*In finem dilexit eos.*

“Before the festival day of the Pasch,” writes St. John, “Jesus knowing that his hour was come, that he should pass out of this world to the Father: having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them unto the end.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Dear friends, our divine Master has loved us unto the consummation of his mission, unto the consummation of his mystery, unto the consummation of himself. Nothing was left for him but a bed of suffering and sadness: all was consummated! O sublime mystery of the Redemption!

Not only did the Son of Man spend thirty-three years among us, thoroughly renewing mankind through his thoughts, words and even the least gestures of a laboriously rhythmic daily life; but he further wished to offer himself as a victim of love on the most wondrous altar. The most wondrous: nay the most dreaded, the most painful, the most ignominious…

But salvation is not limited to the sad spectacle of the crucifixion. The glorious stigmata of the Risen One remind us that Redemption must remain topical in our history and extend to each of our lives. Yes, truly, our Lord loved us thoroughly and his love endures from generation to generation until the fulfillment of time: “And his mercy is from generation unto generations, to them that fear him.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Our life here below is an uninterrupted preparation for the last Passover, the last passage that will lead us from this valley of tears to the vision of God. And since in the “evening of our life,” writes St. John of the Cross, “we shall be judged on love,” [[3]](#footnote-3) it seems that there is no other way of anticipating the encounter with God than to live constantly at foot of the Cross, which means resolving to follow our Lord in the secret of Nazareth, immolating ourselves daily by the exact and loving fulfillment of our duty of state. This is the simple “ecstasy of work and life,” [[4]](#footnote-4) so dear to St. Francis de Sales. But there is a still more sublime mode of union which brings us into direct and immediate contact with the intimate confidant of our soul: this bridge raised to heaven is the holy liturgy. The highest work of love, divine worship is the renewal, actualization, continuation of the Passion of Christ; and reveals to the mediocrity of this age the mercy of the Savior and distributes the innumerable benefits of his Passion. Whether in the Holy Eucharist – the *Sacrament of Love* –, in the sacramental life or in the chanting of the divine office, our Lord continues to flood the world with his graces; and, in such an excess of charity, he not only offers himself, but goes so far as even to beg the love of man and to try to awaken the generosity of a heart whose length, breadth, height, and depth he knows from experience, to make it a source of goodness and merit. “Love has no convicts or slaves,” writes St. Francis de Sales, “but brings all things under its obedience by so sweet a force that, just as nothing is as strong as love, so nothing is as worthy of love as its strength.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Dear friends, in dying on the Cross, our Lord has clearly shown us the liturgy as the place of this glorious sharing: may we contemplate Jesus, who gives himself; may we come to understand how the soul must respond to the song of the bridegroom with sacrifice and tenderness, sometimes in the intimacy of the heart, sometimes by the communion of the saints.

The liturgy is a mark of the Creator's predilection for his creature. Jesus chose to remain in the midst of men in the wholeness of his mystery. Love cannot be reduced to mere feelings and impressions: it rather the bestowal of a gift. Saint Thomas teaches that the more valuable the gift exchanged between friends, the more strongly will it bind them, and the more perfect will be the union of their hearts. Through the liturgy, God the Father continues to send his Son, his perfect image, who, as we read in the Epistle to the Hebrews “being the brightness of his glory, and the figure of his substance, and upholding all things by the word of his power, making purgation of sins, sitteth on the right hand of the majesty on high.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

In the Divine Office, Jesus Christ gives himself to us as the Word of truth who fulfills the prophecies of the Old Covenant as their true and full meaning. “Whoever be the authors of the psalms,” writes Saint Hilary of Poitiers, “everything in them must be read and understood in the light of the gospel... The whole psalter refers either to the advent of Our Lord Jesus Christ and his incarnation, or to his passion and glorious reign, or finally to our own resurrection and the conditions of bliss...” Our Lord destined this practical and loving wisdom for our limited minds, and when animated by the most worthy dispositions, we raise our song to him, in joy as in sadness, with praise and abandonment, this word lifts us up and conforms us to our divine model, making us one with him. Charity thus reaches its most perfect expression as a heart to heart between Jesus who sanctifies and of the soul sanctified which he visits anew, in his mysteries and in his glory, allowing himself to be assimilated like gushing water. “And as the rain and the snow” wrote Isaiah, “come down from heaven, and return no more thither, but soak the earth, and water it, and make it to spring, and give seed to the sower, and bread to the eater: So shall my word be, which shall go forth from my mouth: it shall not return to me void, but it shall do whatsoever I please, and shall prosper in the things for which I sent it.” [[7]](#footnote-7)  It is therefore with, in and through Christ, Word and Wisdom, that creation is enabled to return to its source. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God... And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.”[[8]](#footnote-8) The Son of God’s charitable lowering of himself is the marvelous driving force of our sanctification.

The sacraments present this admirable exchange in a new light since the Redeemer shares not his wisdom but his life; we receive through them the grace which is the distinctive mark of his great charity and the pledge of our participation in future bliss.

Finally, in the Eucharist, the foundation and summit of Christian life, divine goodness shows its full greatness. It is no longer a question of the historical and figurative presence contained in Sacred Scripture; nor of the divine effects produced and signified by the sacramental life; Jesus gives himself with his whole being: body, blood, soul and divinity. “Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends.” [[9]](#footnote-9) There he is, before our eyes, humbly veiled under the Eucharistic species, truly present, God and man. There he is, crying out loudly – “My son, give me your heart” –; He expects nothing from us in return but love. “In this nuptial banquet,” writes Monsieur Olier, “our Lord treats the soul as his wife, testifying that by holy communion he shares all the intentions of his wife, as also she likewise shares all those of Jesus Christ, her Bridegroom.” [[10]](#footnote-10)

Alas, the sin of our first parents has profoundly weakened our original and fundamental orientation to good; without divine help, our souls, in their weakness, would be incapable of attaining heaven. The liturgy is a lesson on returning to God; it is the remedy which the celestial physician applies to the wounds and burns of human history; the bread that strengthens and sustains the hungry, the gushing water that comforts and soothes, the oil that softens the waters of bitterness and discouragement ... The multifaceted and inexhaustible love of Our Lord who is again incarnated in a set of words, gestures, rites, practices and colors which we must cherish and treat with greatest care, above all because they constitute the golden garment of the chosen one mentioned in the royal epithalamium: *astitit Regina a dextris tuis in vestitu deaurato*.[[11]](#footnote-11) On the day of the incarnation, the Son of God assumed our mortal condition; a reflection of the harmonious union between earth and heaven, sealed by the shedding of blood, the liturgy is both human and divine. Its body of texts, ceremonies, and rubrics have no other purpose than to reveal to the eyes of human intelligence, so feeble and miserable, the greatness of God's loving plan for creation. And this is the soul of it: the Redeemer of mankind descends to earth anew and gives us the opportunity freely to express a little of our affection and our fidelity. What reverence and solemnity could be too much? What attention and fervor are called for! May we put divine worship first!

The liturgy measures the intensity of our union with God and is, therefore, indirectly, the truest and most splendid realm of fraternal charity. All the signs of veneration and love shown by our attitude, our singing, our thoughts, the details of the ceremonies, the beauty and decoration of our buildings, the solemnity of the holy mysteries, their meticulous and attentive celebration… in a word, everything that contributes to the worthy celebration of the liturgy must renew us in the depths of our hearts so that charity dilates abundantly and harmoniously, revealing the features of Jesus Christ. Romano Guardini writes:

Devotional forms […] should be permeated by warmth of feeling. On this point as well the liturgy has many recommendations to make. The ideas which fill it are vital: that is to say, they spring from the impulses of the heart which has been molded by grace, and must again in their turn affect other eager and ardent hearts. The Church's worship is full of deep feeling, of emotion that is intense, and sometimes even vehement. […] The heart speaks powerfully, but thought at once takes the lead; the forms of prayer are elaborately constructed, the constituent parts carefully counterbalanced; and as a rule they deliberately keep emotion under strict control.[[12]](#footnote-12)

The liturgy is meant to reform in depth all the capacities of human love: it therefore signifies the long-term work carried out by grace and, for this reason, goes beyond sensations. Liturgy cannot be considered separately from theological life, of which it is the vehicle, the instrument and the manifestation. To make the work of redeeming love our own is to share the intentions of the Heart of Jesus and to hasten the coming of his reign in the world. Because it is, properly speaking, the prayer of the Church and not a merely personal matter, the divine liturgy possesses an incomparable power over the heart of man. Through it the treasures amassed by the blessed throughout the history of the Church are opened to us. Glorious communion of saints which gives us access to the needs of our neighbor; united to charity itself, how easy it is to intercede for our poor world, to obtain for it by praise and sacrifice, the effusion of graces from on high! Liturgy places us at the heart of the Church, the innermost and most influential organ of Christ's humanity, the ardent source of his charity, the crucible of his graces and blessings. The prayer of compassion is the completion of our return to God; it is an immolation together with that of Christ, priest and victim, the realization of an entirely supernatural melding.

If the true spirit of the liturgy were understood, the whole world would benefit from it and much human poverty, both material and spiritual, would be alleviated.

Let us beseech Our Lady of Sorrows to bring the clergy to understand the importance of the liturgy so that they give it the place it deserves in their lives and in their ministry, that is, the first place.

Let us dare, dear friends, to ask our divine Savior, who is present in the ceremonies and symbols which enliven the liturgy, to open eyes of our soul. Thus we shall learn to contemplate with ever increasing devotion and gratitude the wonders of uncreated charity. It is manifested every day in the divine office, the sacramental life and, with what splendor, during the Holy Mass. It adapts itself to meet each of our needs and to remedy the multitude of our shortcomings. It becomes, in the devout soul, the foundation of a new life, full of love for God and neighbor. What more could one expect? “What shall I render to the Lord, for all the things he hath rendered unto me?”[[13]](#footnote-13) Let us now joyfully answer the call of the Heart of God: let us join here and now the song of the angels and blessed. Tomorrow in heaven, we shall resume with all our heart the hymn of eternity.

Amen.

1. John 13, 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Luke 1, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. St. John of the Cross, n°64. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God*, VII, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. St. Francis de Sales, *Treatise on the Love of God,* I, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hebrews 1, 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Isaiah 55, 10-11. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. John 1, 1 & 14. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. John 15, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Jean-Jacques Olier, *Catéchisme chrétien*, II° partie, 4°leçon, p.137. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Psalm 45, 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Romano Guardini, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Psalm 115, 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)