



**In the bread and wine,
that we bring to the altar,
all creation is taken up by
Christ the Redeemer
to be transformed
and presented to the Father.**

Sacramentum Caritatis, # 47

+ Rome, Ash Wednesday 2008

Dear Sisters,

With this letter I want to continue the reflections on some rites of the Holy Mass as a help to concretize our eucharistic life-style, concentrating this time on the preparation of the gifts.

In the beginning of Christianity the faithful brought the gifts which were required for the Eucharist. What was left over after the celebration served to supply food for the poor of the congregation. This changed in the course of medieval times. As the number of faithful grew, the liturgy became almost exclusively an action of the priest. Normally he was the only one who received communion. In this way the people lost sight of the eucharistic gifts and their deeper significance. The emphasis was placed on the sacrificial character of the Mass, from which was wrongly deduced the name “offertory.” In order to “offer” something people gave Mass stipends, alms, and money for indulgences. The common collection taken today has its origin here.

The reform of the Liturgy replaced the word “offertory” – although it is still used – with the more exact expression “preparation of gifts.” “What we call *offertory* has another meaning. The word *offertory* comes from the Latin *offere* or from *operari*. *Offere* does not mean to offer but to work, to prepare. It referred to the preparation of the altar for the Eucharist for which some action was necessary in order that the candles, the gifts, bread and wine were properly available for the Eucharist. Initially it was a simple exterior preparation for the eucharistic celebration. But soon people began to understand the deeper meaning of it.” (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger: *God Is Near us*) The preparation of the gifts is essential for the celebration of the sacrifice of Christ, which he offered for us once and for all time. “The only sacrifice of the Church is Christ’s death on the cross. God gave himself in his Son for the life and the salvation of the world. This sacrifice superseded all other offerings (sacrifices) once and for all. Against this background the gifts which are brought by the faithful to the altar can only be called *sacrifice (offering)* in a figurative sense.” (Jan Magunski) Indeed, the expression “offering” can easily imply the belief that the sacrifice of Christ did not suffice and has to be complemented by our “offerings.” But it is “our” sacrifice only in so far as we unite it with the one of Christ, entering so to say into his sacrifice. “In his sacrifice Christ brings to perfection all human attempts to offer sacrifices.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church).

In order that the preparation of gifts will not be considered of secondary importance, time plays a decisive role. “This is not to be viewed simply as a kind of ‘interval’ between the liturgy of the

word and the liturgy of the Eucharist.... This humble and simple gesture is actually very significant: in the bread and wine that we bring to the altar, all creation is taken up by Christ the Redeemer to be transformed and presented to the Father. In this way we also bring to the altar all the pain and suffering of the world, in the certainty that everything has value in God's eyes." (Sacramentum Caritatis, # 47). Unfortunately the simple but so meaningful parts of the preparation of the gifts are quite often not perceived. The altar is already set; the gifts are seldom brought to the altar because bread and wine are already on the altar. In this way the faithful do not have the opportunity to put the host – and with it themselves with all their strengths and weaknesses – on the paten. While the priest says the prayers of the preparation of the gifts the congregation often sings a hymn which is destined rather for the procession of the gifts. Furthermore, we can observe that some hymns have no relation to the action of the priest.

I was impressed by an example of a community of Sisters which can perhaps animate us to arrange and experience more consciously the presentation of bread and wine. One Sister held a dish with hosts. The priest held the paten. Then each Sister and all present went forward, took a host from the dish and put it on the paten. In this way the faithful experienced consciously the significance of the preparation of the gifts. It became clear to them that not only bread and wine will be transformed, but also we and the whole creation. However, only what we put on the altar will be transformed. Let us ask: How much do we put on the altar? How much of ourselves? Is there still something which I want to hold back?

Dear Sisters, the gifts of bread and wine may be signs of our surrender but they also refer to our obligation to use and share the gifts of creation according to the will of the Creator. "Therefore we ask you, God our Father, give us the courage to enter into the sacrifice of your Son so that we receive from our surrender to you the strength for life." (Prayer over the gifts) Perhaps Lent, which we will begin today, may just be the appropriate time to recall the deep significance of the preparation of the gifts. "The whole secret life of Nazareth, this Advent progression towards the Easter event, is present in them. We start, as it were, with Nazareth, in the act of preparation, and from there we move towards Golgotha and finally into the Resurrection event of Communion." (Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger: God Is Near Us)

Information:

- I enjoyed the many greetings for Christmas and the New Year, which I received from you. With many wishes of blessing you added a remembrance in one or more Holy Masses, for which I am very grateful. Unfortunately we get much of our mail only some weeks after Christmas due to the very irregular mail delivery between Christmas and Epiphany. Nevertheless – a hearty thanks to all of you!
- Pope Benedict XVI grants all the Sisters of our Congregation his Apostolic Blessing, as he informed us through the Substitute of the Secretariat of State, Archbishop Fernando Filoni.
- From February 26 to March 4 the Provincial Superiors will meet with the Sisters of the General Leadership here in Rome. The main theme of consideration will be the reconfiguration of our Congregation. I ask you now already to accompany this meeting with your prayers.
- The Congregation for Clergy published a letter, written on December 8, 2007 by the Prefect Cardinal Hummes, in which he launches the initiative to promote perpetual Eucharistic adoration and spiritual motherhood to support priests. You can find the letter on <http://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2007-12/21-13/Adoration.html>. I highly recommend that you support this important initiative according to what is possible for you.

➤ I want to thank also for the answers to the questions with regard to my report which I received from many convents. It would go beyond the scope of this letter if I would give an account of all the answers. In the following, therefore, I will give a summary of similarities as well as of differences in the answers.

○ *How can we live the hope-filled daring of Mother Pauline?*

In general it was emphasized that we can live this “hope-filled daring” only when we are firmly anchored in God, live according to the Gospel and seek together the will of God. Then we will perceive the mission which God wants to entrust to us today and we will be ready to risk new ways.

○ *Where is our charism being lived most visibly?*

Many answers expressed that our charism, to make the love of Christ tangible, will mostly be visible when we look at Mother Pauline (Sisters referred to Article 7 of our Constitutions) and when we put into practice our eucharistic life-style. Some Sisters mentioned concretely some apostolic activities where this – according to their opinion – is most visible. Also in the collaboration with other Congregations and our Lay Associates the essence of our charism can be experienced.

○ *Where are the shoots of new life of the charism?*

The answers to this question were manifold. Basically they underlined the intentional living of our charism. Sisters referred in particular to our Lay Associates in whom the charism is coming alive anew. They also mentioned hospitable, open communities; convents committing themselves to non-violence; renewal courses and international meetings. Sisters referred also to individual Sisters who had been sent to another Province or to the Philippines in order to serve there – in spite of the lack of personnel in their own Provinces.

○ *Are we poor enough to take risks?*

The answers to this question ranged between “Yes” and “No”, according to the aspect of poverty which had been stressed. Many Sisters see our poverty today in the lack of personnel, in the acceptance of aging and sickness, in letting go of activities which are dear to us, in the changes which are a consequence of that. Our income is declining, the expenses are rising. The answers also revealed clearly that we cannot absolve ourselves from the influence of our consumer society in which possession is considered higher than being.

○ *What is our mission here and now?*

The answers to this question overlapped very often with those of the preceding question. (Are we aware that our communities ... exist for the Kingdom?) Therefore I will combine the answers to both questions. I would like to point out that most answers distinguished very clearly between mission and ministry. Our consecrated life as such is a witness. The essence of our mission as Sisters of Christian Charity is seen especially in making visible to others the love and the light of Christ, to stand up for life, to be committed to justice and peace, to be “a living memory of Jesus’ way of living and acting.”

○ *Do we astonish others by our life, by our eucharistic life-style?*

The Sisters answered hesitantly to this question, many with “Yes”, but some also with “No”. Some Sisters thought that the expression “to astonish” is not adequate and suggested to call it rather “to edify” or “to motivate”. One convent expressed the opinion that we do not astonish others but that we generate admiration. Some convents said that we – insofar as we live our life-style authentically – awaken in many people questions about and a renewed searching for God who alone can fulfil our life.

I wish all of us God’s blessing for the “way to Jerusalem” which Jesus invites us to walk with him. With hearty greetings also from our Generalate community, your grateful

Sr. Adalberta