

English translation of *Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar*
By St Lawrence of Brindisi, O.F.M.Cap.
Translated
By Father Patrick Colbourne O.F.M.Cap.

Translator's note.

This translation is based on the introduction, text and footnotes which were published by P. Costanzo Cargnoni O.F.M. Cap. In I Frati Cappuccini: Documenti e testimonianze dell primo secolo, Edizioni Frate Indovino, Perugia, vol III/2, pp.2669 - 2678.

Introduction by Patrick Colbourne O.F.M. Cap.

St Lawrence of Brindisi (Giulio Cesare Russo) was born on 22nd July 1559 in Brindisi in the Kingdom of Naples and died on 22nd July 1618 in Lisbon. As a young man he was educated by the Conventual Franciscans in Venice and at the age of sixteen he entered the Capuchins in Verona. He was canonised in 1881 and proclaimed a Doctor of the Church with the title Apostolic Doctor by Pope John XXIII in 1959. He was actively involved in the Counter Reformation being assigned to work on the conversion of Jews and being sent to Germany by Blessed Benedict of Urbino to combat Lutheranism. He was a prolific preacher and his sermons fill volumes. He wrote in Latin and Italian and his works have been translated into English. The present translation is a small section of a sermon that was preached in Venice on the Feast of Sts Simon and Jude. It is an example of his style in communicating and discussing the faith which is not unlike the style of St Augustine. Although the logic employed by Greek philosophy has a value it cannot cope with proclaiming the faith which at its deepest level goes beyond words and requires an emotional plunge into ecstatic encounter with what is supernatural. This is portrayed by interpreting Biblical figures as being relevant not only to past history but as being also significant for present spiritual experience. Out of 54 references to Scripture in this sermon, 33 are to texts in the Old Testament and 21 to texts in the New Testament. Does this remind us the St Lawrence was required to work with Jewish people? The most frequently used symbol is that of the temple which he associates with the Temple of Solomon, the temple of the body of Jesus and the temple of the Eucharist as the continuing dwelling of the Risen Christ among us. This short part of a sermon motivates the listeners to be emotionally moved with love for God because of the indescribable gifts He has given them, especially His presence in the Eucharist: a gift not recognised by the Lutherans the preacher is dealing with.

3. *Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar*

Introduction

6244 Just as among the planets the most outstanding is the sun, among the stars the north star, among the elements, fire, in the sphere of the heavens the empyrean, among brings with a soul, human life, and among the angels the Seraphim, so also among the most holy Sacraments of Christ's church the most excellent is the most divine Sacrament of the Eucharist, the Sacrament of Grace, the Sacrament of charity, the Sacrament of love. Among all the other Sacraments it is not only on a higher plain as is the sun is when compared to the planets and the other stars, as human beings are when compared to other animal and the Seraphim are when compared to the other

angels, but it is like God's status when it is compared to all that has been created. This is because the most holy Sacrament contains Jesus Christ, who is both divine and human, is the Son of God and of the Virgin Mary.

This morning I am speaking to you about the exceedingly marvellous pre-eminence of the most holy and divine sacrament of the altar in order to show you how this sacrament ought to kindle devotion in our hearts and souls so that filled with praise and devotion they might approach Holy Communion in such a way that it carries them up to eternal life.

First part.

6245 God's great prophet Moses, who was the foremost among all the prophets, the alpha of all the wise men on earth, cast the eagle eye of his rich mind which simply fixed its glance on the face of the eternal Sun who dwells in inaccessible light, and who no one has¹ ever seen, or could see, except by means of very special grace and an exception gift of God. When he did this, I say, while considering God's grace-filled presence in the midst of the Hebrew people, in the divine sanctuary of the *sancta sanctorum* which was there for the benefit and glory of race of Israel, said with great justification: "*For what other has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him?*"² The God who lived in their midst was not an imaginary god or one who lied as were the gods of other nations, a Saturn, a Jupiter, a Neptune, a Pluto, a Mercury or a Mars, but the true and living God. He was not composed of fear. He was not something fictitious or a figment of the human imagination. He was not the product of art or of good fortune or chance. He was not generated by the forces of nature or a product of time. He existed of himself being divine and omnipotent by nature, having infinite wisdom and inestimable goodness. Using these qualities he created heaven and earth and the vegetation, animals the human race, the planets, the stars and the angels out of nothing. Such a God lived among them in a divine tabernacle in a friendly manner regarding them as his very dear children, feeding them with heavenly manna and giving them out of a stone water that was sweeter than milk and honey.³

6246 O what favours! *There is no other nation that is as great*, that possesses such illustrious and excellent dignity and honour, indeed such exalted glory on earth. This is because we have been favoured by *our God*, who is the creator of heaven and earth, on whom the heavens and nature depend, who supports the orb of the earth with two fingers and holds the entire universe in his fist,⁴ and who is completely perfect, most perfectly holy, most sacredly glorious in incomparable, unconceivable, infinite and eternal glory, without beginning or end, the alpha and omega of everything, the A without A, the ω without ω, the beginning without beginning, the end without end, .Such a God who is supreme, immense, best, greatest, infinitely inestimable. Who would be able to esteem such a one as he ought to be esteemed, since neither heaven nor earth could contain him?⁵ Such a God is *our God who is close to us, who hears us whenever we call on him?*⁶

¹ 1 Tim 6, 16.

² Deut 4, 7.

³ Cf. Ex. 13, 5; Ps. 80, 17 (*Vulg.*); Dt. 12, 13.

⁴ Cf. Is 40, 12.

⁵ Cf. 1 Kgs. 8, 27.

⁶ Cf. Deut. 4, 7b.

O Moses, the following were the great favours that your God presented to your people: by his presence. He lived in the sanctuary, he rained down manna from heaven to feed them, he made water flow from a rock to satisfy their thirst, he led them by day by means of a glorious cloud and by night by a pillar of fire, he led them out of Egypt with many signs and prodigies giving them the law, cult, religion, sacred ceremonies, just judges who listened to all their prayers and accepted their sacrifices that made them holy, justified and almost deified.

4247 However, all these great graces were handed down from the Hebrew people to Christianity, God's chosen people, a true priesthood and priestly nation, a holy people, a people set apart,⁷ for God himself had taken our flesh upon himself and transformed it into a tabernacle that is much more abundant and perfect than what was made by humankind.⁸ By divine intervention: *The Word became flesh and lived among us,*⁹ and by doing so verified the divine oracle that said: *I will place a dwelling within you, and I shall not abhor you, I shall walk among you, and I shall be your God, and you will be my people.*¹⁰ Our God was not satisfied to be among us only by means of the inestimable mystery of the incarnation, by means of which God became man to allow mankind to share in his divine nature,¹¹ but wanted to go further in an incomprehensible and infallible manner by means of the most divine sacrament of the altar in which truthfully speaking God *is with us*. Jesus Christ, Son of God and of the Virgin Mary, true God and perfectly human continues to be present in this sacrament: *Our God is with us. Behold I am with you until the end of time.*¹²

Have you noted that is written in Holy Scripture: that *Our God* is nobody else than *Christ*? *Hear O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone; May the Lord bless us.*¹³ He is one God in essence, but one God in three Persons. *Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God of hosts.*¹⁴ The name of God is mentioned, but not the names of the Three Persons of the most Holy Trinity. However, note the word is always linked to the word *God, our God, one God, may our God bless us, Rise up our God. God-Man be with us.*

6248 You who are listening to me, what is there to be said about such a divine tabernacle except that in Christ is a hierarchical puzzle?¹⁵ What was the ark except a symbol of Christ's flesh as it was assumed by the Word in a union that was personal? *And the word was made flesh. In him dwelt all the fullness of the Godhead corporeally.*¹⁶ What do you think the flowering twig, the tablets of the law and the jar of manna represented, unless they were symbols of the divine power, wisdom and goodness in Christ as these were communicated to Christ's human nature by means of the hypostatic union bringing about the communication of natural idioms? What was the divine propitiation over which God presided, unless it was a symbol of Christ's most sacred soul as, in the first instance, it was united to his divinity, and then to his flesh? What did those Cherubs of glory represent unless it was the intellect and ardour

⁷ Cf. 1 Pet. 2, 9.

⁸ Cf. Heb, 9, 11.

⁹ Cf. Jn. I, 14.

¹⁰ Cf. Lev. 26, 11-12.

¹¹ Cf. 2 Pet 1, 4.

¹² Cf. Mth. 26, 20.

¹³ Cf. Deut. 6, 4; Ps 66, 7 (*Vulg.*)

¹⁴ Cf. Is. 6, 3.

¹⁵ This topic was developed in the preceding sermon. See above *nn.* 6229-6243.

¹⁶ Cf. Col 2, 9.

in the higher parts of Christ's soul that were always sacred and glorious from the first moment of his conception? There we have the complete hierarchical description of Christ.

Do you not know that the inner tabernacle was called the *holy of holies*, with such a title signifying that Christ is the saint of all saints, *until he enters the Holy of Holies*? Have you not read in Daniel that the Angel gave Christ this title?¹⁷ Therefore, Christ is the saint of saints, and *the holy of holies*. Did you who are clever not know that the so-called divine temple is a very private place, and that no one apart from the High Priest can enter there to see the mysteries it contains? Did you not know that it was draped by a veil to prevent anyone from looking at what was inside?¹⁸ Behold, behold the most sacred and divine sacrament, the veiled *holy of holies*, Christ the saint of saints contained within the sacrament, veiled under the accidental species of bread and wine in such a way that no matter how truly and really the living and real body of Christ is contained no one can see it except Christ himself who instituted this most divine sacrament.

6249 Although he used the symbol of the Hebrew people Moses is really speaking about us when he says: *There is no other nation so great that has its god as close to it as our God is to us*. What nation in the world ever had the privilege of feeding itself on the real body and blood of the living and true God, apart from the Christian people who do so in this sacrament?

Our God is present among us, Christ who is the God-man is among us, not only in his essence, power and presence which are part of his nature, but also by being bodily present in this sacrament, not in a way that is visible to our eyes, but in his real substance, in his own person which is made up of the components of Word, soul and flesh.¹⁹ *Behold I am with you to the end of the world*.

By means of his divine nature Christ is present in every being by his essence. In those who are the just he is not only present in this way but also by means of grace. Because he took human nature upon himself he is present in a personal union. These are three ways of belonging to Christ as he is God. From the point of view of his humanity he is also present in three ways. Firstly as the Word he is present in person. Secondly he is present in heaven on God's right hand which his place. Thirdly he is in the host as in a sacrament. By means of his divine nature he is absolutely in everything that has been created because of their essence. By means of his humanity he is totally present in all that is human. By means of his sacramental presence he resides in every consecrated host or chalice on every altar in the world. O what a sacrament, what a most divine sacrament which is no less incomprehensible and ineffable than God! O what a thing of infinite wonder! Thus this sacrament is no less incomprehensible, inestimable or ineffable than God himself! *Our God, our God is with us*. O sacrament of infinite excellence!

6260 You who are listening to me, all the sacraments of Christ's Church are exceptionally excellent, since all contain God's grace, which is a heavenly gift, and participation in and sharing of the divine nature.

¹⁷ Cf. Dan. 9, 24.

¹⁸ Cf. Heb. 9, 7; Lv. 16,1 ss; Ex. 26, 31-34.

¹⁹ According to the teachings of the Council of Trent promulgated in Sessione XIII, *Decr. de Sanctissimo Eucharistiae sacramento*. Cf. *Conc. oecum. decreta*, Bologna, Centro. Documentaz Ist. Scienze Religione, 1967, 669s.

The excellence of Baptism is that it turns the darkness into light,²⁰ the curse of eternal death into the glory of heaven, the status of slaves of the devil into that of being children of God! The excellence of Confirmation is that it makes us soldiers of Christ, champions and like God in invincible courage and unconquerable strength in combating all the enemies of the living spirit of Christ!²¹ The excellence of Penance is that it makes sinners just, and changes them from being vessels of wrath into vessels of grace who are worthy of glory,²² from being God's enemies into God's friends! The excellence of Matrimony is that it weds our souls to God! The essence of Extreme Unction is that it that it enables us to enter the tabernacles of paradise! The excellence of Holy Orders is that it gives us the dignity, the honour and the power to almost be kings on earth! However, this most divine sacrament of the most holy Eucharist deifies us and unites us with God, transforms us into God and makes us many gods.

The other sacraments are so many vessels of Christ's grace, this sacrament contains Christ himself who is the plentiful source of grace, merit, glory and divinity.

Our God is with us.

6251 My people, whoever wishes to speak about the excellence of this most holy sacrament would need to plunge into the infinite sea of the pre-eminence of God, of Christ and thus establish clearly that there is not the slightest difference between the pre-eminence of God and of Christ and the pre-eminence of this sacrament. O incomprehensible pre-eminence, O incomprehensible dignity, O utmost infinity! My dear souls, think, think, employing the highest and most sublime faculties of your minds and spirits how great God is in comparison to whom the entire world is not even a grain of wheat. Go beyond the elements, beyond the stars in the heavens, beyond highest heaven, beyond all the choirs of angels and put the most exalted creature that God has created under the foot of your intellect and from there gaze up high with your mind's eye on the heaven of God's divinity in comparison to which every creature, no matter how exalted, is most vile dust. There you will see how impossible it is for our earthly eye to have the capacity to see the highest heavens. Indeed it cannot reach that high. Thus it is impossible for the mind to make any comparison that would make it understand the depths of God that are infinite. O God, O God! All the infinite greatness of God is contained in Christ; and all of Christ is present in this divine sacrament. This means God is present in this sacrament. *Our God, our God is among us. Let he who can understand, understand.*²³

6252 I spoke about the grace of this most holy sacrament comparing it to the other sacraments. I said that the grace of this sacrament exceeds the grace of the other sacraments as much as the source of light in the sun exceeds the light in the other planets because Christ, the sun of justice,²⁴ is the source of sanctifying grace, just as the sun is the source of light in the other planets. The other planets have light but it comes to all of them from the sun. In so far as the sacraments have grace it comes from this sacrament because Christ who is present here is the author of grace in all the sacraments.

²⁰ Reminiscent of 1 Pet 2, 9b.

²¹ Quoting an expression taken from *Const. 1336, Prologue 4 (n. 150)*.

²² Cf. Rom. 9, 22-23.

²³ Cf Mt 19, 12b.

²⁴ Mal 4, 2.

Not only is the grace of this most holy sacrament beyond comparison with the grace of the other sacraments, but it is much greater than the grace that is present in all those whom God has chosen, whether men or angels, just as the sun's light is not only greater than that of the planets, but greater than that of all the stars in the heavens. Indeed, I would go even further, if you put the grace of this sacrament alone on one side of a balance, and put all the grace that could be found in those whom God has chosen, in heaven or on earth, men and angles, as well as all those whom God will or could create, on the other side, this would weigh more than the entire ocean would outweigh a pinch of earth, even more than the sun outshines the moon. You who are listening to me, the grace of this sacrament is so great that with all his omnipotence and infinite wisdom God could not have created anything greater, even though he knows how to do it and could have created thousands of worlds. O the infinite grace of this sacrament, which is truly endless and beyond calculation.

6253 What is more, there is something else that makes it exceptionally excellent that is that it not only contains Christ as he is the source of grace, but as he is the author of nature, king of glory and lord of the entire universe. *All power has been given to me in heaven and on earth.*²⁵ Just as the sun is king of all the stars, so Christ, who is present in this sacrament, is the king of glory of all the saints in heaven. *The Lord of hosts, he is the King of Gory.*²⁶

You who are listening to me, do you remember how Christ appeared in his glory at his transfiguration? *His face did shine like the sun, and his garments became white as snow.*²⁷ Christ rose like this in glory and ascended into heaven to sit on the right hand of the Father. Did you wise folk not know that at the glorious resurrection of the just their bodies will shine with glory like so many suns? *They shall shine like the sun, in the sight of their Father,*²⁸ Have you not read in St Paul that such glory will not be the same in each one of them? *One is the glory of the sun, another the glory of the moon and another is the glory of the stars. For star differs from star in glory. So also is the resurrection of the dead.*²⁹ Among the glory of the saints Christ's glory is like that of the sun among the stars. In heaven's sky the saints are like the stars in the firmament. If the smallest star in heaven's sky is brighter than our sun, what must the sun of glory be like compared to his stars? O immortal God! What tongue could express this, or what intellect could understand it?

6254 You who listening to me, I said that Christ's glory is such that it not only surpasses the glory of all the saints in heaven who are or will be, but if God were to beatify all the angels who fell along with Lucifer, all the damned in hell and the souls in Limbo and created more men and angels and then in his omnipotence beatified them, Christ's glory would still be greater than all of this, because Christ's supreme glory is such that God could not make anything that was greater, anything better, since that would be equal to God's own glory which is absolutely infinite. Nevertheless all such glory is contained in the most holy sacrament, because the glorified Christ together with all the infinite treasures of his glory are present under the sacramental species.

²⁵ Mt 28, 18

²⁶ Ps 23, 10 (Vulg.)

²⁷ Mt 17, 2; Dan. 7, 9

²⁸ Mt 13, 43.

²⁹ 1 Cor. 15, 41-42.

O sacrament, O sacrament that is more than excellent, filled with grace, glory and divinity, true God! *Our God is among us, Our God is among us!*

My God, my God, who could say something worthy of this incomparable and ineffable sacrament? Ah! If all creatures had speech that was more admirable than that of the Seraphim they could never fully explain, even if they tried for all eternity, the infinite excellence of the most holy Eucharist!

6255 My dear souls, let us be aware, I beg of you, of Christ's infinite love for us when he instituted this sacrament which is an infinitely priceless gift which we ought to value even when we do not value it as it deserves to be valued. It is an incomprehensible gift that we begin to understand when we realise that it is beyond understanding. It is an ineffable gift, which we begin to speak about in an honest way when, lost in wonder, we become silent as we realise its divine grandeur: *our God, our God is among us*. The honour that we owe God we also owe this sacrament. The praise that we owe God we also owe to this sacrament. The adoration and homage we owe to God we also owe to this most divine sacrament because God himself is present: *our God is among us*.

How unfaithful we would be to Christ were we not offer divine honours to this sacrament and adore it with worship! Indeed among all the most memorable deeds that Christ performed for us, all of which deserved to be remembered eternally, none were more extraordinary than this. When this mystery was revealed to him the prophet had every right to say: *He has made a remembrance of his wonderful works, being a merciful and gracious Lord, He has given food to them that fear him.*³⁰ How many marvels are contained within God himself? How many did he perform when creating the world? How many did he perform in the redemption of mankind? These marvels were contained in Christ and Christ is contained in his fullness in this sacrament.

4256 My dear souls, it was certainly a great thing when Christ by dying wished to give himself as the price to be paid for us. However this is much less than when he wanted to give us consecrated food. For, although by paying the price he freed us from sin, by feeding us he gave us eternal life. By paying the price he absolved us from our sins. By feeding us he nourished us on grace. By paying the price he provided us with medicine against vice, by feeding us he restored our strength. By paying the price he made it possible for us not to sin, by feeding us he made it possible for us not to want to sin. By paying the price he reconciled our nature with God, by feeding us on grace he reconciled each individual with God.

I would also say that it is a fact that in paying the price he rescued us from being slaves of the devil and of sin, by feeding us he restored us to life and deified us as his members. By paying the price he freed us from death, but that did not mean that we would never ever die. By feeding us he gave us the eternal life of grace so that we could live forever by means of grace as the cost of being justified. By feeding us he established us as being glorified and beatified in heaven. *He who eats my flesh will have eternal life. I am the living bread that came down from heaven, whoever eats this bread will live forever.*³¹

³⁰ Ps 110, 4-5 (*Vulg.*).

³¹ Jn 6, 41, 50-51, 55, 57.