

The Manifold Dimensions of Eucharistic Hope

Rev. Fr. Paul Vu Chi Hy, SSS

- **Introduction**

In proclaiming “the death of the Lord” and professing “his resurrection until he comes again” (1Cor 11:26; cf. Memorial Acclamation), the Eucharist is preeminently the sacrament of Christian hope.¹ It contains within it the memorial of Christ’s Passover and the anticipation of his coming in glory. As is well known, in the *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* of the Second Vatican Council, the Eucharist is described as “a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet in which Christ is consumed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory is given to us” (SC.,47). The Eucharist is thus the divine milieu where the Christian community celebrates the real presence of the risen and glorified Christ, and the eschatological foundation as well as the ground for its ultimate expectations. Apparently, it is out of this hope in Christ, hope in the Spirit and hope in the promise of God that the early Christians continued to devote “themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Here is the sense that, in the Eucharist, the saving act of God has been realized in Christ, and that, through his Passover from death to life, and by the power of the Spirit, the Christian community indeed shares in the life of the resurrection, that is, the glory of God.

Understood in this way, the glorified Christ who is to come is already in communion with the Christian community. And so, when he comes in glory, the final efficacy of the Eucharist will be the full manifestation of the unspeakable reality, which “God has prepared for those who love him” (1Cor 2:9; Rom 8:28). The Eucharist, therefore, becomes the sacred symbol of the universal reality of God’s Reign promised by Christ (Jn 15:11), filling Christians on their journey through history with hope. To celebrate the Eucharist is to participate in a “Holy Communion” with God through the bread and wine shared together. Such an eschatological communion foreshadows the future transformation of the whole cosmos into New Creation. It organizes and unifies the whole, deferring the meaning: “God may be all in all” (1Cor 15:28). Eucharistic hope is thus hope for the transformation of all that is. For in Christ “all things hold together” (Col 1:17), just as God set forth in him, “as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up” all creation (Eph1:10).

However, in order to celebrate the Eucharist as “our hope of glory”, in time and in history, it is also important to recognize that the future which the Christian community anticipates through the Eucharist is God’s gift. It is a wondrous gift of grace, a precious gift of new life

to be received and cultivated with a sense of responsibility. The Eucharist inspires Christian hope and gives birth to creative human activity in the direction of the coming of the new heaven and new earth. Only when Christians recognize the future as eschatological gift, will they be able to commit themselves to building up the Body of Christ in the world and at the same time dare to hope for the glory in the fullness of God's time. The Eucharistic hope embodies an ethical praxis that the Christian community is summoned to embody in their lives. Hence, the Christian community, gathered for prayers and thanksgiving, for the great song of acclamation and adoration, and for the "breaking of the bread" is itself a community of hope. As we read in John Paul II's Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*:

The Eucharist is a straining towards the goal, a foretaste of the fullness of joy promised by Christ (cf. Jn 15:11); it is in some way the anticipation of heaven, the "pledge of future glory."...Those who feed on Christ in the Eucharist need not wait until the hereafter to receive eternal life: they already possess it on earth, as the first-fruits of a future fullness which will embrace the human in its wholeness. For in the Eucharist we also receive the pledge of our bodily resurrection at the end of the world: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (Jn 6:54). This pledge of the future resurrection comes from the fact that the flesh of the Son of Man, given as food, is his body in its glorious state after the resurrection. With the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the "secret" of the resurrection.²

There is thus an awareness of the Eucharist as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving to God for all the wonders that God has done in creation, redemption and sanctification. It is a communal act giving thanks and praise through Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit to God who has made us worthy to anticipate the future unity, drawing us into the vision of "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col 1:27). In this perspective, as "hope seeking understanding", a number of questions enter into the aspects of hope: What is the Eucharist in relation to our understanding of becoming more fully human in all the struggles for life, love and truth? Does it have anything to say to the existence of so much oppression, suffering, brokenness, persecution and death in the world? How can it be more fully appreciated as the sacrament in which "Christ is really and truly present as hope's food and drink,"³ and celebrated as a fuller anticipation of the heavenly banquet? How does our celebration of the Eucharist as a communal, open, joyful, hopeful meal, and as a sacrifice, a memorial of the Paschal Mystery of Christ connect with Christian hope with practical implications for the way we live in the present and the future? Does the Eucharist contain the promise of new life for all creation in the new humanity of Christ?

This paper is, then, presented as an attempt to explore "*The Manifold Dimensions of Eucharistic Hope*". We will consider, first of all, the notion that the Eucharist, as the sacrament of hope, is both a vision of the future and a celebration of the Christian community nourished on the Body and Blood of Christ, the "first-fruits" of the Kingdom. If Christ is our ultimate future glory it matters greatly that we understand and know that the gathering at the Eucharistic table confirms and extends our communion with Christ, with one another and with all creation. For it is in this Eucharistic communion that hope is born. Secondly, we will

come to realize an essential feature of significance for a renewed appreciation of how the Eucharist could provide the foundation for Christian hope-filled activity by stimulating a liberating vision of the transformative possibilities for the life of human society. And we will conclude with an acknowledgement of the Eucharist as eschatological gift of God in Christ, for us and for our salvation. This “gift from above” celebrated in the Eucharist encompasses history and the cosmic process in which the Spirit of God is making all the difference.

1. The Form of Eucharistic Hope as Communion: “God will be all in all”

Since the Eucharist is a celebration of the shared life and the destiny of humanity and creation, it enacts the mystery of the interconnection of personal, interpersonal, ecclesial, and cosmic salvation. In a fundamental way, the Eucharist is a sign and an effective source of “Holy Communion.” Those who come to celebrate it are always more deeply inserted into community. In the Eucharist the many people become one Body of Christ (1Cor 10:17) in such a way that Christ takes them up “into himself” as one body of the new creation. To participate in this sacrament of hope means to be incorporated into the person of Christ and transformed in the totality of one’s ecclesial relationships. This focus on the Eucharist as an event of communion, then, provides a significant point of entry for a renewed anthropology whereby Christian hope is brought into dialogue with contemporary quests for some key aspects of being human.

1.1 The personal dimension of communion

A first feature within this renewed anthropology in terms of Eucharistic hope, however, arises from our awareness of being human as personal. A person may be defined as a human subject, an individual center of consciousness, an intentional, historical person with his or her own personal traits and life story, an individual identity, one who knows and is known, loves and is loved, and exists as a free, unique and unrepeatable entity.⁴ As such, the human person is not simply someone who has a body, but someone who is a body.⁵ This concept of person has a close affinity to our emphasis on the human subject as an embodied reality through and through, from the beginning to end. Here a renewed anthropological form of the Eucharistic hope stands in contrast to the dualistic conception of immortality, that is, the body-soul schema as expressed in the classical philosophy and the traditional treatment of the human subject. It envisages the human person as at the same time embodied spirit and inspirited body. The human person thus appears as embodied self-consciousness and exists corporeally in the world as a whole person in relation to God and to others.

Contemplation of the human person in this non-dualistic way, then, draws attention to the Eucharistic hope for the fulfillment of personal life in resurrection. It is distinctive in its inclusive reference to the quest for wholeness. So, while our hope in God’s final triumph over sin, evil, suffering and death is a total hope, it does not exclude the dimension of the person as self-identity, individuality and embodied self-manifestation. If the Risen Christ truly gives himself personally in the Eucharist, where Christians are nourished by the eternal life of the Body of his Resurrection, then hope for personal fulfillment in the resurrection of the total and unified human being is an integral part of Eucharistic hope. In this regard, the whole

Eucharistic celebration becomes a locus for the reception and transmission of the vision of a future glory that is more than the salvation of pure spirits.⁶ It is the future glory of the totally human. For the Risen Lord who “will transform the body of our humiliation, so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory” (Phil 3:21).

1.2 The interpersonal and ecclesial dimension: The event of persons in communion

Although in terms of personal identity, being and living, each human person is a unique subject, a transcending, responsible, communicative and free being, there is something fundamentally communal about the human subject. Here a significant feature of Eucharistic hope arises from our emphasis on the interpersonal and ecclesial dimension of personhood. Relationship is a fundamental characteristic of all beings in the world; one is present to oneself only insofar as one is present to others in terms of communion. Since human existence is an invitation to a life of inclusive communion with other persons, with those of friends and neighbors near and far, an isolated person is a contradiction in terms, just as an essentially unrelated, self-contained, self-focused and self-enclosed subject is incompatible with both the human and Christian experiences of hope.⁷

By its very nature, then, hope involves a consciousness of communion. It insists that personal and interpersonal fulfillment is inseparable. As John Zizioulas, a well-known theologian of the Eastern Orthodox Church phrases it, “one person is no person.”⁸ Thus, the human person fully alive is formed through relationships. We see here, for the Christian perspective, it would not be possible to speak of the personhood without the concept of communion. Gabriel Marcel, a Christian existentialist also points out that hope is always related to a “thou,” that is, to a real communion established among persons.⁹ He summarizes the authentic expression of the act of hope in the formula: “I hope in you for us.”¹⁰ This is so because hope itself can be seen as meaningful only within the context of this new depth of being. The meaning of the Eucharistic hope then emerges in this interpersonal dimension of personhood.

As a sacrament of hope, the Eucharist communicates not only the interaction between the divine and the human initiated by God, but also gives witness to the fact that the uniqueness of a human person exists within a community of mutual relationships. If Eucharistic hope is finally in the Triune God, who is essentially relational, as persons in communion, then it is necessarily a hope not of isolated individuals but of people in community, in which everyone gathers without the barriers of race, language or cultural traditions. In terms of Eucharist communion, hope is thus a positive attitude to various communities of people, an appreciation of unity in diversity, and an understanding of the ultimate reality as mutual self-giving and inter-being. Just as the bread and wine become the real food and drink of the Kingdom, those who partake of the Eucharist are united in body to the life of the new humanity of Christ, as the result of the transforming action of the Spirit. So, the Eucharist heals, perfects and fulfills the body of Christians. And this is exactly the character of the life that the Eucharist already celebrates, here and now, even as it awaits the blessed hope, being aware of a glorious community to come.

1.3 The cosmic dimension of communion

A third aspect of being human concerns our communion not only with other human beings but also with the whole of creation. Since Eucharistic hope has a cosmic dimension, the future fulfillment which human beings yearn for, cannot be found apart from the transformation of the world to which they are bound in life and death. As an event of eschatological communion, the Eucharist celebrates the unity and solidarity of human persons, the earth, and the whole cosmos when the bread and wine, as earthly realities, come into their own as bearers of the ultimate future of humanity and the cosmos. Also, according to the findings of contemporary cosmology, we are all part of the whole and see everything in the cosmos and part of ourselves as interrelated.¹¹ There is nothing outside the scope of this universe as “God’s body”, the source and breath of all existence.¹²

We thus arrive at an understanding of salvation as the entry of all creation into God’s eternal community of love (Eph 1:22; Phil 3:21). As the memorial of Christ’s all-embracing love, the Eucharist speaks of how “all things have been created” through him, in him, and for him (Col 1:16-17; 1Cor 8:6). In this way, then, God’s salvation comes upon the whole of creation “without annihilation, without spoliation, without alteration: it enriches.”¹³ Precisely here this open-ended character of the Eucharist is the effective source of Christian hope, reminding us of the sacredness of creation. This also means that the end of the world will not be a destruction of the universe, but a transformation and fulfillment so that it will become “the new heaven and the new earth” (Rev 21:1). The mystery of the Eucharist, therefore, discloses that not only humankind, but all creation is incorporated in Christ, and with him, will obtain “the freedom of the glory of the children of God” (Rom 8: 21). The whole of history is “saved in hope” (Rom 8:24), for Christ is the “first born of all creation” (Col 1:15), and its final homecoming.¹⁴ Through the mystery of his death and resurrection God has entered into solidarity with the cosmos and, through the grace of the Eucharist, begun the process of transfiguration of the material universe itself. Here a renewed Eucharistic hope as cosmic communion thus emerges, embracing the whole of creation, so that it is taken up into the worship of God who will be “all in all” (1Cor 15:28). We come to the Eucharist, bringing the bread and wine as symbols of the whole universe, in which matter, spirit, the meaning of nature, history, society and culture are truly interconnected, ready to be transformed by the Spirit into the Body and Blood of the Cosmic Christ. Hence, through this transformation of bread and wine, Eucharistic hope is all-inclusive in its expectation.¹⁵ The Christ of the Eucharist is revealed as the life and recapitulation of all creation.¹⁶

2. The Eucharist as source of a hope-filled praxis of liberation

Consequently, how then can such a cosmic vision of hope, thus distinguished from the myth of human progress, highlight the intrinsic and dynamic connection between the celebration of the Eucharist and the praxis of liberation, the responsible action for the salvation of the world? Here the Eucharistic hope finds its expression in another perspective. As a celebration of unity, peace and reconciliation, the Eucharist reminds those who participate in Christ’s self-offering of the part they must play in helping resolve exploitative and unjust situations. In this sense, the Eucharistic hope brings effective meaning and power not only to the

personal, interpersonal and cosmic processes, but also to the body politic, the social systems which we create and in turn shape us.

2.1 The political, social and liberating implications: hunger for justice

The most dramatic illustration of the divine demand for justice and for the liberation of the oppressed is the story of Exodus. Hence, this great story of the liberation from slavery and the journey across the wilderness to the land of promise and the covenant established by God prefigures the liberation of all humanity in the context of the Paschal Mystery of Christ. It is not, however, an isolated example of God's concern for the poor. The prophets often speak of God's judgement on those who consider that the performance of religious ritual, rather than the struggle for justice for all, is the principal demand God makes upon people (Is 1:11-17; 58:4-8; Mic 3:1-3; 6:7-11). God's saving activity on behalf of the poor and the oppressed is continued and intensified in the New Testament. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus in his public ministry is portrayed as having a special compassion for the marginalized and the lowly. For him, eschatological hope is the basis for social justice and ethics. He welcomed society's outcasts and sinners into table-fellowship with him as an anticipation of the Kingdom, announcing the year of God's favour (Lk 4:18-19). According to the biblical witness, indeed, Christian faith is active in works of justice and love, and they are the test of true forms of worship. Here correspondingly, the fundamental characteristic of the Eucharistic hope as praxis of liberation can be understood in terms of communion, which has a threefold sense.¹⁷

Firstly, it concerns the liberation from social situations of oppression and alienation. The Eucharist embodies and defines a mode of human community as the Body of Christ, for it celebrates Christ's victory over all that oppresses and divides; it is the victory of a new order into which Christians are gathered together, united with Christ in his death and now raised to live in his glorified life (Rom 6:4-5). The Eucharist indicates this new order as eschatological hope, consisting in a total openness to the Reign of God. To this Eucharistic hope, therefore, Christian response must be a life of mercy, justice and love for others. All kinds of injustice, racism, discrimination, division, persecution and lack of freedom are thus radically challenged when we come to share the Eucharist, to stand around the table of the Lord, and to break the "Bread of Life". This is to say that the Eucharist itself is the privileged place for breaking down the barriers that separate us from each other so as to have reason to hope that these barriers will break down in the world.

Secondly, the Eucharist as liberation calls for a personal and ecclesial transformation by which Christians live with inner freedom in the face of every kind of bondage. The Eucharist sets them free from the fear of suffering and death, from loneliness, self-centeredness and pride, in order to form a community in which all can share life with each other, having all things in common and placing themselves at the service of the poor and the needy (1Jn 1:3, 6; 1Cor 1:9; 2Cor 9:13; Rom 15:26-27).

Thirdly, the Eucharist is the sacrament of Christian liberation from sin in all its dimensions. Sin, whenever it exists, is a destructive influence in the reality of all relationships, a breaking of communion with God and with other human beings, and thus is the exact opposite of what God is, namely, persons in communion. Through sharing in Christ's body and blood, we are

progressively wrenched from the forces of evil. The Eucharist reveals to us the presence of sin in our selfishness, in all symptoms of the self-serving ambition at the expense of others, the indifference or complicity in social injustice, while drawing us towards a new life transformed through self-sacrificing love into the gracious moment of forgiveness and conversion. Thus liberation from sin is at the very root of social liberation.¹⁸ Here we can see how the senses of hope are lifted up and significantly intensified. For God's saving and healing action in Christ is what the Eucharist recalls and celebrates against all the forces of destructiveness (1Cor 11:17-24; Jas 2:14). In this way, the celebration of the Eucharist, the taking of communion, is truly "a moment of conversion", that is, "to go beyond the alienations, boundaries, polarities and classes of the given society in order to become a genuinely open community of love and hope for all."¹⁹ In other words, each celebration of the sacrifice of Christ is, properly, understood as the outcome of the divine all-forgiving love and reconciliation; it is both a moment of truth and a movement of life and growth, a moment of hope.

2.2 Bread of Life as hope for the world: hunger for meaning and purpose

Still, to appreciate the Eucharist as a hope-filled praxis of liberation, we can place it in a larger frame of reference. Here we are aware of being in the world, and we begin thinking about the nature of human existence in terms of "hunger."²⁰ This notion provides a significant Eucharistic application in terms of a hunger for the "Bread of Life," for full participation in the divine hospitality. How can the Eucharist as the bread of life be understood? Does not the Eucharist in this perspective recall our responsibility to deal with the dominant hungers of the world, such as the hunger for freedom and dignity, the hunger for peace and love, for meaning and purpose?

Since the Eucharist links the living bread of the Eucharist (Jn 6: 31-57) with the "manna" given by God to the hungry people in the wilderness (Ex 16: 4-35), the bread broken and shared enables the Christian community to glimpse the shape of a new world that is coming to be. Here the Eucharist becomes a sign of the generous justice by which God invites the hungry to the eschatological banquet. It refers, on one level, to the physical sustenance and, on another level, to the human sense of incompleteness, which makes people reach out for new life in terms of communion and continuing improvement. Hunger calls into being what is "not yet" and is a realm of possibility. On whatever level such hunger is defined, it reveals, in a deeper sense, the essential interconnectedness and interdependence of all humanity and all creation.

If hunger brings into focus both our human dependence on the bounty of nature and our interrelationship with one another, the Eucharist concerns the material as well as the spiritual needs. Because its primary symbols are drawn from the activities of human life: the bread of human labour and struggle, the wine of human fellowship and commitment, the Eucharist is not a sacramental world separated from that of social reality. Christian tradition confirms that, in the Eucharistic celebration, Christ makes himself known to us not only on the table as the bread of God, but also "in the breaking of the bread" (Lk 24:32, 35). This is an act of

sharing daily food with the hungry, showing hospitality to the strangers, and thereby giving them hope. Thus, in the Eucharistic sharing, we find a positive correspondence between human welfare on earth and final salvation in heaven, between the historical future and the eschatological Kingdom. It is in this perspective of hope that we can understand the Eucharist as the new manna for our pilgrimage, the new way that God gives us daily sustenance.

Food and drink, however, are not just a means for survival or staying alive. In the New Testament, for instance, every table fellowship with Jesus is, in a wider sense, an event of peace, liberation, trust and hospitality, a sign of reconciliation and an anticipation of the eschatological banquet in the consummation of the Kingdom (Lk 14:15; 15:2; Mk 2:15-17; Mt 26:29). There is an obvious, though not literal sense in which Jesus can claim to be the bread of life (Jn 6:35, 48, 51), which God provides for the world's nourishment, feeding the hunger of humanity for meaning and purpose in life. If Christian hope can be seen in relation to the deeply human forms of hope, then the Eucharist must become a constant challenge for the Christian community in the search for appropriate relationships in social, economic and political life, pointing to a sharing and reconciled community, and the fullness of life.

3. The Eucharist as God's Gift of Salvation in Christ

Yet the fullness of hope is not reducible to "an upward movement from the core of our being."²¹ We are presented in the Eucharist with a hope beyond all that we deserve, achieve or can even imagine. Just as "the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world" (Jn 6: 33), it tells us that the future fulfillment we seek is a marvelous "gift from above" and beyond all telling. Here we note that the Eucharist is always the reality of God's gift of new life in Christ to the world that freely initiates this hopeful communion of love. So it is right that the Christian community prays in the Eucharist: "Thy Kingdom come," constantly asking God to bring this about. In what sense, then, can we say that, in the Eucharist, Christians open their hearts to God's Kingdom, anticipating the future glory and are given a foretaste of things to come? To this, our response must be understood as participation, in Christ, of what God will do to transform the whole of creation. Since the Eucharist is already communion with Christ, and yet a communion which will reach its plenitude with the coming of the Reign of God, how does this expectation give new energy for the cultivation of this life with all the practical aspects of hope?

3.1 As gift of freedom

In terms of Christ's self-giving love for the sake of the world's salvation, we see then how, the Eucharist can be celebrated as the gift of freedom. In all its salvific reality, the Eucharist is Christ's free gift of self, which reveals the authentic meaning of a love freely given: "Having loved his own in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). Sharing in the Eucharist, then, Christians open their minds and heart to the hopeful gift of freedom in Christ. Eating and drinking what Christ's Body and Blood, they become "partakers of his glorious life."²² As one of the Eucharistic acclamations expresses it, "Save us, Saviour of the world, for by your Cross and Resurrection you have set us free." The Eucharist is thus celebrated as a new Passover from darkness to light, from slavery to freedom. Christ is present, in his life,

death and resurrection, offering the Christian community salvation and the possibility of rising to new level of freedom as members of his glorified Body (Eph 4:22-23). What we receive here is “sanctification and its end, eternal life” (Rom 6:22).

Hence, in this gracious reality, Christ fulfills who we are in God’s plan, upholding us and in the midst of all the unfulfilled hope of human encounters giving us the promise of an everlasting love. This freedom is the liberation of being taken into communion and service for the renewal of all things, that is, the capacity to create and to develop the conditions for orienting human life toward the future in which God’s work of salvation can be fully realized. In other words, the Eucharist is a participation in the source of divine freedom and an anticipation of God’s promise for the future. It is both divine gift and activity in the sense that it is even now joined with our own bringing forth into history the eschatological fulfillment of God’s Kingdom, the absolute being together of God and the whole of creation. Moreover, if freedom is the ultimate fulfillment of hope and the “one thing necessary,”²³ then the Eucharist is the most surprising gift of the divine freedom, connecting it with all the gifts in the mystery of Christ. These gifts can be experienced and expressed as freedom from loneliness and isolation for relationships and communion, freedom from whatever kind of hunger for sharing in the table fellowship of the Kingdom, freedom from sin and guilt for salvation and reconciliation, and freedom from fear to hope for the fulfillment of our future glory, the final realization of what God’s love has promised.²⁴

3.2 As gift of praise and thanksgiving

In this way, then, the Eucharist brings us to its familiar character of hope as a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, to an appreciation of all the divine gifts: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit.” We can see how, since the very early Church, in whatever the circumstance, the Eucharist has been understood as a sacrament of praise and thanksgiving in the light of hope in which Christians gather together to celebrate and share God’s saving gift in Christ. They come to give thanks, not because of the feeling of being indebted, but precisely because they live in a world of grace and blessing; they become the anticipatory fulfillment of Christ’s self-giving love in history.

In the face of such Eucharistic giftedness, unlike the human situation of giving, God’s giving offers divine life, freely and graciously, and out of the sheer desire to give. Hence, the only fitting response that can give meaning to the acts of praise and thanksgiving of the Christian community is the willingness to enter into the communion with God’s very life and love, and to participate in the sharing of life with others. This is a genuine and spontaneous appreciation of the gift of the Eucharist. And this means that those who participate in the Eucharist are drawn into God’s lifestyle. As the fourth weekday preface in the Eucharistic celebration rightly expresses this point: “You have no need of our praise, yet our desire to thank you is itself your gift. Our prayer of thanksgiving adds nothing to your greatness, but makes us grow in your grace.” The Eucharistic gift continues, in this sense, to increase, being at any one moment beyond measure, the continual dawning of the future.

It is, therefore, not a gift closed in upon itself, not in any way given back to God, nor adding something to God's being, but rather witness to the mystery of Christ's self-giving love, always overflowing and open to surprise. As gift of praise and thanksgiving, the Eucharist transforms the community of Christians into the new humanity of Christ, so that they, in turn, become bread for the world, to be broken, given away and consumed in anticipation of the future. In the Eucharist, the Christian community can celebrate the marvels of salvation, giving thanks to God and blessing God's name. Here then, praise and thanksgiving are God's gifts of grace in Christ, exulting in the movement of hope as infallible signs of a transformed heart, of a redeemed community (Rev 15:3-4).²⁵ So when God is experienced as central to everything that happens and everything that is good, Christian existence becomes, indeed, a hymn of praise and glory, a movement of free love with a universal character. It is a way of living with, in, and from the joy of salvation, that is, in a very real sense, a real sharing in the divine life and communion, a kind of beginning of glory in the Eucharist.

3.3 As gift of grace in witness and mission

An important outcome of this hopeful vision of the Eucharist is the responsible sharing of Christians in God's gracious gift of salvation in history, preparing the way for the coming Reign of God. We note at this point that the notion of gift is integral to Christian hope. And if the gift is only received in the sense of the giving, then, in a similar fashion, the Christian community is called to embody the very promise of the future glory. In the Eucharist, the self-giving love of God shows forth in the self-giving love of Christ, and as David Power envisions: "This self-giving love of Christ shows forth further when through the Spirit it is embodied in the Church, which in turn gives that life, pours out that love from within itself, so that others may share in it."²⁶ Thus, there is a real flow to the Eucharistic gift opening up its possibility, and drawing Christians into communion in witness and mission.

This indeed provides the context for our understanding of the dynamic sense of the Eucharist as the memorial of Christ's Passover, and is celebrated in the hope of reaching ultimate freedom from the concrete reality of suffering and death. We note that the Gospel writers portray Christ as "the Son of Man [who] must suffer many things...and be rejected...and be killed...and then enter into his glory" (Mk 8:31; Mt 16:21; Lk 17:25; 24:26). More particularly, this aspect of hope comes into prominence when we recall that its immediate context was the Last Supper of Christ with his disciples, the night before his passion and death. It was in the shadow of betrayal and terminal opposition, the shadow of the Cross that the Eucharist was instituted, and that Christ surrendered himself to God for the sake of all who would follow him (Mt 26:17-19; Mk 14:12-17; Lk 22:7-14). To celebrate the Eucharist is thus to participate in the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection: "Do this in memory of me." It enables Christian hope to embrace all the realities of darkness and light, tragedy, oppression, persecution and transformation, sharing in the patience of God as distinctly paschal elements of a trustful movement forward, for the time of hope is still yet to come. Here given the significant effect of the Eucharist, that is, our communion with and transformation into Christ, we can grasp how the life of hope lives by surrendering to the

creative and redeeming mystery of God's love, and how we "may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit" (Rom 15:13). As the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans has it:

And we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us (Rom 5:1-5).

Hence, the Paschal Mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ becomes the parable of Eucharistic hope.²⁷ As nourished on the sacramental reality of Christ's Body and Blood, our hopes of glory, our ultimate desires, and our deepest longings anticipate a real communion with Christ in his self-giving death and resurrection. In the Eucharist, the living sacrifice of Christ becomes the self-sacrificing love of the members of his Body. The bread and wine presented at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist are sacramental signs that prepare us for what is to come. We can offer to God all our sufferings and prayers, thanksgiving and self-surrender, works and acts of love. It is here that we also offer ourselves as a living and holy sacrifice (Rom 12:1). It is the fulfillment of this boundless hope of which we speak when "all of us...are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit" (2Cor 3:18).

In celebrating the Eucharist, the Christian community is thus called to witness to what the resurrection of Christ promises for the future of the world. And hope, if it does not disappoint (Rom 5:5), must be a hope beyond hope, that is, a "living hope" (1Pet 1:3), showing a proper patience and reminding us that the present chaos is not the end of the world, but the labour pain of a new birth coming into glorious form of God's everlasting love (Rom 8:18-21). There is, indeed, a sense that hope informs our understanding of what it is that we most long for and how we should learn to exercise faithfulness to the end, whenever it will be.²⁸ This is to say that Christian hope has to rise to the challenge of adopting an existential attitude so as to confront the many faces of despair in all the agonies of the historical world, and more radically still, as the readiness to take up the cross of self-giving love, even to give one's very life. This is like the long-suffering, patient endurance characteristic at those critical moments of the great martyrs of the Church and the persecuted Christians throughout the ages (Rev 1:9; 2:2-3; 2:19; 3:30). Take the life story, especially the martyrdom of St. Ignatius of Antioch, for example. His letter to the Romans evinced a great love for the Eucharist and how this account of Eucharistic hope sustained the courage necessary to rely on the "God of hope" (Rom 15:13) alone for the fulfillment of glory. As he mystically expressed:

I am the wheat of God, and let me be ground by the teeth of the wild beasts, that I may be found the pure bread of Christ... Entreat Christ for me, that by these instruments I may be found a sacrifice [to God]... But when I suffer, I shall be the freed-person of Jesus, and shall rise again emancipated in Him (Romans 4:1,2).²⁹

Thus, for Ignatius, the Eucharist is the form of his martyrdom, “the medicine of immortality, and the antidote to prevent us from dying.”³⁰ More precisely still, his hope and desire for eternal life can be regarded as the perfect Eucharist. As he explained:

My love has been crucified, and there is no fire in me desiring to be fed; but there is within me water that lives and speaks, saying to me inwardly: Come to the Father. I have no delight in corruptible food... I desire the bread of God, the heavenly bread, the bread of life, which is the flesh of Jesus Christ, the Son of God... and I desire the drink of God, namely his blood, which is incorruptible love and eternal life (Romans 7:3).³¹

Such is a real participation of the Christian in the self-offering of Christ, a full conformity to his self-surrender to God for the life of the world. It gives us a true sense of the meaning of our sacrifice as well as that of hope. So, hope can find its nourishment in the Eucharist in which the absolute future is already anticipated and make it possible for us to persist in a life of service and costly demands of Christian discipleship. We then realize that in the celebration of the Eucharist the whole range of Christian life in time – with its memory of the death of Christ, its experience of the power of his resurrection in the present, and its joyful hope for the final coming of God’s Kingdom – is expressed. It is, precisely, in this memorial of Christ’s Passover that Eucharistic hope emerges with its own possibilities in the light of the God of Exodus and Easter. The Christian community has somewhat “tasted the heavenly gift, the goodness of the Word of God, and the powers of the age to come” (Heb 6:4). Here is found the true hope that must be learned in communion with the God who is with us, for us, and involved with us in all our struggle to bring forth a just and loving world for all humanity, and for the whole circle of God’s embracing love (Jn 3:16) as eschatological anticipations of the new creation.

In this perspective, then, the Eucharist has profound significance for the mission of the Church in the world in so far as “it is the sign of the great feast which God will offer” in order to express forever the universal triumph of the divine saving will and purpose.³² Those who participate in the self-giving love of Christ, then, go out transformed by the Eucharist to transform the world around them with the love they have encountered in the Eucharist, that is, to presuppose “acceptance of the daily effort for justice in love.”³³ Such is the remarkable effect of the Eucharist as an event of communion with Christ and with one another, and as a gift that is endlessly productive, looking to the transformation of “fruit of the earth and work of our human hands.” At the Eucharist, as St. Augustine and many others in the Christian Tradition have affirmed, “we are to be what we celebrate and receive what we really are.”³⁴ As consecrated and transformed by the activity of the Spirit into the Body of Christ, the Christian community bears witness to the glory of God, and therefore, has a mission of hope to a troubled and suffering world. Again, the words of the Encyclical “*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*” point in this direction:

Many problems darken the horizon of our time. We need but think of the urgent need to work for peace, to base relationships between peoples on solid premises of justice

and solidarity, and to defend human life from conception to its natural end...Proclaiming the death of the Lord “until he comes” (1Cor 11:26) entails that all who take part in the Eucharist be committed to changing their lives and making them in a certain way completely “Eucharistic.” It is this fruit of a transfigured existence and a commitment to transforming the world in accordance with the Gospel which splendidly illustrates the eschatological tension inherent in the celebration of the Eucharist and in the Christian life as a whole: “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Rev 22:20).³⁵

Hence, this understanding of the Eucharist as the celebration of a hope-filled preparation for the coming of Christ in a final and definitive way serves not only to lead the Christian community to the expectation of “new heaven and new earth” (Rev 21:1), but also to increase a sense of responsibility for the world and, of course, for the holiness and wholeness of all life. It is here that the character of the Eucharist as an expression of eschatological hope is closely related to a participation in history and actively co-operating with Christ, so that the whole world “might be fashioned anew according to God’s design and brought to its fulfillment.”³⁶

- **Conclusion**

As we come to a conclusion, we acknowledge the inadequacy of our words. Yet we have attempted to present the Eucharist as a foretaste of the fullness of grace to come. To share in the Eucharist at all is an anticipation of the coming of Christ in glory and the heavenly banquet. As a commemoration of Christ’s Paschal Mystery, the Eucharist reveals both hope for history and hope for the future glory beyond history. Here, then, we truly become one with Christ’s hopeful expectation: “I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the Kingdom of God” (Mk 14:25; cf. Mt 26:29; Lk 22:18).

As such, a new sense of being in the world and of being in communion is proposed that changes the horizon of hope. To eat and drink at the Eucharistic table is to be united with Christ, with one another and to be nourished by the self-giving and transforming love of God. So, as the Body of Christ, the Christian community offers “the fruits of the earth, the work of human hands,” pulling together words, signs and ritual actions to give thanks and praise to God, “the fount of all holiness” and life. Every prayer, every act of sharing, eating and drinking together in the Eucharist is, therefore, a sacramental form of Christian hope, pointing towards its completion in the fullness of time. This is to say that the Eucharist is, in essence, the matrix of the Christian “hope-vision” and “hope-expectation” of reality. It breaks open and discloses a new world in particular times and places, that is, the song of creation, incarnation, resurrection and consummation, yet transcendent in glory beyond all created things. In the Eucharist we remember and anticipate Christ who is the source, the goal and the form of what the whole world is becoming. Through his self-giving, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are invited to participate in the eternal life and glory of the Triune God. In this sense, a “Holy Communion” that is brought about between heaven and earth, between the living and the dead, between spiritual and the physical, between personal and communal fulfillment, between the human and the cosmic, is symbolized in the transformation of the

bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Risen Christ. It is this Eucharistic hope that most significantly transforms all life and gives meaning to our journey through history.

Ultimately, then, the Christian community is revealed as a hopeful people, for it is essentially a Eucharistic community – one which celebrates Christ's Paschal Mystery by sharing together the real food and drink of the Kingdom, thereby living in the hope of Christ's promises. Our trials and sufferings are, therefore, taken up into the mystery we celebrate and all that is true, good, and beautiful which we have created in this life will be our definitive participation in it. Here certainly is the hopeful embodiment of Christ's gift of self in our midst for the life of the world. And yet, as absolutely a divine gift, the Eucharist summons the Christian community to work for the future glory in the present with joyful anticipation, confident that people of every race, language and way of life and the whole of creation are given not only grace, but the very author of grace, Christ himself, the divine gift of salvation. Thus, the Eucharist can give us a sense of direction, activating hope in the present time for the consummation of God's purposes for all humanity and for the fulfillment of God's Reign of justice, freedom and peace. If hope is essential to the human condition, then, the Eucharist keeps hope alive within the Christian community and the world. Indeed, a foretaste of the life to come is already celebrated and given in Christ's self-giving love. What we celebrate here on earth is a participation in the banquet of eternity, that is, the final gathering of all the ages on God's holy mountain (Is 25:6; Heb 12:18, 22-24; Mt 22:2-14; Jn 6:51, 54). From this perspective and all that has been explored, the horizon of Eucharistic hope truly opens up in its manifold dimensions.

¹In terms of Eucharistic hope, this conviction leads Paul to spell out the eschatological significance of being Christian: (1Cor 11:26; Gal 4:4; Eph 1:10; 2Cor 5:17; Rom 6: 3-5; 1Cor 10:11; Eph 5:14; 1Tim 4:1; Eph 4:22; Col 3:9; Rom 8:29; Col 1:18; 1Cor 15:20; Col 3:3-4).

² See Encyclical Letter of John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia: On the Eucharist in its relationship to the Church*, par. 18 (Strathfield, N.S.W: St Pauls' Publications, 2003), 19-20.

³ Tony Kelly, *The Bread of God: Nurturing a Eucharistic Imagination* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori Publications, 2001), 83.

⁴ See John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), 33, 47, 49.

⁵ See Gilbert Ost diek, "Body of Christ, Blood of Christ," *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Dermot A. Lane Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), 141.

⁶ Tony Kelly, *The Bread of God*, 82.

⁷ See Gabriel Marcel, *Homo Viator: Introduction to a Metaphysic of Hope*, trans. E. Craufurd (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 60. Hence if there is hope, it will arise not out of empirical evidence that can be tested but out of deep communion.

⁸ See John D. Zizioulas, in "The Mystery of the Church in Orthodox Tradition", *One in Christ*, 24 (1988), 299. Cf. also in his book, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985).

⁹ Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 152.

¹⁰ Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 60.

¹¹ See Peter C. Phan, *Responses to 101 Questions on Death and Eternal Life* (New York/ Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1997), 12-13. Peter C. Phan, "Eschatology and Ecology: The Environment in the End-Time," *Dialogue & Alliance* 19.2 (1995), 105-106.

¹² See H.U. von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics I: Seeing the Form*, 679.

¹³ F.X. Durrwell, *The Eucharist: Presence of Christ*, trans. S. Attanasio (Denville, N.J.: Dimension Book, 1974), 32.

¹⁴ See Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books), 194.

¹⁵ See Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 191.

¹⁶ See John D. Zizioulas, *Being As Communion*, 119.

¹⁷ See Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 150. Firstly, *koinonia* signifies the common ownership of the goods necessary for earthly existence. It is a concrete gesture of human charity. Secondly, *koinonia* designates the union of the faithful with Christ through the Eucharist. It is a means of sharing in the body of Christ. Thirdly, *koinonia* means the union of the Christians with the triune God. This summary is cited in Horton Davies, *Bread of Life and Cup of Joy: Newer Ecumenical Perspectives on the Eucharist* (West Broadway, Eugene OR 97401: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 123-124.

¹⁸ Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 149.

¹⁹ Tony Kelly, *The Bread of God*, 70-71.

²⁰ See Monika K. Hellwig, *The Eucharist and the Hunger of the World* (Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 1999), 2, 9-10, 14.

²¹ See Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 204.

²² See Vatican II Council, *Lumen Gentium, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, par. 48, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. by Austin Flannery, (New York: Costello Publishing; Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1998), 408.

²³ See Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 205.

²⁴ In the Eucharistic hymn, *Verbum Supernum*, Thomas Aquinas gives a summary of four freedoms, central to Christian life: "By being born he gave us companionship. At Supper he gave us food. On the Cross he was our ransom. Reigning in glory he gives us reward [eternal life]." Cited in John Moloney, "The Eucharist: Proclamation and Gift of Freedom," in *Eucharist and Freedom*, 46th International Eucharistic Congress, Wroclaw, Poland, (May, 1997).

²⁵ See Tony Kelly, *The Bread of God*, 75-76.

²⁶ David N. Power, *Sacrament: The Language of God's Giving* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1999). 281.

²⁷ See Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 73. See also Dermot A. Lane, *Keeping Hope Alive: Stirrings in Christian Theology* (New York, Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1996), 68-69.

²⁸ See Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 12-13.

²⁹ See David W. Bercot, Editor, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson), 351. See also Roch A. Kereszty, Ocist., *Wedding Feast of The Lamb: Eucharistic Theology from a Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Perspective* (Chicago/ Mudelein, Illinois: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), 95.

³⁰ See David W. Bercot, Editor, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 251. See also Roch A. Kereszty, Ocist., *Wedding Feast of The Lamb: Eucharistic Theology from a Historical, Biblical, and Systematic Perspective*, 95.

³¹ See David W. Bercot, Editor, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*, 251.

³² Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, 128.

³³ Martelet, *The Risen Christ and the Eucharistic World*, trans. Rene Hague (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 187.

³⁴ See St. Augustine of Hippo, *Sermo*, 272: PL 38, 1246-1248.

³⁵ The Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, par. 20.

³⁶ See Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, par. 2. See also pars. 38, 39, in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. by Austin Flannery, (New York: Costello Publishing; Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1998), 937-938.