

CHAPTER TEN
The Liturgy

The Eucharist is, as we have seen, the great sacrament of the contemplative life. In it Our Lord himself comes to help us unify our lives. The Eucharist enables us to reconcile the demands of love and faith, and thus serves as the sacrament and means of unity amid the discontinuity of our contemplative life. But it is also the sacrament of faith: it has been given to us because, walking in faith, we need signs. It enables us to refocus our lives on the invisible reality that ought to be much more real for us than the exterior realities among which we live. It is good to receive Communion to show Our Lord that we believe in our contemplative life. This is something we can always do, no matter what dryness or aridity we might be experiencing.

We have seen the importance of the interior signs of a call to the contemplative life that God gives us. The Eucharist is an exterior sign given to everyone, to which we can always have recourse. It reminds us how far God's predilection has gone; in it our Friend comes to dwell among us. He takes on the form of food to show us his desire to be with us every day. He assumes the appearance of bread because it is the simplest and most common food. If he had wanted to manifest his greatness, he would have chosen a more precious material; but love is what he wanted to show. Hence he used bread, an everyday food, the nourishment of the poor.

Whenever we receive Communion, let us ask Our Lord to strengthen our faith in his predilection for us and in our contemplative life. This life is bound up with the Eucharist. The very theology of the Eucharist demonstrates Jesus' desire for contemplative souls. The fact that he wishes to remain with

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us in this way evidences his desire for an intimate relationship with us.

Being both sacrament of unity and a sacrifice, the Eucharist enables us to unite the two aspects of our life: contemplation or intimacy, and the aspect of sacrifice. Jesus saved the world by an act, a sacrifice. It is by sharing in that sacrifice that we will gain the strength to unify these two summits of our life and thereby bring this life to its fulfillment.

The Eucharist also unites the interior contemplative life, in which God is given in the silence and secrecy of our souls, and the exterior life—that which we live in community. For the Eucharist is, on the one hand, an efficacious sign of actual intimacy with Our Lord as well as of the still more intimate relationship that is yet to come both here on earth and in heaven. On the other hand, this sign is given to us at the altar table and during the common banquet, the great community action of the day.

The Eucharist is the sacrament of unity for apostles too. It is the beginning and the end, the starting point and the crown of their life of interior union with Our Lord, while at the same time the takeoff point for their apostolic life. They offer Mass for the people they are about to approach: they receive Communion for those who do not receive it themselves and who cannot be approached. Conscious of the fact that the priesthood is for the sake of the Eucharist, they never cease trying to lead souls to the Eucharist.

To understand the full significance of the Eucharist we must take up the liturgy and its place in our life. But in order to treat the liturgy in a truly theological and contemplative manner, we must view it in light of the Eucharist. For there is always a danger of taking a merely historical point of view, seeing only the exterior rites, which constitute the generic element of every religion. But the mystery of our Christian liturgy consists in the fact that these exterior rites are ordered