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A white man in a black cassock wearing a silver pectoral cross speaks at a clear lecturn into a

Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, gives the annual Cardinal Dearden Lecture at The Catholic University of America in Washington April 26, 2023. The lecture honors the late Archbishop John Dearden of Detroit, known for implementing the Second Vatican Council's teachings in the United States. (OSV News photo/courtesy Patrick Ryan, The Catholic University of America)

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Archbishop Christophe Pierre, apostolic nuncio to the United States, said he is "convinced that the church today is in need of an eye-opening experience," similar to the experience of the two disciples who encountered Jesus along the road to Emmaus following the Resurrection, but who did not recognize him until they shared a meal.

"We have seen many of our brothers and sisters leave the church disillusioned, thinking that Christ is not the answer to their quest for happiness and meaning," he said April 26 at The Catholic University of America in Washington.

"We experience on a daily basis the hardships of living out the faith in the face of a society which is increasingly secularized and polarized. The temptation to remain stuck in the past is real; the path forward is often difficult to discern and discouragement can set in," Pierre said. "But now, as then, the Risen Christ walks with us to help us find the way. He is the way, and we recognize him as such in the breaking of the bread. The Eucharist is the place of this encounter that grants discernment, that affords a new vision of reality, an ecclesial vision of reality."

Pierre spoke on "Eucharist and Ecclesial Discernment" as the 2023 presenter of CUA's annual Cardinal Dearden Lecture, which honors the late Archbishop John Dearden of Detroit, who was instrumental in implementing the teachings of the Second Vatican Council in the U.S.

In the hourlong lecture, Pierre explained how the Eucharist is "the fulcrum of ecclesial discernment" by framing his reflection within three of Jesus' statements: "I am the resurrection and the life" (Jn 11:25); "I am the bread of life" (Jn 6:35) and "I am the way" (Jn 14:6).

"The three go together as steps in a gradual process of ever deeper compenetration between the life of the Risen One and that of every believer," he said. "In the Eucharist, Christ makes himself edible so that the power of his resurrection can be experienced at a personal existential level. Thus, the Eucharist becomes the place of a transformative encounter which points the life of the believer, and the life of the church, in a new direction."

The connection between the Eucharist and the paschal mystery -- God's plan for salvation fulfilled by Jesus' passion, death, resurrection and ascension -- was evident in the early church, but was obscured over time by a heavier focus on the sacrament's sacrificial aspect, Pierre said.

Accounts from the early church allow contemporary Christians "a glimpse of the original dynamic, which links Eucharist, paschal mystery and discernment," he said. He recalled examples from the Gospel where his disciples were fearful, distressed or disillusioned, and where Jesus heals their situation through a shared meal, foreshadowing the Eucharist.

"Christ's salvific act is mediated through his sacred humanity, and communicated through the symbols of bread and wine that he chose to be the vehicle of such communication, and which are expressions of the creatural dimension of the human

person. The symbol opens the natural to the supernatural," he said.

The "intrinsic link between the creatural condition of man and his supernatural finality," however, is lost in what he has observed as an emerging "tendency to understand the supernatural in a way that renders the Eucharistic sacrament ethereal, removed from the most concrete aspects of the human condition, a mystery that imposes a certain distance and calls primarily for a posture of contemplation."

"Such incomplete perspective is at the root of the ideological debate concerning the Eucharist, its weaponization in the cultural wars and the, at times, isolated focus on Eucharistic adoration," he said.

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In some Catholic circles, he said, there are tendencies toward "neo-Pelagianism," where people "ultimately trust only in their own powers and feel superior to others because they observe certain rules or remain intransigently faithful to a particular Catholic style of the past," he said.

Others embrace "neo-Gnosticism," which he called "a different shoot from the same stock," where bodily realities are considered bad, and spiritual realities are considered good.

"The antidote to these tendencies lies in the correct integration between natural and supernatural in the economy of salvation," he said. "The call of every human person to a profound union with God is discernible through the body, through the specific historical instantiation of being. Christ’s salvific act is mediated through his sacred humanity, and communicated through the symbols of bread and wine that he chose to be the vehicle of such communication, and which are expressions of the creatural dimension of the human person. The symbol opens the natural to the supernatural."

Archbishop Pierre also underlined the communal aspect of the Eucharistic meal.

"The fact that the encounter with Christ happens in the context of the liturgy also points to the ecclesial character of the Eucharist. The church draws her life from the Eucharist," he said. "It is in the heart of the Christian assembly that it is possible to experience the victory of Christ over death. We are taken up in the dynamic of his

paschal mystery as a community of believers, not as individuals. Thus, the church becomes the sacrament of salvation, the place where an intimate knowledge of the Savior and of his will is possible."

In identifying himself as "the way," Jesus provides direction for his followers, and "discerning becomes encountering," Pierre said. The Eucharist is the place for such an encounter, he said.

"I am convinced that many of the difficulties we encounter in the church today, especially when it comes to discerning the way forward, and which result in division and polarization, are caused by the absurd claim to analyze reality from a lofty ideological stronghold," he said. "The Christian is never a spectator. There is no better way to discover who Christ is than to enter into a relationship with him."

The answer to the question of how Christians evangelize the modern world "can only be found by evangelizing, with that openness to others that Pope Francis is asking us to have. There, in the struggle of the everyday encounter with sin, with poverty, with the challenges of indifferentism and atheism, we will find the path. The charism of the evangelizer is that of a path-finder, of one who navigates by sight."

That reasoning "lies behind the invitation of the pope to synodality, which is not an undercover attempt to introduce a parliamentary system. Rather, it is an exercise of communion, which expresses at its core the true way of being church," he said, referring to the Synod on Synodality, a three-year, worldwide discernment process that culminates in two meetings of bishops and other church representatives at the Vatican in October 2023 and 2024.

"Synodality invites us to listen to the other, to break the barrier of isolation in order to know what the suffering of our neighbors are," Pierre said. "Here again the Eucharist is the north star. It leads us down the path of the Incarnation not to judge, but to love."