

Eucharist and Ecology

by Fr. Erasto Fernandez

In the prayer at the Presentation of Gifts, the celebrant reminds us that the bread and wine brought to the altar are 'what earth has given and human hands have made.' Thus, the fruit of the earth and everything connected with it also has a place in our Eucharist - in our thanksgiving to the Father. However, very often we limit our reflections and considerations only to the spiritual side of our lives; either we take the rest for granted or we have been trained to feel that God is not really interested in this aspect. Concern for the material, we imagine, is to be left to the unspiritual persons among us. Nothing is further from the truth for God is keenly interested in everything that he created, for he saw that it was good, in deed, very good!

Jesus and the World

As we go through the parables and other teaching of Jesus, it might surprise us to see how close he was to Nature. He not only observed Nature keenly, but also learnt the many lessons it teaches us. He spoke about trees, birds, animals, seasons, signs in the sky concerning rain and dry weather - there was nothing that was alien to him. Reflecting this approach of his Lord and Master, Paul the great preacher of the Good News of Jesus has this powerful passage in his letter to the Romans: "The whole of creation is eagerly waiting for God to reveal his sons. It was not for any fault on the part of creation that it was made unable to attain its purpose, it was made so by God; but creation still retains the hope of being freed, like us, from its slavery to decadence, to enjoy the same freedom and glory as the children of God. From the beginning till now the entire creation, as we know, has been groaning in one great act of giving birth; and not only creation, but all of us who possess the first fruits of the Spirit, we too groan inwardly as we wait for our bodies to be set free..."

For St. Paul then, Creation is closely linked with the destiny of human beings, who are seen as the 'king' or crown of creation. So it is understandable that when we celebrate Eucharist thanking God for the gift of redemption, we include the whole of creation in this act of thanksgiving. However, if we sincerely wish to express our gratitude for creation, it would not be enough merely to do this negatively, viz. by not harming creation. Rather, we would need to positively foster all that promotes the growth of Nature so that in its flourishing, God is glorified.

Self-centred Manipulation of Nature

If we look at how human beings have used or even abused Nature over the last couple of centuries we could well ask how much of respect we really have for it. To take just one simple example: to bring out just one edition of a Sunday newspaper in the USA (or for that matter in any big city anywhere in the world), acres of forests have to be destroyed so that the required amount of paper can be produced. Add to this the tons of chemical effluents being released daily into streams, rivers and ultimately the oceans and the destructive effect this has on plant and animal life not to mention human life - we can well gauge the abuse or selfish use we have been making of Nature. The persons directly responsible for such harmful practices think primarily of themselves and of the profit they can get out of their products, irrespective of the harmful effects that are part of the process of manufacturing their products. Now when such people celebrate the Eucharist, can their Eucharist really praise and thank God for his goodness and the lavish outpouring of his gifts on us? How can self-centred persons present the bread and wine as symbols of themselves and of their self-gift to others? How can they later say: 'Take and eat this is my body which is given for you' as they break the bread and share the cup? Could their words and gestures have any meaning? Wouldn't it be a mockery of the self-giving gesture of Jesus, or even a repetition of the treacherous act of Judas?

So, the celebration of the Eucharist challenges us to learn to be more respectful of Nature and to use its gifts to us with prudence and restraint. There is further the aspect of preserving Nature so that future generations may also be able to enjoy its benefits. If we destroy Nature in our own age, future generations would be deprived of its benefits and have a difficult time. Again, we are beginning to wake up to the fact that already in our own generation we are paying for our overwhelming abuse of Nature in the form of global warming leading to the outbreak of new strains of diseases, viruses and the like. Reclamation of land from the sea has often led to the ocean claiming its rights in some other parts of the world. Forced rapid production of poultry and other foodstuffs can lead to deficiencies in our systems that again result in new types of sicknesses for which we have no cure. In short, Nature has its own way of reminding us that we cannot afford to take it for granted, but need to respect its laws.

Eucharist: Answer to Ecological Concerns

It would be true to say that almost every section of the Eucharist, if celebrated meaningfully would have something to say about the ecological concerns of our day. Our very gathering together for Eucharist should remind us that we cannot come empty-handed but that we gather also as the 'stewards' of Creation. We cannot afford to leave the concerns of the world behind as we go to 'meet' or encounter our God. When we seek to praise God for the gift of forgiveness, we would need to include our sins against Nature among those that he has forgiven. However, it would help if at least some times we did specifically recall our sins against Nature, at least in order that we do something to rectify the sinful use we have been making of Nature's gifts and thus restore the balance.

During the liturgy of the Word, it would be important to pay attention to references to Nature and creation, as these are often called to be witnesses to the sins of Israel. Again we would benefit from noticing how Jesus referred to things of Nature to enhance his teaching. At the end of the readings we are called to answer the question: 'Have you seen how much I love you?' as shown in the readings of the day. At this time it would be helpful to note how God shows his love often through Creation around us. The recalcitrant Jonah was protected from the blazing sun's rays by a castor-oil tree. Ravens fed Elijah as he wallowed in his depression because of the persecution of Jezebel. We might be surprised to see the numerous references to Nature as part of God's revelation of his love for us.

While the gifts are being presented, we could spend some time reflecting how the bread and wine really represent the whole of creation and its blessings to us human beings. We could also see how people have harnessed the forces of Nature to obtain blessings for themselves. Included in this could be some of the modern achievements of Science and Technology whereby the benefits of Nature are made available to people at large. We could also remember the persons responsible for these advancements and pray for them, offer their efforts in thanksgiving to the Lord.

Conclusion

Since the Eucharist is the source and summit of our Christian life, it must include everything that forms part of human existence here on earth. And Nature certainly has an important role to play in our life in a thousand different ways. Our spirituality today reminds us that we should be grateful for all that God has given us even through Nature, we need to look at things positively using all these gifts as stewards of creation and not as their sole possessors or owners. Stewardship implies that some day we would have to give an account of our ministrations, not only to God from whom all good things come, but also to our brothers and sisters and the generations of human beings who will follow us. The use of bread and wine as 'instruments' for the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist forces us to reflect that we cannot afford to act as if Nature belongs to us to use or abuse according to our whims and fancies. Nature too, like humans, is ordained to a higher purpose by our Creator.

Celebrating Eucharist as the source and summit, while remembering our status as 'priests' of Nature would help us keep the proper balance not only for ourselves but also for the benefit of all around us.

Care for the earth and make it your own!
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