The strong media interest in the death of Pope John Paul II and the election of Pope Benedict, the popularity and official support for spectacles ranging from World Youth Day to the recent Confirmation at the Superdome and the growing insistence of the upturn in priestly vocations seem to indicate we have begun to rise again from post Vatican II depression. We see pride in the restoration of piety and processions and a return to overt and public religious practice by small bands of well-rehearsed youth on whom the hope of the church now depends. How does this stack up with the strong decline in religious practice of the young and not so young; the fact that the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation has almost disappeared and the reality that the vocations we do have, regardless of their suitability and their ability, cannot meet the needs of the Eucharistic communities in Australia over the next 20 years?

The rise in interest of media attractive events and the growing prominence of pietism, all be it by small groups, indicates the great need we have for religion in our lives. Religion that brings comfort, certainty and a hope of attaining salvation has been popular even before the Pharisee in Luke’s gospel proudly proclaimed that his religious practice set him apart from others. But Jesus points out that to the extent he stands apart from others, for example the tax collector, he also stands apart from right relationships with God. Many hunger for the comfort of religion but are unprepared for the cost. If you want to sit on the right and left of Jesus in the kingdom, you must be prepared to live the baptism of Jesus by which he means the cost of the suffering and death that accompanies the journey of standing along side the poor, the hungry, the lonely, the prisoner and the naked.

Religion that is attractive to people is like the container of religious practice that holds out a hope of salvation. But the gospel reminds us that true salvation lies not in the container of religion but in the contents. Richard Rohr recently wrote “most people … confuse the rituals with the reality that they point to. (St.) Paul is impassioned about this:
“it really makes no difference whether one is circumcised or not, all that matters is that one is created anew” (Galatians 6:15). Rohr remarks that it is not that most people are hypocrites but that we are selling them short by suggesting that they can “join, attend, perform, obey here and there—and that is what it means to know and love God”. Most people are attracted by the media event but there is little “matching interest in the actual teaching of Jesus, real prayer, social justice, or any in-depth transformative journeys. Many people just like religion”. (Thoughts on the Papacy - Container Versus Contents, Richard Rohr, OFM, April 22, 2005, The Center for Action and Contemplation website)

My intention here is not to be critical of any group of Catholics because of their piety practices or any particular liturgical practice or its ability to gain publicity. I simply want to make the point that an interest in religion may not reflect an interest in the challenge of the gospel but rather a “cheap” grab for salvation in a world of uncertainty. I also want to suggest that we as Catholics need to look more deeply at religious and liturgical practice so that it reaches beyond its popularity with the media to a deeper reality. I also want to critique the tendency I see to “beat them at their own game” so to speak. I sense a gloating that we beat the Hillsong in numbers and dollars spent on the Confirmation at the Superdome. If it was a good idea (and I have no idea whether it was or not – we might need to carefully ask those who attended), it is not because we outdid Hillsong statistically but because people left that event changed and challenged to continue to walk alongside the poor, feed the hungry and visit prisoners. The rituals we design must leave people uncomfortable, not because we think we will go to hell for some misdemeanour but because we sense the call of the gospel that brings true liberation for us will only come when there is true liberation for all. The prayer after communion for this week says it clearly – Lord as you give us the body and blood of Jesus, guide us with your Spirit that we may honour you not only with our lips, but also with the lives we lead and so enter your kingdom. What is the reality we hope Eucharist will point to? What precisely is the Sacrament? How is Christ realised as a mediator of justice for the world in the Eucharist?

I would like to note a few of the trends in the theology, ethics and ecclesiology of justice since Vatican II because this will help us in thinking about the Eucharist and its role in being bread for the community and wine to strengthen us for mission. Gaudium et Spes (The Church in the Modern World) clearly situates the struggle in the world – in the hopes; joys; griefs and disappointments of people although unlike earlier social encyclicals it demonstrates this from a theological point of view. That is to say it relies on the scriptural ethic of solidarity with those who struggle rather than a natural law philosophical argument of previous Catholic social teaching. It is a struggle acted out in dialogue with the world where justice is to be done - but born of the intimate dynamic of Christian ritual in the communities of faith where the inspiration, imagination and creativity spark real resistance to the disempowering evil of the determinism of human
politics and governance. It is the gospel that unmasks the principalities and powers - the taboos of the political economy that so mesmerise us. The gospel reminds us that abuse of power, privilege and position kept in place by the political and economic structures of the powerful are not up to the creative imagination of Christians who remember the stories of noticing the stranger as a friend, engaging with the "other" as mission methodology, standing on the side of the vulnerable and the power of love unto death.

Where does the community engage with these stories creatively? Precisely in the intimacy of the shared sacred meal. Precisely in the carefully crafted ritual of intimate belonging, community building and personal nourishment of a praying, caring; reconciling and deeply committed community. Thus we can change the world through Eucharist because it is the story drama based on Jesus words – do this in memory of me – put your lot in here with mine if you dare and I will be with you always – do not fear.

This approach is far more empowering than the natural law approach of earlier encyclicals because it engages the Spirit who is creativity and imagination; who is the poetry of human resistance; who is the Word of God cutting, as it does, like a two edged sword to defeat the powers of oppression, marginalisation and victimisation. The Spirit in us has the power to confront militarism, sexism, racism and greed. These are spiritual problems and human problems because they dehumanise us all. Natural law can be dismissed as dry academic argument, but the Spirit cannot be dismissed without risking our very humanity.

The Eucharist is the work of the Spirit using music, poetry, symbol and Word to engage us as whole human beings in the shape of the most intimate of human encounters - a meal. The Eucharist is a meal with power precisely because it gathers the resistance community to act from the heart, body, mind and spirit. This is far more than an intellectual problem or argument - in Eucharist we move to conversion and conversation - a whole hearted movement literally calling us to act in solidarity with the most vulnerable.

Pope John Paul II in his document for the Year of the Eucharist, *Stay with us, Lord*, develops the links between the Eucharist and the practice and methodology for personal and social transformation. He notes: *The Christian who takes part in the Eucharist learns to become a promoter of communion, peace and solidarity in every situation. More than ever, our troubled world, which began the new millennium with the spectre of terrorism and the tragedy of war, demands that Christians learn to experience the Eucharist as a great school of peace, forming men and women who, at various levels of responsibility in social, cultural and political life, can become promoters of dialogue and communion.* (#27)

The Eucharist, properly considered and celebrated, can never leave us unmoved - that is to say the same as when we arrived. This is precisely because of the ways in which
Christ is present. The Vatican Council II document on the Liturgy reminds us that "to accomplish so great a work, Christ is always present in His Church, especially in her liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, not only in the person of His minister ...., but especially under the Eucharistic species. ...... Jesus is present in the sacraments, so that when someone is baptized it is really Christ Himself who baptizes. He is present in His word, since it is Christ Himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in the Church. He is present, lastly, when the Church prays and sings. (#7)

The Eucharist calls us to become the Sacrament we celebrate - our participation in the bread and wine is our participation in the glorified Risen Christ as our faith attests - but not only as a practice of piety but precisely in the Christ present in the poor, hungry and naked - when you do this to one of these least you do it to me. This radical real live presence is recognised, honoured and realised firstly in the Eucharistic community sharing the one loaf and one cup as an undivided body. There is to be no distinctions in the Eucharistic body assembled. But this is an efficacious Sacrament - having ritualised this communion and made it real in the Eucharistic body, we are thereby empowered to transform the world in the human community. This process is no longer alien to us and the mystery we celebrate no longer beyond our grasp.

Pope John Paul II in Stay with us, Lord, reminds us of the methodology of transformation embedded in the Eucharistic event when he comments: Can we not make this Year of the Eucharist an occasion for diocesan and parish communities to commit themselves in a particular way to responding with fraternal solicitude to one of the many forms of poverty present in our world?... the tragedy of hunger which plagues hundreds of millions of human beings, the diseases which afflict developing countries, the loneliness of the elderly, the hardships faced by the unemployed, the struggles of immigrants. These are evils which are present...even in areas of immense wealth. We cannot delude ourselves: by our mutual love and, in particular, by our concern for those in need we will be recognized as true followers of Christ. This will be the criterion by which the authenticity of our Eucharistic celebrations is judged. (#28)

The authenticity of the Eucharist lies in us creating celebrations where no one is excluded; the voiceless are noticed and honored; we are not afraid to welcome the stranger and eat with them and we make space for those who are different. Authentic Eucharist recognises indigenous land, embraces profound equality, consecrates space and time, engages with the cosmic dance, listens to the disturbed and the babies crying, rejoices in symbols and music of the people and prays for the asylum seeker, disabled,
lonely and elderly. Authentic Eucharist is not afraid of the pain of grief and finds the brokenness of the community a sacrament of sharing and a beacon of hope.

But it is not there for itself - all this is only so we can go on mission confidently. Authentic Eucharist inspires cooperation; calls people to action; organises rallies; letter writing; sit-ins; poetry readings; book clubs; soup kitchens and theological reflection that leads to action - all in favour of communion with the poor. Authentic Eucharist is sacrament because it effects what it signifies - it not only talks justice, reconciliation and mercy but it makes these really present in our community through the Eucharistic community's prayer and love. This is the real presence of the Eucharistic Christ - the literal presence of the poor in our midst - not tolerated but welcomed; not the object of our charity but the subject and reality of our dream to live in Christ's presence. Here is the dangerous content of religious ritual which is the container. This is what it points to - real food and real drink for the hungry and thirsty - and it is that which satisfies. It is built on the firm foundation of gospel love and human toil but always in the celebrating community.

St Lawrence, one of seven famous deacons of the early church, a librarian and archivist, was thought to have a list of all the members of the early church, and the locations of all the mythical hidden hoards of gold belonging to the Vatican. Captured by the soldiers of the Emperor Valerian a few days later, on August 8, 258 AD, he was told to produce all the wealth of the church. He was given only two days to bring all the treasures to the imperial palace. Particularly desired were the names of all the Christians who were also Roman nobles, since they could be ransomed for gold by the emperor or executed and their wealth confiscated by the emperor for the state. Lawrence gathered up the all the diseased, orphaned or crippled Christians on the appointed day, brought them to the palace, and told the startled emperor that "These are the treasures of the church!"

According to tradition, for his presumed impudence, Lawrence was then slowly roasted on a grill on the site of the Basilica di San Lorenzo in Rome, in the hope that he would publicly renounce his religion and reveal the names of the wealthy Christians.

There is a Christian who lived the challenge and cost of Eucharist