cross, which is that in taking upon himself all the sins of the world—in being plunged into the darkest of nights—God’s eternal love surrenders itself to the uttermost limits of God-forsakenness in order to prove itself, at the moment of its greatest weakness, stronger than all the guilt and sin of the world.
- 9.1.2. The power to regain life completely is contained in the capacity for self-surrender even amidst the experience of suffering: “For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (Jn 10:17-18).
- 9.1.3. Death and resurrection are two naturally-reverse aspects of *one and the same act of love*: The glory that manifests itself on Easter is already present in the veiled glory of Good Friday. This is why the Cross is his ‘hour,’ the ‘hour of his glory,’ in which he is ‘glorified as he was in the beginning.’ For, the glory is decisively the self-glorifying love of God manifested to all the world.

[See illustration on next page]

- 9.2. **CROSS:** In the Cross, we see the Son ‘love to the end,’ by following the will of the Father, and bearing the ‘sin of the world’—all that is opposed to God, all that hates God. As the ‘sin of the world,’ the Father’s eyes must turn away from his beloved Son, and the Son must give up his Spirit, the very Spirit that is the communion between him and the Father. He descends into forsakenness, godlessness, and abandonment in our place, out of love. “Christ’s death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form.”¹
- 9.3. **HOLY SATURDAY:** On Holy Saturday, the question becomes: *what will have the final word? The power of sin or God’s love poured forth into the depths?* Jesus’ death is the Father’s ultimate word on Sin, but it is not the Father’s ultimate word on love. The Father and Son, who are inseparable from eternity, appear divided (Matt 27:46; Mk 15:34; Cf. Ps 22:1ff). The Father has loved us so much that “he did not spare his own Son but handed him over for us all” (Rom 8:32a; Cf. Jn 3:16a). But the love between Father and Son is such that not even death can overcome it. Jesus descended into the depths of the abyss of death (cf. Rom 10:7) – the abyss of God-forsakenness. The Son, abandoned by the Father because he stood for our sin, descended into the depths of Hell itself (Cf. 1 Pet 3:19-20; See Apostles’ Creed). But will sin conquer the Father’s love for his Son?
- 9.4. **RESURRECTION:** “We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God” (Rom 6:9-10). The love of the Father for his Son and the Son’s unfailing fidelity to his Father, even in the face of death and abandonment, is the life of the world. Sin has been swallowed up in the unfailing love of the Father and Son. Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaims, “God raised [Jesus] up, releasing him from the throes of death, because it was impossible for him to be held by it” (Acts 2:24). In the Resurrection, love is triumphant. But it doesn’t deal with suffering, death, forsakenness, abandonment, or even hell, by offering some ‘cosmic explanation,’ or even a very good ‘reason’ that somehow sets them all aside; rather, it *transforms them from within in*. It is the ‘love poured out’ that is *unveiled in those wounds. The wounds are transfigured*. But how? By the very love that bore those wounds for us. By taking our brokenness—our sin, our suffering, and our death—upon himself *by a love that is poured out ‘to the very end,’* that *very love* transfigured our sin, our suffering, and our death. The Resurrected body of Jesus is precisely a human body transfigured by and made transparent to the *very love* that was completely surrendered for us.²

¹ Benedict XVI, *Deus Caritas Est*, 12: AAS 98 (2006), 228.

² Here one should listen carefully to Augustine’s beautiful reflection on the wounds of the martyrs as they will be seen in heaven: “I do not know why it is, but we feel such love for the blessed martyrs that we want to see on their bodies, even in the kingdom of heaven, the marks of the wounds they suffered for Christ’s name, and perhaps we shall. For in their case these will not be marks of deformity but marks of honor, and a kind of beauty will shine in them which, although in the body, will be a beauty not of the body but of virtue. This does not mean, however, that any martyr who had limbs cut off and taken away will lack those limbs in the resurrection of the dead; for to them, too, it was said, *Not a hair of your head shall perish* (Lk 21:18). But, if it is fitting for the marks of their glorious wounds to be visible in their immortal flesh in that new age, there will be scars where the limbs were struck or cut at in order to lop them off. The limbs themselves, however, will be restored not lost. Thus, although any deficiencies that have happened to the body will then be gone, we should never consider or call the marks of virtue deficiencies” (*City of God*, Bk XXII, 19; tr. William Babcock. Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2013).

9.4.1. This means that the Cross is not ‘behind him’ as in it could only be considered as belonging to the past. Rather, it is ‘done’ in the sense that it is an *irreversible act of redemption that takes place between the time of his crucifixion and Resurrection*. The crucifixion Christ ceases to be bound by the limits of finite time, just as little as he is bound by it during his descent into hell, and in the Resurrection. (In case you have any doubts about this: how can he bear a sin that I will commit in 30 years from now if he is in the ‘past’ only? Or, how can we share in his sacrifice at the Mass if it is in the ‘past,’ and not, somehow, omnitemporal?). The Church is founded by this irreversible act. By seeing the Cross as something that is merely “past” in a temporal sense, you would be turning the Cross into a mere “bridge” or “tool” for *you* to get to heaven, rather than realizing that the goal of the Christian life is to be in intimate communion with *the very One who has poured himself forth for you on that very Cross!* The Cross cannot be instrumentalized in that way; it is a *love poured forth to the end*. To say that I want the Resurrection without the Cross, is to say that I want the benefits of love separated from the love poured out for me. To offer an example, it’s kind of like when a spouse tells another spouse: “I love you because of what your love does for me; it makes me feel better, and it makes me feel more secure and more comfortable. That’s why I’m grateful for you.” My goodness! How terrible!

9.4.2. The love issuing forth from the spear-wound in the side of the resurrected Christ streams forth into the Church and the world: the seal of God’s love is broken open. With the opening-up of his heart, the Spirit is poured forth into the world and bathes the Church in the light of Easter which the Word has earned for it. Christ’s Resurrection is the transfiguration of hatred, forsakenness, Godlessness, abandonment, suffering, death, sin—in short, all that is distant or opposed to God—by pouring his love. The wounds do not disappear; they are transfigured, and the resplendent glory of love shines through them. This is why whenever we suffer something, if we embrace it in freedom and surrender ourselves in love to that very suffering, we ‘taste’ the resurrection—that is, the very transfiguration and transparency effected by love itself.

9.5. **THE ASCENSION:** The Son has reconciled the world to the Father. He has died the death of sin and has been raised by the Father to newness of life. Love has conquered death. And he has taken the entire world with him to his Father. And he sends forth his Spirit into the world. Christ is the living water (Jn 4:10) and the Spirit is the stream poured into the world. The task of the Spirit is to Christify the world: that is, to take the entire world into Christ, in order that the world thus taken into Christ may be transfigured and elevated to the Father. By the work of the Spirit, the living heart of Jesus which died in obedience to the Father but which now lives only for the Father (Rom. 6:10) is made into the heart of the world. At the center of the world now is a Spirit that is renewing all things; a Spirit which makes all things new; a Spirit which searches the depths of God and which brings and offers the world up to the Father through Christ. Jesus went up to the Father like a firework into the heavens, and once he was at the right hand of the Father, he spread himself into the whole work through the Spirit, like how a firework explodes and spread across the whole sky. The one light – the

light of the world, Christ, ascended to the Father, but now the whole world is lit by Christ's light because the Spirit of Christ has indwelt in us all.

[Implications for Christian Life]

10. *Questioner*: So what does this view of the relationship between the Cross and the Resurrection tell us about Christian living today? About what it means to be a Christian? Does this mean that I should go out looking for suffering? You're making it seem like I should go back to those medieval quacks who would whip themselves on the back—yes, those guys that do all the crazy things in the Dan Brown movies, since you're making it seem like the Christian life is all about suffering instead of happiness.
11. *Response*: Let's look at your question a bit more closely. The Cross and Resurrection tell us a few things:
 - 11.1. First, it changes how we understand love, happiness, and suffering. In the final instance, the reward for the Son's *total* and *complete* self-surrender out of love to the will of the Father (that is, the Cross) is nothing other than love (that is, the Resurrection). ***Love is its own reward.*** This means that the promise of the greatest imaginable joy could never exclude the deepest suffering: darkness and light are correlatives in Jesus Christ's epiphany of love; they are two aspects of a deeper reality and mystery that gives them meaning, i.e. *love*.
 - 11.2. Second, it is not *suffering* that transfigures love; but *love* that transfigures suffering. We should not embrace 'suffering for suffering's sake'; that misses the whole point! It's the fact that the Son *emptied himself into our suffering out of love* that transforms that suffering. It means that if God calls me to suffer with or for someone else in a way that is analogous to how he suffered for me, I should do so *out of love*, because it's that love which gives the suffering its final meaning; it's that love which transfigures it and which brings me into intimacy with my Beloved, who gave his life for me.
 - 11.3. Third, everything that I am, I am solely by virtue of Christ's death, which opens up to me the possibility of fulfillment in God. Christ has died *my death*, and I have new life only by surrendering myself to him and planting myself deeply into his death in which I have already died, so that I can find my true self only in rising in him. I blossom on the grace of the God who died for me. I sink my roots deep into the nourishing soil of his flesh and blood. The love that I draw in faith from this soil can be of no other kind than the love of one who is buried in him, and who, therefore, can live out of a love that is greater than death, a love that is "eternal life."³
 - 11.4. Fourth, Dan Brown is as much an expert on Church history and teaching as Charlie Brown. =)
 - 11.5. Fifth, we must realize that the 'love that was poured out' was poured out for *all*. And thus, to respond to that love by the measure of that love, we must share in his love *for all*. Just as God so loved the world that he completely handed over his Son for its sake,

³ John 17:3: "And this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent." But how do we *know* God? "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love" (1 Jn 4:7-8).

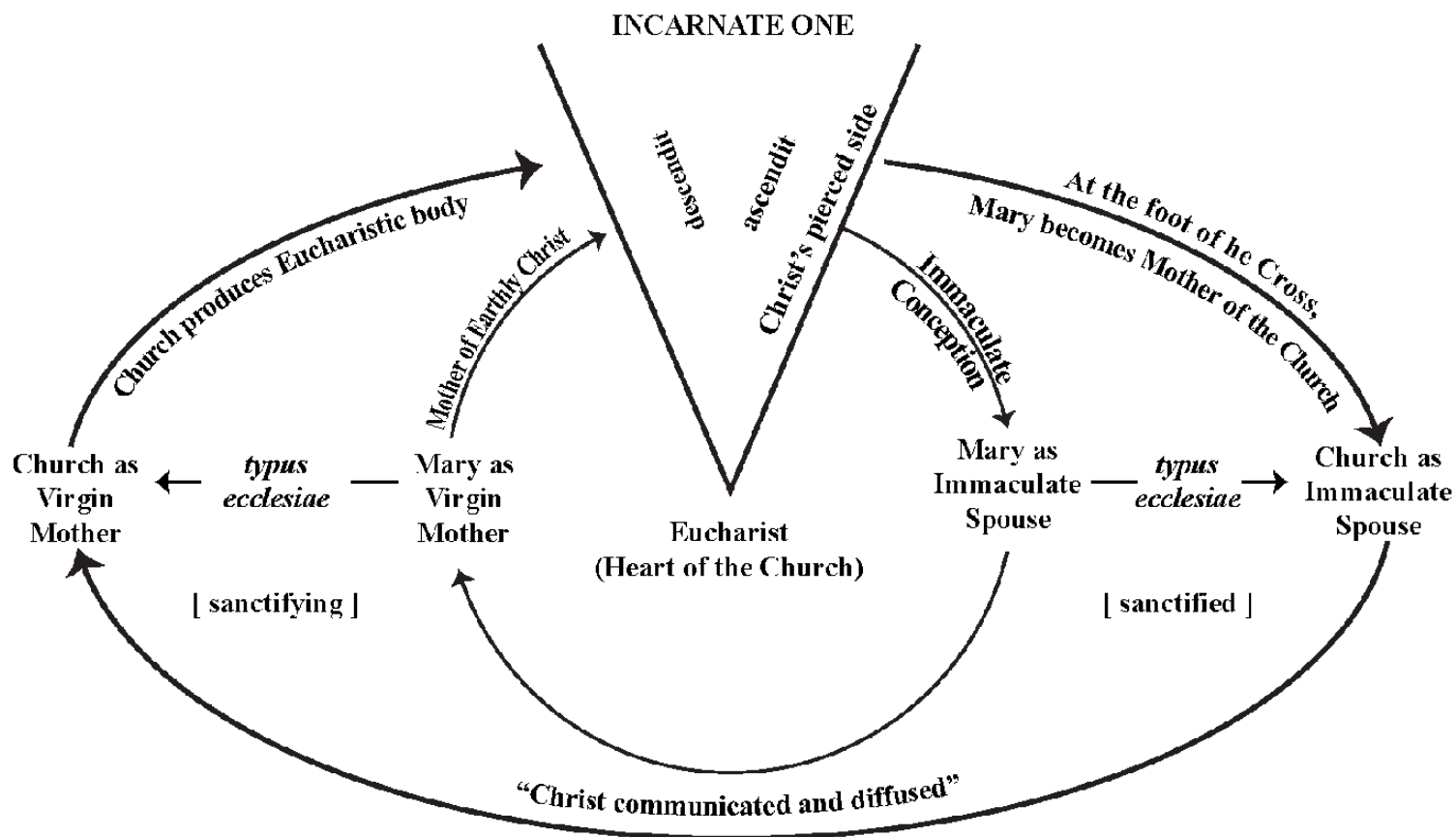
so too the one whom God has loved will want to save himself only in conjunction with those who have been created with him, and he will not reject the share of penitential suffering that has been given him for the sake of the whole. He will do so in Christian hope, the hope for the salvation of all men, which is permitted to Christians alone. Thus, the Church is strictly enjoined to pray ‘for *all* men’ (and as a result of which to see her prayer in this respect as meaningful and effective); and it is ‘good and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires *all* men to be saved ...’, for there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus who gave himself over as a ransom for *all*’ (2 Tim 2:1-6), who, raised up on the Cross, ‘will draw *all* men to himself’ (Jn 12:32), because he has received there the ‘power over *all* flesh’ (Jn 17:2), in order to be ‘a Savior for *all* men’ (2 Tim 4:10), ‘in order to take away the sins of *all*’ (Heb 9:28); ‘for the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of *all* men’ (Tit 2:11), which is why the Church ‘looks to the advantage of *all* men, in order that they may be saved’ (1 Cor 10:33). Thus: ‘God has consigned *all* men to disobedience, that he may have mercy upon *all*’ (Rom 11:32).

- 11.6. To summarize, look at this illustration: The entire Christian life is based on this “alpha point,” in which we encounter God’s love poured forth for us and the world; and, moved by that love, we respond to God’s love by sharing in God’s love poured forth for the love. Thus, *the Christian always has his feet planted in the love poured forth for him in Jesus Christ, and, sharing in that love, is always oriented towards his neighbor, whom Christ loved with his whole life.*

[Mary and the Eucharist]

12. *Questioner*: This is very interesting. I have never seen it this way! What does this say about the purpose of the Church? And what does it say about the Eucharist?

13. *Responder*: I'm glad you raised these points. Let's meditate on these things using the following illustration:



[Some notes about Mary for your reflection]

This fruitfulness that God expects of us and of his whole Church is founded on the divinity of the Bridegroom who communicates his own fruitfulness to the human Bride. In order for Mary to be capable of acceding to the Cross, an ever more profound, merciless initiation is necessary for her, applied without regard for her by her Son. She is submitted to all the humiliations, to feel them, to accept them like the

sword that is to pierce her heart. Consequently, all the Gospel scenes where the Son encounters his Mother will be scenes of humiliation:

—at the Temple, Mary does not understand why the Son has done that to her;

—at Cana, she is dismissed: ‘Woman, what have you to do with me?’ (Jn 2:4)

—at the time of her visit, she is not even received, and the Son designates his listeners as his brothers and his mother;

—when the woman in the crowd blesses ‘the breasts that you sucked,’ Jesus again turns the attention away from his Mother: ‘Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it’ (Lk 11:27-28). After all these rejections and all the anxieties and incomprehension of Mary, she will be ready to hear, she will be ready to hear, beneath the Cross, the last word of the Son, the hardest perhaps, for the withdraws from her his sonship in order to substitute another for it: ‘Woman, behold your son’ (Jn 19:26). And it is precisely in this way that the perfect union between the two is accomplished: just as the Father abandons his Son, the Son separates himself from his Mother. This form of union was necessary so that Mary—who henceforth would have to form the center of the Church—might know from experience the mystery of redemption and might be able to transmit it to her new children.

Just as Christ is humiliated all the way to the Cross in order to be able to fulfill the mission of the Father, so he humiliates his Mother and bestows on her her ecclesial mission through a final humiliation. He will proceed in the same way with Peter, who, at the moment when his treason is recalled, will be invested with his responsibility as shepherd.

With all that it is not our intention to encourage a certain dolorism, more morbid than Christian, that would seek to sink into the sufferings of the Crucified. If Christ, in Luke, commands us to carry our cross every day, he implies very precisely that this dull, ordinary cross consists in persevering at every moment in the Marian Yes, which transforms everyday mishaps as much as possible into situations that are fruitful in Christian terms.

It is always Christ who gives a share in his Cross, but the form of this participation always remains ecclesial and, thus, Marian, in priests and religious no less than in the ordinary faithful. But if Saint Paul affirms that he finds his joy ‘in my sufferings for your sake’ and that ‘in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church’ (Col 1:24), he is very conscious of enduring these sufferings in favor of the Church as a grace that the crucified Lord grants him. ‘Was Paul crucified for you?’ (1 Cor 1:13).

Christ takes up the elements lacking to the Cross of Christ and that are provided him by the compassionate Church, in his original Cross in order to make a whole indivisible offering of them to God the Father as a unique act of love that exceeds the weight of sin. But everything the ecclesial body adds is derived from the Cross; it is through grace from the Head that the Body can collaborate; it is an effect of the fullness of Christ that a place is reserved for us in the redemptive work. The Marian and ecclesial yes is always response, consent, never the first action.

[Some notes about the Eucharist for your reflection]

This whole mystery can be seen in the Eucharist in the most pointed way. The Eucharist is the place where Christ offers himself to us as fully poured out, in his total self-gift, and where we, receiving this self-gift, offer ourselves back to him completely. And, just as Christ, in his

ascension, offered his transfigured wounds and body to the Father, as handing him all of Creation transfigured by his love, we share in Christ's offering up of transfigured creation to the Father in the sacrifice of the Mass, precisely by offering to the Father Christ *and ourselves* in this mutual exchange of total self-gift. And it is precisely this total self-surrender in response to his self-surrender that transfigures the world.

Some notable quotes:

“The ‘sacrament of charity [love]’ (Thomas ST III, q. 73, a. 3), the Holy Eucharist, is the gift that Jesus makes of himself, thus revealing to us God’s infinite love for every man and woman. This wondrous sacrament makes manifest that ‘greater’ love which led him to ‘lay down his life for his friends’ (Jn 15:13). Jesus did indeed love them ‘to the end’ (Jn 13:1). In those words, the Evangelist introduces Christ’s act of immense humility: before dying for us on the Cross, he tied a towel around himself and washed the feet of his disciples. In the same way, Jesus continues, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, to love us ‘to the end,’ even to offering us his body and his blood” (Opening lines of Benedict XVI’s Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacrament of Charity* (*Sacramentum Caritatis*), §1).

“The bread you see on the altar, sanctified by the word of God, is the body of Christ. In these signs, Christ the Lord willed to entrust us his body and the blood which he shed for the forgiveness of our sins. If you have received them properly, you yourselves are what you have received” (*Sermo* 227, 1; PL 38, 1099).

“not only have we become Christians, we have become Christ himself” (*In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 21, 8; PL 35, 1568).

“one should not believe that Christ is in the head but not in the body; rather he is complete in the head and in the body” (*In Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus*, 28, 1; PL 35, 1622).