

Talk 3 - Fr. Steven Hoffman

... the details during his homily. What I want to talk about mainly and focus on is the place of the Eucharist in her life and its connection to her generous service to the poor, the sick and the elderly.

Alright, we'll set this here. Okay. Not only am I wired by the coffee I drank this morning So, even though I know there are some here that are not involved or connected to the medical profession specifically, I want to say off the bat that this talk, this reflection, applies to everyone. This is all-embracing, all-encompassing. I want to talk about the place of the Eucharist in St. Gianna's life, in relation or connection to the generous service that she gave to the poor, the sick, the elderly, and many other people. She received her first communion on April 4th, 1928, and she said of this that this became an indispensable food for her daily life. She became a daily communicant after that day, and in fact she would also make frequent visits to the Blessed Sacrament outside of daily Mass. By her life of self-sacrifice and her service to others, we can see how this manifested the fact that she was living the Mass, that her life was in many ways Eucharistic, and this is what we want our life to be as well - to live a Eucharistic life. How this was manifested was in her daily trips. Daily she went out to serve the poor, the elderly, and the suffering, and it was said of her that she preferred to see everyone happy and she would sacrifice anything in order to make sure that was the case. She was so given to others.

She also saw everyone as a brother or a sister. Now there's a gaze that's missing today, huh? this gaze that we have upon each other, upon the other who is there before me. Who is that? How do I relate with that person? She saw everyone as a brother and a sister in Christ. She preferred to see her medical career not as a career, but as a mission - as an apostolate - and, of course, her ultimate Eucharistic expression manifestation was the ultimate gift that she made of her life with her youngest, after the birth of her youngest daughter, which cost her life. Of course, this makes us think of those beautiful words of Christ in the Gospel, where He says, "No greater love is there than this - to lay down your life for your friends."

So, in her life we see this connection between her love and thirst for the Eucharist and the way she viewed her life and her mission, which included how she viewed others. So, we can say that she had what we can call a Eucharistic gaze upon herself, upon others, and upon her life. Now, what I want to do is dig a little bit deeper so that we can try and understand what this means when it comes to having a Eucharistic gaze upon ourselves and upon those whom we serve and with whom we are in relation. In order to do that, I want to focus the rest of this reflection on three questions. They are going to sound pretty childlike and simple, but their implications are profound in relation to the Eucharist. So, in the light of the Eucharist, here are the three questions: (1) Who am I? (2) the second question is, "Who is this other - this other person before me, in whatever context (it could even be in the family, in the workplace, on the street, in the store, at the bank)?" (3) and thirdly, "What

difference will this make or what importance does this have for how I see and treat this person before me? - all of this now in the light of the Eucharist.

What this implies is that, if we were to look in any other direction, we would end up with an impartial, limited understanding of who we are, and this becomes problematic - for example, in certain fields that claim to have the full answer about the human person. Psychology, for example, as helpful as that field of science is for understanding human behavior, it does not fully reveal the deepest, highest truth of who I am, and sometimes it talks as if it does, and it's always over-stepping its bounds when it tries to do that, especially in areas of morality. Also, a medical chart - you know, you go into the doctor's office and they ask you to fill out those forms and check the boxes, and then afterwards certain comments are made with regard to the results of the examination. How much does that say about who you are? Not a lot, and this is an area where ... I was talking with a physician down in Rochester that I'm very good friends with, and I think, Fr. Tolefson, you've met some of them down there. We were talking about this, and he saw this as one of the big problems in the medical profession. The way that charting is done, you become like a charted case and you become reduced to the checkmarks on this form and a few comments that are made by a nurse or a physician or both. This is very problematic. It's no longer in a narrative form, taking into context your life story, which of course you obviously can't do this in a

I'm just going to drop that down right now before it - there. It's done. It's kind of like a little distraction, like a bee flying around and distracting you.

So, this is why it's so important that we reflect on this from the perspective of the Eucharist. Remember that the Eucharist is one of the Luminous Mysteries. It is a mystery of light, and it's a mystery that is so badly needed today, this light, because the spiritual battle that is waging in our world today is often at the level of truth - ideologies - some of which threaten and often endanger the truth about who we are as human beings. John Paul II spent his entire pontificate proclaiming loudly the truth of the Gospel in the face of all of these different ideologies that we run into - for example, the ideology of efficiency. This is becoming a very serious problem. Now, first of all, there's nothing wrong with being efficient; in fact, in some ways we need to try to find ways to be more efficient, but is how I am being efficient truly serving at the service of the human person? In many cases, it is not. Now, this being efficient is often tied to money - greed, very often - and, as Father mentioned earlier in his talk, utilitarianism - you know, that which is useful, that which is efficient, that which makes money becomes the primary focus, and the human person gets lost in the shuffle and disfigured. It is no longer a true contact between persons, but I'm gazing at the other through a lens of efficiency, of greed, of making money, and of using - utilitarianism.

For the sake of time, I'm not going to go into ... I could talk about a lot of other ways or ideologies, but I'm not going to. If you want to talk about that later, we can. But all of these go to dehumanize us - objectivize us - in a bad way, and this is why we

need this Luminous Mystery of the Eucharist, and to reflect on that I want to go right into St. Luke's Gospel, one of the institution narratives of the Eucharist, where Christ is instituting the Eucharist with his apostles, and it says here, "He took bread and, when He had given thanks, He broke it. He gave it to them saying, 'This is My Body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me,' and likewise the chalice, after supper, saying, 'This chalice, which is poured out for you, is the new covenant of My Blood'" ... "My Body given for you; My Blood shed for you" ... The disciples, when they were hearing this, did not yet understand what this meant, and certainly not in connection to His earlier statement, the command to "love one another as I have loved you," He said. But we know that later the meaning of this meal would be fulfilled by that which it anticipated and foreshadowed, which is Christ's Passion, Death and Resurrection, bearing witness to the greatest love that this world has ever seen and ever will see. In the suffering of Christ upon the cross, the fullness of God's love for man is manifested and revealed and, following the term that Father used in the first talk, released. The human suffering in Christ was what allowed the love of God - the infinite, divine love of God - to be fully released through the humanity of Christ.

Imagine just what this means, that God took on a human nature - a body that was like ours in every way except sin. He had a human body like ours, and this is where the stuff that makes up our humanity - flesh, blood, bones, spirit - receives its ultimate (if I say the word finality, does that ring a bell?) - its ultimate end, that for which God made it. Here is where we see the ultimate dignity of our humanity, that the stuff of which we are made went into the creation of the human body of the Son of God. Now, just get your arms around that, if you can. The stuff that makes up my and your body is the same stuff that went into the formation of the human nature of Christ, and that human nature, by His taking that on, allowed Him to become vulnerable in the same way that we are - a body that is capable of suffering, of knowing pain; a heart that could know loneliness and rejection, that could be hurt and broken. There is no heart ever created that was more broken - more wounded - than the Heart of Christ, and this Body He broke in order to give it to us, and this is where it foreshadows His Passion. But it is there that we see our great dignity, because with our bodies - my body, your body - is then revealed what is the end of our own human nature. It is to break it, as Father was talking about earlier, through the mystery of suffering, through that suffering entering into the mystery of Christ's own Passion, that our bodies are given up with Christ, our blood is poured out with Christ, and there's where we discover the ultimate revelation of who we are and what is our ultimate dignity and vocation.

This is why the Passover of Christ to the Father - this Pascal Mystery - the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ, is the center of all history. It is the center, the reference point and the source of all truth about who we are, and this truth is revealed in the self-giving, sacrificial love of Christ. That is now the reference point. The minute I turn away from that - if I divorce myself from that - I no longer know who I am and I no longer know who this other is who is before me that I am called to serve. The ultimate truth is revealed right here, and this is why the Second Vatican

Council will say in that beautiful document, *Gaudium et Spes*, “Christ reveals man to himself.” Christ is our mirror. Every morning, yes - we need to look in the old bathroom mirror; if we don’t, people might comment - but, we should never leave the house - never leave the house - without also looking into the gaze of Christ in that Paschal Mystery. There is always, at every moment of my life - at this very moment now - there is always someone gazing upon me and you, gazing upon me through the mystery of that Paschal Mystery - the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. And my life is seen in that context, and there is where we understand who we are and what we were created to live and called to be. This is where Christ responds to all that is deepest in the human person - all the deepest yearnings and thirsts for fulfillment, for happiness, for goodness, for truth - these are all thirsts in the human spirit. Christ fulfills and answers and responds to all that is deepest in us through the Paschal Mystery.

St. John, who was below the cross with Mary at this moment of the ultimate revelation of who we are - he was so touched and moved by this revelation of love that, when he was inspired later to write this account in the Gospel, you recall that he no longer refers to himself as John. How does he refer to himself? ... the beloved disciple; the one whom Jesus loves. He is no longer John; he is the one whom Jesus loves. For how many of us is that the first thought upon waking? I am the one whom Jesus loves. He showed it. Do I believe it? And do I believe the same for the other, whom I am about to serve? This person is one whom Jesus loves. That must be first in my mind. Remember Martha and Mary. They sent for Jesus. What did they say when Lazarus was sick and they called for Jesus? He whom You love is sick. Beautiful. When you walk into an examination room, a doctor’s office, a hospital room, going to a home to visit someone who is ill, you are going to visit someone whom Jesus loves. Period. This is ultimate. This is the beginning of developing a Eucharistic gaze upon ourselves and upon the other, and this is why the document *Gaudium et Spes* will continue to say, “Man cannot fulfill himself, except in the sincere gift of himself.” “Love one another, as I have loved you.”

John Paul II, in his first encyclical ... it’s important to realize that when you’re reading John Paul II, that first encyclical he wrote on the redeemer of man is a foundational work for understanding everything else that he wrote. Just kind of tuck that away and keep that in mind. It’s a foundational work that is like a tree branching out into all of these other works that he wrote - and boy, did he write other works. I don’t think he knew how to write a thin one; I think they were all about this thick, but in the one work on the redeemer of man he speaks very beautifully about this identity springing from, founded in this love, and he puts it this way (this is in paragraph 10, if you’re taking notes): “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it. This, as has already been said, is why Christ the Redeemer ‘fully reveals man to himself.’” If we may use the expression, this is the human dimension of the mystery of Redemption. In this dimension, man finds again the greatness, dignity and value that belongs to his humanity. In the mystery of the

redemption, man becomes newly expressed and, in a way, is newly created. He is newly created. This is the gift that you bring to others in your service, whether in the medical profession or not. By the way that you gaze upon the other, which must begin with how we gaze upon ourself, you allow this other person to rediscover who they are by the love of Christ radiating and coming through your actions.

When you enter a hospital room, the mystery of the Eucharist, as St. Gianna - in her life, she was a walking Eucharist. Her thirst for the Eucharist, her daily Mass, her visits to the Eucharist were manifest in this generous self-giving, that love just pouring itself out, breaking her body like a Eucharist in sacrificing herself for the good of others. This is ultimately what "our lives as servants of Christ" really means. It is important to realize that this Paschal Mystery is made present to me at every Mass again, where I am brought into the presence of that Paschal Mystery again at the celebration of every single Mass, and this because I need to see again and again - I need to be reminded this is who I am. This is who I am called to be, what I'm called to live, but in order for this to be realized and lived, and for that Eucharist to really nourish my life, I am called to participate in that sacrifice, and this implies placing myself on that altar. It is dangerous to go to Mass, as Bishop Sheen would say. Christ is looking down in the person of the priest on the altar, Christ who is at the right hand of the Father and can no longer suffer - He is in glory. He looks down, as Bishop Sheen will continue - and I always love this, when he talks about this - He looks out to each one of us and He calls us by name. Will you give Me your human nature? Will you place all that you are on that altar, so that I can live the mystery of My Passion, Death and Resurrection in you and through you? It's dangerous to be on that altar, because there is part of us we don't want to give up. We struggle with these different areas of attachment, areas of egoism, of selfishness. I'll be the first to raise my hand. And this is exactly what we need to place on that altar, in the fires of divine love that are present there at every Mass ... it is said (there is a tradition) that, upon dying, if a soul dies in a state of grace and yet is not perfect (in other words, it needs to be a little more polished), it says upon their death, at that instant, that angelic moment when they are before God, they see exactly who they are in the gaze of God, that gaze of pure love, and in that instant they see all that is still in them that is not yet love. And this tradition continues - but they willingly throw themselves into the flames of purgatory with joy in order to be purified, so that they can see God who is pure love.

At every Mass, we are called to bring our fragile, imperfect, sinful selves - half-baked potatoes - and we're called to throw this potato into the flames of the Eucharistic love of Christ, so that we can become fully baked, so that we can become eaten by others. It's a beautiful analogy, although probably a different food would work better. Christ uses bread. Okay, let's talk about baking bread here, but it's another analogy, okay? We are called to become fully Eucharistic in order to be eaten by others. Look at children. If you love them, they will eat you right up. There is a great thirst in humanity today for this love. The world is thirsting for this love, and it knows when it does not get it. When I have been to a doctor's office, I know when I have not been treated like Christ, when I am not being respected. It is painful, because I am worthy of the love of Christ.

So, this Eucharistic gaze, which we have been talking about, gives us a gaze of wisdom upon ourselves. What do I mean by this? It is kind of tying into what we said before. When God looks upon me and upon you and upon the other, He does not first see me as a sick person. It is not the sickness or the illness that He sees first. He looks upon me in the light of His Paschal Mystery, this Mystery of Divine Love. In other words, He looks at me in the light of my end, which is the formation of Christ in me, of my union with Christ, and of my participation in the Divine Love of Christ. That's what God is looking at. That's my end ... the end for which I was created. I was not created to be a mailman; excuse me, but we all thank God for mailmen - or a bus driver, or a plumber, or whatever. I was created for eternal beatitude, and the way that I get there is through Christ, by becoming like Christ in His Paschal Mystery, Eucharistic - totally given and poured out, until finally that is consummated in the eternal self-giving of Divine Love in heaven, which will be our joy and our happiness - our beatitude. That is what I was created for, and therefore the most important thing in God's eyes is not first the curing of that illness, because, as we know, in the mystery of God's Divine Permissions, sometimes it does not happen. We must do all that we can to help the sick, and the dying, and the frail. We must do everything that God has given us - skill, talents, knowledge, technology - at the service of trying to promote life, to save life, and to better life, but our faith tells us that there's more to this than just that, that there is someone else who is present who is the Master over that life and who is gazing upon that life in the fullness of their finality, their end. And we know that, as Father talked about so beautifully in the first talk, suffering - which, in the medical field today is often seen as useless and to avoid at all costs (just medicate them until they now longer know their name - you know, what are you after that? You're there drooling and just totally out of it and you're not aware of what's going on) - but God is saying, "How can I bring this soul, this person, to Me through the Paschal Mystery?" And therefore He is always looking at the condition of our faith, our hope, and our love, and what can deepen those virtues, which finally lead (those are theological virtues) toward God. We know that sometimes sickness, suffering, ailments, as the saints often tell us, God can use to heal the soul, which is the most important thing.

So, while we are trying to do all that we can to better the life of someone who is suffering - and we ought to do that - we at the same time have to be aware of the fact that suffering is not useless, as Father so beautifully shared with us earlier, and that God can use that suffering to be a point or a way to encounter this person in their suffering and a way for this person's love to be released, for them to discover redemptive suffering, that that suffering has salvific meaning and that suffering can be an instrument and a tool to deepen and awaken faith, trust, and abandonment. How many of us would be the Christians we are today, if it was not for suffering? How many of you are the beautiful Christians you are, with the virtues you have - would you have those virtues without suffering? Now, I know what a rascal I am. I know that enough, and my mother could even support that by her account, that I know that I would not be who I am today if it were not for suffering. I don't even know that I would know God. It was through pain. It took a cannonball to bring me to my knees,

and I thank God, although I would never want to go through that time in my life again, but I thank God for the suffering that brought me to my knees. I failed right into the arms of God. Everything in my life was failing and God was taking one thing after another from me, and that suffering was redemptive. It realized, in the mystery of God's grace, my conversion, and this is what can be happening. We must realize this when we are before a person who is suffering. God is present there and God is using all of it, even though we feel helpless and limited - and we are. God is not, and God's ultimate concern is, "How can I get this person to heaven?" And maybe I can use suffering to do that. He is using it for me, I can tell you that. Without it, I don't think I would get there, because the minute stuff starts to get good and life becomes easy, I get lazy, I get sloppy, and I start to slowly drift away.

Suffering - it keeps us feeling our need for God, and God uses it in so many beautiful ways. What are the implications of this? I can't, because of the time - I'm going probably a little bit over there - I want to just skip over a few things here and talk about how this Eucharistic gaze also reaches into another area, which is with regard to our relationships with each other, the Mystical Body of Christ. We know that, as Catholics, our participation in the Eucharistic makes us members of one another. Now, we have heard this many times; you know, we are the Body of Christ, you and I are brothers and sisters, but we have a long way to go to realize that reality, on how I relate with you and you with me, and all of us with those that we meet each day. This must be so real that, when I am visiting someone or serving someone who is in need, or even someone who is not in need, that their burdens are in every way truly mine, their sickness is mine, their crosses are mine. The Lord made me realize this in this last year at the seminary. How often, when we have a critical gaze upon others, when we reduce them to their faults, which is so common today, we lose this sense that this person is so connected to me by the mystery of the Mystical Body of Christ that what happens to them affects me and what happens to me affects them, and we are so joined in this body that their burdens are truly, truly mine, and therefore I must get my shoulder underneath them. This is what we do in our service to others.

This was basically how we would understand the life of Blessed Mother Teresa. She saw very little difference between - although theologically, certainly, there is a difference - between her daily holy hour and receiving the Eucharist at Mass and picking up dying people on the streets. She saw her whole life every day as being with Jesus Christ, and that was true whether she was at Mass or whether she was picking up Jesus Christ in the person of the sick, in what she would often call "in distressing disguise." The reality of this is we believe it, but it has to be more deeply realized in our life. When I go in to a sick person, I must walk into that room, in a sense, with awe and adoration. I get to be with Jesus. I get to touch Jesus. I get to serve Christ. Do we believe this? Often we forget this, and these other kinds of ideologies and things from our own sinful tendencies blind us and disform and disfigure our gaze upon others, but we must, like Mother Teresa, come to realize that, when I am before anyone in the Mystery of God's Grace, and especially the weak and the poor - Christ has so united Himself to them that he says, "Whatever you do unto them (if you visit a prisoner, if you visit the sick, if you give someone a drink of water), you are doing

that to Me.” Do I believe that, when it comes to my relatives, my family, which is sometimes the hardest, huh? With family it can be just a real challenge, but all day long I get to be with Jesus. This was the joy of Mother Teresa’s life, from the Eucharist to the poor. Jesus. And she saw this also as quenching the thirst of Christ. Above all the doors of their houses, as you probably know, is this plaque that says, “I thirst,” because she saw her life and the life of all the sisters who joined her as nothing more, and very simply, quenching the thirst of Christ from the Cross, when He was hanging there and He said, “I thirst.”

This is also part of this Eucharistic gaze, and there’s a two-fold thirst here. There’s the thirst of Christ - God - as Father Livingston said, His thirst to love us, but also His thirst for our love in return. I love this expression of one of the seminarians. Do you know Prentice? He is assigned to this parish. He said one day - and I love this - he said, “You know what, brother? All I want to be is a sponge, and I just want to soak up all the love that God has for me, and then I want to wring it out on others.” I love this - I love this - I love this. A sponge - a thirsty sponge - this is what we are. We need the love of God. I need to realize in the morning I am the one whom Jesus loves, and I must just open my life to receive, to soak in my thirsty soul this love. That’s how I begin my day, and then I get to go out and I wring it out on others. This is our life. I love that image. And so, when you come into a situation with another person, there is a two-fold thirst going on there. This person is Christ. “I thirst. Will you love me?” And in us, if we are becoming Eucharistic, is our thirst, the very thirst of Christ to give love, the thirst to love Christ. This was the life of Mother Teresa and of St. Gianna, this two-fold mystery of thirst. This is part of this Eucharistic gaze upon ourselves and upon the other.

Lest I belabor this too much longer, let me stop there, because I think I’ve said enough. That’s a lot to ponder. I could have said a lot more, but the human mind can only take in so much. You know, a sponge has a saturation point, and I think I might have gone over just a little bit, so excuse me if I have. So, let’s end there.