

A Charism Illumined: Eucharistic Anamnesis Informing ‘Viva Memoria’

*“You have called me to relive in myself
the Mystery of Jesus...and to be a living memorial of it...”*

Constitutions and Statutes Order of the Most Holy
Redeemer #87 Formula of Profession

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Introduction

The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) energized a life-giving impulse which coursed through the Church. One of the most generative of its instructions directed congregations and orders of religious to reach back into their history, to be guided by scholarly investigation of early texts and archival material and by this effort to reappropriate the original inspirations of their founders. There was great reason to hope that by retrieving its natal charism a community would renew itself. There was even greater hope that the still burning embers of the Spirit’s work could be fanned into flame and the light of its fire would illumine the path ahead in new times and new circumstances.

The Order of the Most Holy Redeemer pursued this directive in company with Redemptorist brothers whose invaluable efforts brought its founder, the Venerable Maria Celeste Crostarosa (1696-1755), into the light. With all of the revealed vivacity of her spirit and mystical experience came rediscovery of the institute’s charism, the life force to be reappropriated by her sisters, the call to be a living memory of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus.

During ten years of association with the Order and two years within the community, conversations with friends, lay associates, religious of other congregations,

and visitors to our monastery I have often attempted to explain the subtle nuances of our charism, namely that the heart of the Redemptoristine charism is the call to be a “living memory” of Christ. (Crostarosa, Dialogues, Oppitz Trans. #104, p. 54) Invariably a disclaimer would follow; “But that does not mean mere imitation. It goes beyond that.” And the effort to expand on the “beyond” has always fallen woefully short of communicating the meaning of “living memory.” From this sense of inadequacy was born a search for a way of defining “living memory” that would be appropriately substantial yet comprehensible.

The Eucharistic Connection

With time and within the misty atmosphere of mental conjecture, “living memory” began to merge with the words of Jesus repeated in the Eucharistic Rite, “Do this in memory of me.” Suddenly the overlap was not merely a coincidence of vocabulary. The search drew me toward a concept of Eucharistic theology explored in graduate school. That first appreciation of the principle of Eucharistic anamnesis seemed like a bright star exploding before my eyes, initially blinding in its brightness but then illuminating the entire field of vision. It was explained that at the consecration of the Mass not only is the Body and Blood of Jesus made present under the appearance of bread and wine but that Jesus Christ and all of the Paschal Mystery is also made present and active among us in this present time. We are not merely remembering Jesus’ life and sacrifice on the cross. Those events are rendered as living and actively working in their redemptive power for the world at this moment. That pattern of explanation and

disclaimer emerged from the past and coupled with the “living memory” question of the present. Furthermore, it suggested that the concept of anamnesis itself could provide clarification for that of “living memory”.

By connecting “living Memory” with the anamnesis of the Mass, a Eucharistic context for the search began to take shape. The form and features of this context emerged from careful reading of the Dialogues and Autobiography of Maria Celeste in which her post-communion meditation experiences provide a rich vein of evidence.

One morning after Holy Communion I heard in the very center of my Soul these words of the Credo pronounced: “Consubstantialem Patri per quem omnia facta sunt,” [One in being with the Father, through whom all things were made.]so that filled to over flowing with Divine Gifts, it seemed to me that the Divine Essence was in me...My Lord Jesus Christ...gave me His Divine Heart which he enclosed in my breast in place of my own...I seemed to enter into a new life of Love, a life in God.

Autobiography, Capitolo 18 Critical Ed.; p. 43, 1940 English.

This morning...my whole soul was transformed into your very substance
Dialogues, Oppitz trans. #30, p. 23

Since your soul is the figure of My substance, what really are you within your spirit, in your very being, if not a living image, a living copy of me...
#47, p. 31

After I received Holy Communion...I saw You within me and myself changed into you...I felt that just one word was being spoken to me, namely, “Substance of the Father” ...This transformation, O Lord of my heart, of my being into Yours, You deigned to make so many times!
#125, p. 61

This morning I went to Holy Communion and You transformed me into yourself so that I entered into the humanity of Your Divine Word and began to sacrifice myself to the Father for all men.
#147, p. 67

You do this precisely by the spirit of observance in terms of your Rule, which was given by Me so that you might be a viva memoria (a dynamic memory)

These passages speak of a transformation that is not merely an imitative overlay but a participation in the substance, the very essence of Jesus in which He, in turn, is consubstantial with the Father. Nor is it a static participation but a highly animated one that propels Maria Celeste “into a new life of Love, a life in God”. By such human participation and animation Jesus, His Paschal Mystery, his work of redemption is made present and active in our time. For Maria Celeste the Incarnation of Jesus was the opening of new territory in the relationship between God and humanity, a territory into which she entered with abandon. By partaking of the Eucharist, the essential act of remembering Jesus, she became substantially one with him, not merely an imitation of him. Gradually these mystical experiences revealed to her the necessity of remembering always, of living a life of remembering, a life of ‘oneness’ with Jesus Christ.

Eucharistic Anamnesis

The phenomena of Eucharistic anamnesis and “living memory” each reflect the other. Yet their depth, their power to inform sacramental and spiritual appreciation was lost over time. While the anamnetic character of the Eucharistic meal was buried under weighty, mountainous layers of theological argumentation, “living memory” suffered from the loss to obscurity of Maria Celeste’s mystical experience for over two hundred years. In the 20th century each became the object of a kind of archaeological dig, a treasure to be unearthed in tectonic shifts powered by the Second Vatican Council.

The crucial feature of both anamnesis and “living memory” is the ability to render past events and the person of Jesus present and active in our time. However, offering this explanation and pointing to the connection is not enough. One must ask, “Where does this astounding concept of anamnesis come from?” The answers will more fully illuminate the Redemptoristine charism, and the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church gives inquirers a start.

The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ’s Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice... In all of the Eucharist Prayers we find after the words of institution a prayer called the *anamnesis* or memorial. [“Do this in memory of me.”]

In the sense of Sacred Scripture the *memorial* is not merely a recollection of past events but the proclamation of the mighty works wrought by God for men...they become in a certain way present and real. This is how Israel understands its liberation from Egypt: every time Passover is celebrated, the Exodus events are made present to the memory of believers so that they may conform their lives to them...When the Church celebrates the Eucharist she commemorates Christ’s Passover, and it is made present...As often as the sacrifice of the Cross...is celebrated on the altar, the work of redemption is carried out. (#1362-1364)

Rooted in Jewish Liturgical Practice

The memorial or anamnestic character of the Eucharistic banquet is not a conceptualization newly minted by post-Vatican II sacramental theology. Rather, it is a theological concept found in the oldest Eucharistic prayers which reflect how the practices of the early Church were deeply rooted in ancient Hebrew liturgical tradition. “The primitive eucharist was a commemoration. Not a commemoration of the last supper, but a commemoration of Christ, and of his saving mysteries. The idea...of a ‘mere’ commemoration (*muda commemoratio*) would have been meaningless to the

Jewish mind.” (Lash, p.44) In 1969, Rabbi Marc Tannenbaum, then director of national inter-religious affairs for the American Jewish Committee and observer at the Second Vatican Council, wrote: “To commemorate and to remember is in the Jewish tradition never a mere memory but always implies a look toward the future and a making present again.” (Breaking Bread, p. 148) The Jewish Passover Seder is the penultimate expression of the Hebrew commemorative meal making present in the real time the mystery of the Passover of the Lord God.

Based upon the work of scholars in Eucharistic theology, among them Louis Bouyer, Louis Ligier, Joachim Jeremias, Jean-Paul Audet and Dom Gregory Dix, an even greater understanding of the origins of the earliest Eucharistic prayers or anaphoras is emerging. The most ancient anaphoras conform in structure to the Jewish prayers said at a fellowship meal, most especially the *birkat-ha-mazon*, which was typically anamnetic in character and featured three movements: blessing, thanksgiving and supplication. (Audet in Kline, p. 410) Beyond appreciating the stylistic resemblance of early Eucharistic prayers, it was Dom Gregory Dix who had the insight to consider the *sitz-im-Leben*, that is, the institutional setting in actual Hebraic practice, which gave specific meaning to these liturgical meal prayers. (Kline, p. 413) Dom Gregory’s insights answered a most basic question: what did Jesus, as a Jew of his time, have in mind; what did he mean when he said, “Do this in memory of me”? “The command of Jesus did not refer to the repetition of a sacral fellowship meal. This could be presumed as fundamental to Jewish religious practice. In other words, Jesus did not have to institute a meal, because the meal was already there. What Jesus did was to invest this meal with

a new anamnestic character.” (Kline, p. 414) For the Hebrew of Jesus’ time the Passover meal was not merely “a subjective, human psychological act of returning to the past, but an objective reality” undertaken to make the Passover of the Lord perpetually present before God. (Bouyer, p. 103) “By the power of the Lord of history, those events are in a sense made present in the liturgy, so that the worshippers are living them again in their own lives. A Jewish ritual memorial, therefore, is no mere thinking of the past; it is a memorial filled with the reality of that which it commemorates.” (Moloney, p. 265) This was the anamnestic character of the meal. When Jesus said, “Do this in memory of me” he invested the meal with a new anamnestic object, that is, the Paschal mystery, which is the saving acts of his own life, death and resurrection.

The Implications of Anamnesis for Our Practice

Celebrations of the Eucharist in which we share today are the occasions in which we call to mind the person and events of our salvation – Jesus Christ and his Paschal Mystery – in such a way that “we” render them living and active in our own time. The “we”, plural pronoun, is operative here. The priest, although in *persona Christi*, is not acting alone. The gathered community is not merely present or participating by observation. The community gathered for the memorial meal is integral to anamnesis, to recalling and thereby making actively present the person and saving action of the Redeemer. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium) of the Second Vatican Council declared that God’s people gathered for Eucharist “offer the immaculate victim through the hands of the priest but also together with him”. (48) The

Eucharistic prayer emphasizes this integral function by repeated use of the pronoun “we”. *We thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you (EPII). We offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice (EPIII). We, your people and your ministers, recall his passion, his resurrection from the dead and his ascension into glory (EPI).* Indeed, the level of participation penetrates more deeply if the community offers itself along with the gifts of bread and wine and unites itself with the words of Eucharistic Prayer III, “*Father we bring you these gifts. We ask you to make them holy by the power of your Spirit, that they may become the body and the blood of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.*” By this collective effort and offering and in light of the concept of Eucharistic anamnesis Jesus becomes uniquely present in the consecrated bread and wine but also actively present in our time and within and among those gathered. And this answers the question; in what way is Jesus Christ made actively present at each Eucharistic celebration? At least in part, Jesus the Redeeming Christ, is made present within those who are united with Him in this memorial. In remembering, we become what is remembered. Just as the anamnestic character of our Eucharist is rooted in an ancient religious ritual, appreciation of the effect of anamnesis is imbedded in our history. Saint Fulgentius of Ruspe, bishop (467-533CE), speaking of the obligation of the faithful to fulfill the words of the Savior at the Last Supper wrote, “Thus they drink the Lord’s cup by preserving the holy bond of love; without it, even if a man should deliver *his body to be burned*, he gains nothing. But the gift of love enables us to become in reality what we celebrate as mystery in the sacrifice.” (Liturgy of the Hours, p. 379)

Alexander Schmemmann, the late Russian Orthodox scholar of liturgy, wrote about the power of anamnestic memory in his work The Eucharist – Sacrament of the Kingdom. His words are so eloquently reminiscent of the Constitutions of the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer that they must be quoted at length.

...in Christ...memory comes to reign and is restored as a lifecreating power, and, in *remembering*, man partakes not of the experience of the fall... but of the overcoming of this fall through “life everlasting.” For Christ himself is the incarnation and the gift to mankind of *God’s memory* in all its fullness...

The essence of our faith and the new life granted in it consists in *Christ’s memory*, realized in us through our *memory of Christ*. From the very first day of Christianity, to believe in Christ meant to *remember* him and keep him *always in mind*. ... From the very beginning the faith of Christians was memory and remembrance, but memory restored to its life creating essence – for... this new memory is a joyous recognition of the one who was resurrected, who lives and therefore is present and abides... Faith eternally knows that the one who is remembered *lives*...

The remembrance of Christ is the entry into his love, making us brothers and neighbors, “brethren” in his ministry. His life and presence in us and “among” us is certified *only* by our love for each other and for all who God has sent into, has included in our life, and this means above all in the *remembrance* of each other and in the commemoration of each other in Christ. Therefore, in bringing his sacrifice to the altar, we *create the memory of each other*, we identify each other as living in Christ and being united with each other in him. (Schmemmann, p.128-30)

The Constitution and Statutes of the Order of the Most Holy Redeemer in its section on the Liturgy asserts again and again this understanding of Eucharistic meal as the agent of “living memory”.

The Church continues to make present this Memorial of the Passover of the Lord, a living bond of love between Christians and a pledge of future glory. (#37) ...Our liturgical celebrations must give witness at one and same time to the holiness of the Lord and to His loving presence among us. (#40) ...This silent contemplation, maintained

in faith and love in the depth of the soul, allows us a personal experience of God and also permits us to enter fully into the plan of Redemption. (#42) ...We allow Christ to relive His Mystery in us by contemplating Him in the whole of His life.

Participation in the Memorial by the Power of the Holy Spirit

The scope of this paper does not permit lengthy discussion concerning the history of debate regarding consecratory elements of the Liturgy of the Eucharist. While the Church in the west has long held to the words of institution, “this is my body...this is my blood” of the narrative of Jesus’ last supper narrative, as the consecratory formula, the Church of the east has always pronounced the epiclesis, the prayer of the invocation of the Holy Spirit, as the essential moment of consecration. Again it is Alexander Schmemmann who calls the debate back to order. “Despite hundreds of treatises written in response to this question, neither academic theological nor liturgical studies has given, alas, a satisfactory answer...We cannot ‘break through’ to the genuine meaning, embedded in the very experience of the Church, of the eucharist as the *sacrament of remembrance*.” (Schmemmann, p.192-3)

Although today Roman Catholic teaching declares the entire Eucharistic Prayer as consecratory, the very existence of the old debate serves as a reminder to renew our attentiveness to the work of the Spirit. This attentiveness is particularly essential to appreciating the implications of belief in the anamnestic character of the Eucharistic memorial. Each of the four principal Eucharistic prayers includes an epiclesis invoking the power of the Holy Spirit as the agent of consecration; “let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy”. (EP II) By these words we acknowledge that it is by the power of the Holy Spirit that the

gifts are transformed. In these words we ask that we too may become holy and transformed into the mystery that we celebrate, the mystery of the *sacrament of remembrance*.

For Redemptoristines the vocabulary of anamnesis: memory, remember, remembrance, recall, memorial, should be like music to the ears. The charism to be a “living memory” of Jesus was revealed to our foundress during post-communion meditations in which she experienced the transformative power of the Eucharist accomplished through the work of the Spirit. Her daughters are to be transformed into the “living memory” by participation in the Eucharistic banquet, which was from the beginning an exercise of memory. By our act of remembering we participate in the transformation of the Eucharistic elements into the Body and Blood of Jesus and, in turn, we are transformed into the very life which we remember. In addition, the Jesus of Maria Celeste’s mystical experiences also asked, “You shall take on a memory of My life in each hour [of the day] ...I shall be the lamp of all your activities and you shall eat the living food of eternal life which was contained in the works of My life while I was a pilgrim on earth. This is the spirit of the Institute: the viva memoria and My imitation just as I lived among you.” (Dialogues,#104-105, p. 54-55). Elsewhere this level of attentive remembering is referred to as the *fixed gaze*. To the degree that the daughters of Celeste are recollected to this *fixed gaze*, their very lives take on an anamnestic character; their lives become capable of rendering the Paschal Mystery present and active in real time.

In this way our very lives become the “living Memory” of Jesus. Our acts of memory, in so far as they are facilitated by the Holy Spirit, render us not only spiritual people (*pneumatikos*) but also bearers of the Spirit (*pneumatophoros*), living *epiclesis*. (Bianchi, p.162)

By our lives we call down the power of the Holy Spirit into every corner of the world and the troubled psyche of humanity.

The original question concerned the deeper meaning of a charism, which is an invitation to be a “living memory” of Jesus Christ, to make the person of Jesus present in our world in a manner that goes beyond any imitation. Our Eucharistic liturgies are “pregnant with reality”, a reality called for in the anamnesis, the appeal of Jesus in his last supper to “Do this in memory of me.” (The Study of Liturgy, p.14) Jesus, the incarnation of the memory of God, is asking us to become, in turn, the incarnation of his memory in our world. The words of Maria Celeste express self-affirmation and encourage her community today:

Now that your sacred Humanity, united to the Word of God,
has been glorified...It gives me such a risen life in God that it transforms
me into the eternal life of God, as I await the dawning of that new day,
which will make me blessed for all eternity.

Florilegium, p. 95, Crostarosa, Exercise of Love for Every Day

If we have it in our power to make present and active the saving work of Jesus by our remembering, the quality of that remembering, our awareness of and presence to it, becomes so much more vital. Appropriation of the anamnesis as metaphor for “living memory” raises the volume and imperative of the call to be contemplatives. For Redemptoristines, for all contemplatives, or those who would live their active lives in a more contemplative fashion, the concept of Eucharistic anamnesis suggests an ordering of ones’ life in a way conducive to remembering, to being recollected to the person, life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Almost fifty years ago Thomas Merton declared, “In the night of our technological barbarism, monks must be as trees which exist silently in the dark and by their vital presence purify the air.” (Merton, p .124) Just as the trees of the forest breathe transforming life into the world,

our conscious and active “living memory” is co-creator with the divine breath of the Spirit of the saving presence of Jesus in our time. Appreciation of the anamnestic power of our “living memory” is impetus for the life and work of contemplation.

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