

This Is My Body

A PASTORAL LETTER ON THE HOLY EUCHARIST

for the clergy, religious and laity of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany

by

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the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ



Prologue

The overwhelmingly positive response to last year's Eucharistic Congress made it wonderfully clear that the people of our diocese are hungry for a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. What a beautiful sight it was to see more than 4,000 people of all ages and backgrounds converging at Auriesville to celebrate and receive Jesus in the Eucharist, the source and summit of our faith. The Pastoral Letter that follows is a continuation of what we began on that beautiful fall day. Think of it as a mini-retreat, a springboard for your own reflection on what the Eucharist really is and what it means to you.

I am grateful for all of you who encouraged and collaborated with me in bringing this Pastoral Letter to fruition. Especially, I want to recognize Father Robert Longobucco, for his substantial work on its structure and content, and Fathers Anthony Barratt and David LeFort, and Mary DeTurrís Poust, and their associates, for their invaluable help in the revision and editing of the drafts.

May I encourage you to read this Pastoral Letter slowly, to re-read it, to treat it like *Lectio Divina*, waiting for a phrase or sentence that speaks to your soul and then taking those words and turning them over in your heart, allowing the Spirit to speak to you. I hope it's not too long, but you don't have to rush through it. Take time to ponder, to contemplate and, hopefully, to enjoy. When you are finished, we can talk about it and share our insights. And what better time to get started than on the Feast of Corpus Christi. — Bishop Edward B. Scharfenberger

Introduction

"This is my Body...This is my Blood." With these humble and generous words, with the simple gifts of bread and wine transformed into the truly divine, our Lord Jesus Christ institutes his enduring, loving presence in our midst for all time and in all places. His command, "Do this in memory of me," entrusts to us this gift and so makes us participants in a holy action in which not only is bread and wine consecrated, but we ourselves are transformed into "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of [God's] own possession."¹

As Catholics, the Eucharist is indeed our greatest treasure, the true measure of our dignity and belonging in the world. It is the sacrament of sacraments² in which we are drawn into a "holy communion" with the Lord and where we come truly to know him, and through this communion, our world and ourselves. We rejoice that united we are the Body of Christ: even as Christ dwells personally within each and every one of us.

¹ Preface I for Sundays in Ordinary Time

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 1210

The Centrality of the Eucharist: a healing gift for our world and for us

So easily can we feel overwhelmed by all the suffering and the multiple, even desperate, needs in our world. So many live in anxiety and on the edge of despair. So many divisions seem to overwhelm our desire for communion and community. And despite all the people around us and access to social communication, so much loneliness!

We also search for meaning in our lives and a need for direction and purpose. As our horizons expand and our world becomes ever more complex, as options and avenues of opportunity multiply, it is harder to find where we fit in, how and why we matter, and how we can make a difference. While technology and the age of information has added to this anxiety, this sense of needing to know where we belong and who we are is ancient and we can see how well aware of it was Jesus Christ throughout his earthly life. Indeed, those with no place in the world — lepers, tax collectors and sinners — Jesus seemed to hold a special attraction for in his heart. He was intent on showing that God loves everyone, and that all possess a call to holiness, a special place in his mission.

On the night before he died, Jesus Christ gave us the answer we are hungering for with an act of love, both simple and profound. He gave us the Eucharist. As He prayed over the gifts of bread and wine, he promised to be among us, with us and for us forever. The Eucharist sums up all he wants to say to us, all he has done for us, all that we are. We fundamentally find our purpose, our destiny and indeed ourselves in this encounter with Jesus Christ.

Jesus truly present in the Eucharist and his sacrifice is truly made present

When the Lord intended to give us his complete self, he took no half measures. He emptied out his life and poured it out on the cross. When he instituted the Eucharist, he gave no less. He is truly present in the sacrifice of the altar, where his once-and-for-all sacrifice on the cross is made present again.³

Born a Jew, Jesus always drew inspiration from his religion. All that he did was steeped in the context of Judaism.⁴ The Eucharist is no exception, for it is the final covenant that culminates all the other covenants that bonded God to Israel. Jesus is the most innocent lamb of the Passover sacrifice.⁵ Indeed, the Passover context of the Eucharist is critical to how we understand it as a memorial feast. Those who celebrated the Passover have always understood it not only as a bringing to mind of a decisive event in their history, but a way of actually being present with it, incorporated into the story of the first Passover. What is remembered becomes somehow real

³ Council of Trent, Session XXII, Chapter 1

⁴ For example, see: Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*

⁵ John 1: 29

and present. The Jewish people therefore celebrate not just their historical liberation as former slaves in Egypt thousands of years earlier, but their election and salvation in the present.

Of course, when we celebrate the Eucharist, it is infinitely more than the telling of a story of a friendly last meal that Jesus wanted to share with his disciples. Rather, it is the story and present reality of the salvation he won for us and that comes to us here and now, that is always and everywhere at work in our lives. Jesus is the true bread from heaven, the perfection of the manna that sustained Israel during their wandering in the desert (John 6: 48-51). Indeed, the Jewish expectation of a new and superior manna granted by the Messiah is fulfilled.⁶

Of course, since the manna given to the people of Israel as they journeyed through the wilderness was real food, the new manna had to be more than just a symbol, if it were to be the capstone of a new covenant. Jesus Christ is truly present in the bread and the wine we receive at Mass. This is the unimpeached testimony of the New Testament and the Fathers of the Church. Our Catholic belief (and one shared by a number of other Christian traditions) is that when Jesus said, "This is my Body...this is my Blood," at the Last Supper, he *really* meant what he said. He did not say, "This is a *likeness* of my Body," or "This is *just a symbol* of my Blood." No, he said, "This *IS* my Body...this *IS* my Blood."⁷ How else could it really be a true and total love-gift, if he is not giving us himself?

St. Paul too makes this clear in his straightforward account of a tradition well known within 25 years of Jesus' death and resurrection:

"The Lord Jesus on the night he was handed over took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my Body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.'" (1 Cor. 11:23-25)

A little over 100 years later, St. Justin Martyr writes of the unanimous agreement of all the Church Fathers:

"For we do not receive these things as common bread or common drink; but as Jesus Christ our Savior being incarnate by God's Word took flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food consecrated by the Word of prayer which comes from him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of that incarnate Jesus."⁸

⁶ Cf. John 6

⁷ Council of Trent, Session XIII, Chapter 1. Also see John 6: 51-52

⁸ St. Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, chapter 66

From the beginning, at the very heart of our theology, is the understanding that Jesus truly invested himself into the Eucharist. He is present, body, blood, soul and divinity as “the whole Christ is truly, really and substantially contained.”⁹ As Catholics we believe and marvel that as the eternal Word of God became incarnate and dwelt among us as truly human, so Jesus becomes, in a sacramental way, incarnate again at each Mass and dwells among us. As his body was not finished with life even after it suffered crucifixion, so his presence on earth did not disappear at his Ascension.¹⁰ He still comes to us in the Eucharist, so that we might newly encounter our God.

A Sacred Meal that re-presents the total “Paschal Mystery”

Jesus meant for the Eucharist to be inclusive of all of his life. We receive all that Jesus is, just as we embrace the history of those we love. The Eucharist conveys Christ’s life, words and mighty deeds. Here we meet Jesus, crucified and risen, and also Jesus the leader, the healer, and the performer of mighty deeds. Receiving this gift conforms us more closely to the life of Jesus and makes us more capable of speaking words of love as he did, of setting and meeting standards of justice as he did, of feeding the hungry and of healing as he did.

We know that meals and eating are vital to our human life. We eat to survive, of course. However, for human beings, eating together is so much more than this: it is rich in meaning and symbolism. Eating together builds up connections and relationships. Often during a meal we share memories and create new ones, and we can build up bonds, strengthen ties and solidify our identity. Past, present and future somehow come together. This is why key moments or events in our lives such as baptisms, weddings, funerals, birthdays, anniversaries and graduations are often celebrated and completed with some sort of meal.

It should not surprise us then that God has taken this very human action of eating together with all its deeper significance and associations and chosen it as *THE* way of being with us and of building up our church family. Indeed, much of the earthly life of Jesus can be traced through the meals he shared. He taught and healed at meals and, most daringly, invited tax collectors, prostitutes and outcasts to his table. His every meal was a welcome table for sinners. And so it still is.

The Last Supper was the perfect summation of all those meals. It occurred at the most important meal of his Jewish faith, the Passover, when Jesus offered himself as the unblemished lamb to be offered as an oblation on the cross. His intention is that we specifically remember his passion and his sacrifice in which he offered his Body and Blood for us. This is what we memorialize, a perfect gift of love, the emptying out of God for God’s people. The

⁹ Council of Trent, Session XIII, 1st decree; cf. CCC, 1374

¹⁰ Matthew. 28: 20

cross is the passion we taste in communion. We know, too, that we are not worthy of such a gift. At Mass we echo the words of the centurion: “Lord, I am not worthy...”¹¹

The Eucharist, of course, makes present the sacrifice, but it also celebrates thereby the triumph of love that the resurrection will affirm. The Holy Spirit that transforms the bread and wine is the very same life-giving Spirit that raised Jesus from the dead. It is the risen and glorified body of Christ that we receive. “Every celebration of the Eucharist is a ray of light of the unsetting sun that is the Risen Jesus Christ.”¹² Jesus’ promise of eternal life is embedded in the Eucharist and our participation in it is a foretaste of heaven. We can recall the beautiful prayer attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas: “O sacred banquet! in which Christ is received, the memory of his Passion is renewed, the mind is filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory to us is given.”¹³

The heart of the Church is the heart of the people: a Eucharistic people with a Eucharistic heart

“And he [Christ] put all things beneath his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way.” (Eph. 1:22-23). The Church fulfills the mission of Jesus: indeed, it has no other purpose but that of serving the Gospel. Christ gave the Church every necessary element to evangelize the world. Its only measure of success is reflecting the wisdom, glory and salvation of its Lord.

This mission would be impossible without the Eucharist. For Christ, to give everything, means that he cannot withhold himself from this gift. Love can hold nothing back. And in the gracious gift of Holy Communion, his self-donation transforms the people who receive it into his Body, ready to perform holy actions in this world. He is truly present to the Church in this extraordinarily intimate way. The Church acts as a sacrament of Christ, “a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race,”¹⁴ and the Eucharist perfectly depicts the relationship of God, Church and humanity. This is why it is so necessary to receive the Eucharist weekly, for it is Christ’s desire that we know we are bound to him and he is bound to us.¹⁵ When we forget or ignore this, we forget who we are and who God is, and we lose our path to true love and happiness.

The task or mission of the Church is to proclaim and celebrate the experience of the presence of Christ, but then to share it in communion with others. Christ’s lavish gift of the Eucharist is the greatest guarantee that his bond with those he came to save will remain unbroken. When the Church falls short of living up to the standard Jesus Christ laid out in the Eucharist, when it

¹¹ Matthew. 8: 8

¹² Pope Francis, General Audience, November 22, 2017

¹³ Attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas, “O Sacrum Convivium”. Also see the Divine Office, EP II, Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, Magnificat Antiphon.

¹⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* n. 1

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1389

does not give itself wholly, it has failed Christ and his people. When it succeeds in that test and reflects that Eucharistic intimacy in its words and actions, it fulfills its divine purpose, its mission on earth.

The “presences” of Christ in the Eucharistic celebration and its effects

The Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, famously identified the four presences of Christ in the Mass: the priest, the Word of God, the gathered people and the sacraments, especially and primarily in the Eucharist.¹⁶ Therefore, each of the presences of Christ at the Mass informs and deepens our understanding of the Eucharist.

The Priest – in persona Christi capitis (in the person of Christ, the Head)

The priest who presides at the Mass acts *in persona Christi capitis*, or in the person of Christ the head. He is given this awesome power and dignity as a service to the whole Church. This is what the priest is ordained (that is “ordered”) to do. Of its very nature, then, the priest’s role points beyond himself to Jesus Christ. With the great responsibility invested in the priest, it is easy to attract attention and distract from the Eucharist itself. Though rarely done intentionally, the focus can shift from the action of the confecting of the Eucharist to the priest himself, especially when he relies on a particularly dramatic or idiomatic style, or when he takes it upon himself to alter the prayers or gestures of the Mass.¹⁷

The priest must make every effort to allow those whom he serves to dwell on the great miracle happening in their midst through the stirring words of the Eucharistic Prayers. He serves as a bridge-builder of the communion of all believers, for he is a conduit of grace and not its source. As John the Baptist said of his relationship to Jesus, “He must increase; I must decrease.” (Jn. 3:30)

At the same time, the priest must give the words the power and energy they possess and not be unmoved by the awesome act over which he is privileged to preside. He should engage the mystery and invite people to share in it by directing their prayerfully intense attention to the wonder that appears before them.

When the Mass begins, we do not “greet our celebrant” Father so-and-so – there might be time, hopefully, to do that after Mass – but we join together in prayer, beginning with a song of praise to the Lord and an act of thanksgiving for God’s mercy in the Penitential rite. We are preparing to hear the Word of God and, hopefully, a reflective opening up of that Word in our hearts through a homily that draws us deeper into the heart of God. This “Liturgy of the Word,”

¹⁶Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* n. 7

¹⁷ Cf. *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* (GIRM), 3rd Edition, n. 24

and the intercessory prayers that follow help “set the table” for the love feast that Jesus sets before us. With prayer and reverence, the priest helps draw us into that mystery.

Above all, the priest is to be a man of the Eucharist with a Eucharistic heart; reflecting its meaning by a life filled with thanksgiving, prayer and mercy. “If the Eucharist is the center and summit of the Church's life, it is likewise the center and summit of priestly ministry.”¹⁸ The marvel at being able to share this perfect grace is humbling. Priests are challenged to live up to the promise they made at their ordination: “Know what you are doing and imitate the mystery you celebrate; model your life on the mystery of the Lord’s cross.”¹⁹ The priest’s life ideally becomes a prayer, and he is to be poured out for others.

Christ truly present in the Word

“It is [Christ] himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the church.”²⁰ His words were always effective in life. They offered healing, comfort, hope and challenge and could even raise the dead.²¹ They are no less effective and powerful in the context of the Mass where the words crackle and provide direction and light centuries after Jesus spoke them.

The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist are inseparable and so integrally connected, it is impossible to imagine one without the other. The remembrance of God’s saving history thrusts us to the remembrance of the ultimate salvific act of the cross and resurrection. Hearts are opened and transformed by the Word, so they can receive every benefit of the sacrament. The love and grace proclaimed in the Word is manifest in the Eucharist we receive.

Christ truly present in the people of God: a living sign of our discipleship and of being disciple-makers

As Christ promised, “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” (Mt. 18: 20). He is most profoundly present in the Eucharistic assembly, for they are the receivers of his gracious gift. The assembly, transformed by the Eucharist, goes forth as the Body of Christ to be his witnesses. We are reminded of this during the dismissal at the end of the Mass: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord...Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.” In its singing, praying and quiet reflection, the People of God gathered around the altar makes Christ Jesus known.

This awesome gift also carries a commensurate responsibility. *How* are we making Christ known? Are we truly allowing Christ to fill our lives at Mass by preparing in the most diligent

¹⁸ Pope St. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 31

¹⁹ Cf. *Ordination Rite of Priests*

²⁰ *Sancrosanctum Concilium* n. 7

²¹ Cf. John 11:43, Luke 7:14

and enthusiastic ways? We can study the readings of the Mass and take advantage of the tremendous resources of adult faith formation. We should receive the Sacrament of Penance, so as to fully and truly delight in God's love and mercy experienced in the forgiveness of sins and to fulfill the precept of the Church to receive the Eucharist without the stain of serious sin. We should not avoid personal penance and reconciliation; for the Lord commanded us to leave our gift at the altar to be reconciled with one another so our reception of his Body and Blood may be pure.²² Even our dress, our attentiveness and our posture speak to how we bring Christ alive at the Mass. A test I like to use is to ask, "What if Jesus was in the congregation with you, or next to you on the Communion line? Would you do anything differently?" Of course, he is there in line with you as well as in the Sacrament, for he is present among us.

The People of God have particular roles in the liturgy; ones that have gained particular prominence since the Second Vatican Council. Each of these ministries reveals and allows us to experience Christ among us. First among these roles are deacons dedicated to service. They have the blessed opportunity to proclaim the Gospel, preach and to raise the precious Blood of Christ. "They are dedicated to the service of the liturgy, of the Gospel and the works of charity."²³ As the first deacons were to provide for the poor, their presence is a reminder of the justice and compassion that flows from the chalice to which they have a special attachment.²⁴

Readers who share "the words of eternal life" (Jn. 6: 68) are to prepare themselves by practice and prayer. As proclaimers of God's Word, they should speak in a way that is clear and unrushed, never just "read off" like a grocery list, but showing a loving appreciation of the message they bear. Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion have been given a responsibility, perhaps unimaginable for previous generations of lay Catholics. They must serve with great solemnity and humble joy. Ushers and hospitality ministers are charged with having the same welcoming and inviting attitude as Christ, especially towards children and "outsiders" for whom Jesus always showed particular care. Altar servers are to be well trained and to have a good understanding of the liturgy, so they can perform their tasks, confidently and unhurriedly, with reverence, and serve as a sign of the hope of generations. Above all, it is through the weekly reception of Communion by all of God's people that we truly show our reverence and thanksgiving to God.

Practicing the Presence of Christ

Prayer is not in time; time is in prayer. We are "caught up" in the eternal prayer of Jesus to the Father, united with him in the Holy Spirit. This same Spirit impels us at all times to give praise and glory to God, in season and out of season, whether "in" church or not. So we look for ways

²² Matthew 5:24

²³ *Lumen Gentium* n. 29

²⁴ GIRM, n. 94

to extend our Eucharistic awareness, our “ecclesial consciousness” one might say, throughout every moment of our day. Besides just going to church, we bring church wherever we go.

The presence of Christ continues in the congregation of the faithful and in the heart and soul of every believer even beyond our celebration of the Mass. Sanctified by God’s presence within us, we become “tabernacles” of the Holy Spirit. Respect for the dignity of every human person flows, in part, from our being created from the beginning “in the image and likeness of God” and, in a most remarkable way, being made receivers of the real presence of Jesus Christ through whom our humanity is further blessed by becoming a fit dwelling place of divinity.

This mystery is well worth contemplating, for its grace radiates well beyond our full participation in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. Our attitude and demeanor as we leave Mass should display the love and reverence for the divine Person we have received into our hearts and souls. Our manner of speech and manner of dress, our public and private behavior, our respect for all persons we encounter – even on the road in the heat of traffic, in the mall or on the field afterwards – is a sign, often a test, of the depth and sincerity of our faith and our sanctified bodies. Our whole being and all that we do must reflect the dignity in which we are created and re-created through God’s redeeming grace.

Time spent reflecting on the Eucharistic presence in our communal worship and in our personal devotion can enrich our experience of its transforming power. We might call this “practicing the presence of Christ.” We allow the seeds of God’s love, his personal presence planted in our hearts, to take deep root and to grow. We open our minds and hearts to where God’s Spirit might direct us, spending some time in prayer perhaps before or after Mass, preparing for what we are about to celebrate or reflecting on the Word and the message we have received at Mass.

The Holy Spirit is not bound by time or space. Though our Eucharistic devotion essentially springs from the Mass, like all prayer, its power and effects are not limited by any one experience of the Mass. It is not diminished by the veil of an unfamiliar language we might hear it in, if we happen to be traveling abroad. Nor is its validity determined by the form in which it is celebrated, ordinary or extraordinary, though we might have a preference. As important as our liturgical surroundings may be – and they should be beautiful and comfortable – the majestic beauty of the Mass itself is not altered by our physical comfort, the convenience of the worship space, or even how agreeable our celebrant or fellow worshippers might be on any given day. Though the Mass is truly “heaven on earth” – we are never closer to heaven on earth than at Mass – getting there and back, and being there, may not always feel like heaven. Sometimes a little sacrifice might be salutary, however, as we recall the Mass’s Calvary connection. “The essence of the Mass is that Christ is making an offering to the Father of Himself, who was slain

for us upon Calvary. The Mass is Calvary, as Christ now offers it to His Father,” Frank Sheed concisely observed.

The ancient practice of “Eucharistic Adoration” offers an excellent opportunity to prolong the moment of Christ’s sacramental presence. It is always to be understood as an extension of the Mass, never a substitute for, or dislocation from, the action in which Christ’s Eucharistic presence is celebrated by the community of faith.²⁵ Many saints bear witness to this. Their life and mission were given a deeper meaning, a focus and direction through the practice of prayer and contemplation in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, reserved or exposed, at times when Mass was not being celebrated.

In recent years I have observed how, in particular, many young people are drawn to both the mystery and the intimacy that they have discovered in the quiet presence of the Lord through the practice of Eucharistic Adoration. On special occasions, such as the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi), many faith communities will observe the tradition of a Eucharistic procession. This may take on many forms, including a solemn march, always following the Mass, in which the congregation accompanies the priest who bears the Blessed Sacrament consecrated at the Mass throughout the streets surrounding the Church, in a public expression of our Eucharistic faith.

As a youngster, I remember our parish celebrated “Forty Hours” – a two-day celebration that began after the last Mass on Easter Sunday. The pastor would expose the Blessed Sacrament and, for the next two days parishioners would take “watches” for hour-long periods. Altar servers would do the same, but during the day. I never forgot it. As I look back, it was during such quiet periods that I came to appreciate the peace and serenity that come from just being in the presence of the Lord. Of course, in those days, the only screen we had was the TV and, occasionally, the movies. But I can tell you, during those “Holy Hours” I knew I was more connected to the really Real than anything I would ever find on a screen. Now I know why! If you have done a Holy Hour – or even a holy half-hour – no doubt you will know what I mean.

Those participating in our Eucharistic Congress in Auriesville last September will recall what a joy-filled experience that was. Many participants had never experienced the many dimension of Eucharistic devotion that came together that day. Most especially, people throughout our diocese with the Bishop, uniting together right at its center, both geographically and spiritually: it was on this soil that the Jesuit Martyrs first brought the name of Jesus and celebrated his Eucharistic presence. The evangelization which we carry on in throughout our region started right here.

²⁵ “Holy Communion and the Worship of the Eucharist Outside of Mass”, General Introduction n. 4; nn. 48-49.

And speaking of Evangelization, which always flows from the Eucharist, one spiritual fruit that those who practice the presence of Jesus through Eucharistic Adoration often experience is a strengthening of their “inner ear,” the capacity to listen to hearts and souls. While all contemplation can lead to an enduring inner peace, when it is rooted in the sacramental presence of Jesus flowing from the Eucharist, it becomes the foundation of our relationships with others. This enhances our ability to connect with them, to share the joy of the Gospel, the Word dwelling in our hearts. A contemplative heart is a patient heart. Nothing is more conducive to effective evangelization than a heart that can listen to and respond to the heart of another seeking the peace that the world cannot give, but only Jesus, the true Bread of Life.

Transformed in the Eucharist: a call and a challenge

“If you receive the Eucharist worthily, you become what you receive.”²⁶ With these memorable words, St. Augustine pointed to the purpose of the Eucharist as transformative for each person and for the Church. As daring as the mission to proclaim Jesus Christ as truly present in the Eucharist may be, this mission is not fulfilled and his presence is not truly manifested in our lives, until we are changed by this powerful encounter with the Risen Lord. We must become an ever-more-committed Eucharistic people, so that all might see Christ in us, his Church.

Transformed into one body

The Liturgy, the work of God’s people, has a key purpose in bringing all together to worship God. That is why it is so painful when it becomes a source of division. Too often what divides us, for example, are stereotypes and outmoded labels like “liberal” and “conservative,” especially when they become flashpoints for Catholics in matters liturgical, which do nothing to foster unity. One word I do miss from the past (if we must go there) is “dialog.” Respectful listening and consensus-building seems so rare in civil discourse these days. A Church that has learned to grow stronger some 2,000 years of cultural transitions and family tensions should be well equipped to do just that – so long as we do not let the Eucharist itself divide us!

A good place to start is by recognizing that, first and foremost, the Mass is a prayer. To pray well together there must be some order and consistency in what is to be expected. Following the rubrics and other liturgical directives as the Church universal prescribes is an exercise in fraternal charity and just common sense. It is important to do things well, to pray as the rites direct us to, to bring a sense of beauty and awe to our celebrations and to achieve “that fully conscious, and active participation” our Church demands.²⁷ If the Eucharist promises anything, it promises unity that can never be pushed aside to pay homage to an agenda, nor to declare winners and losers in our liturgical tastes. So we focus on what we hold in common: belief and

²⁶ St. Augustine, *Easter Sermon* 227

²⁷ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 14

trust in the sacramental presence of Jesus among us and the inherent goodness of one another celebrating our unity. We also need to allow the Eucharist to bring us together, to have the confidence faith brings in its inherent power to forge that unity, as it drew all those individual grains to form the one bread and all those grapes to fill the one cup from apostolic times. St. Paul decried disunity at Corinth for it disrupted the Eucharistic community from forming one body. "For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit." (1 Cor. 12:13)

In the end, the Eucharist is less about what we do, and much more about what God is doing in and through us. It is not so much our prayer as the prayer of the everlasting Pray-er, Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of the Father, to whom he offers himself eternally in the love of the Holy Spirit, inviting us into this Trinitarian life. As God is one, so also does Jesus pray we may be one in him (cf. John 17).

On a more pragmatic level, if we cannot come together, how are we to transform the world for the love or justice that Christ promised? Every member of this Body is endowed with a dignity that must be more than tolerated or respected. It must be held precious. Knowing who we are and what we have been given, we see the world through the eyes of the One whose Spirit lives within us. Thus, every unborn child, every dying person, every striving immigrant, every disadvantaged, disabled or impoverished person is united with us. As a Eucharistic people, we stand with them as one body, which can never be divided.

Transformed in mercy and being merciful

In an almost unfathomably creative way, Jesus sustains and memorializes his mission of mercy through the Eucharist. As Christ-bearers, we now carry the mission of mercy which was the life of Jesus. We are to forgive, to make peace, to reconcile and to heal as he did. As the Mass ends, the dismissal "to go in peace" is not an ending, but a beginning. It is a commissioning for the weekly mission of extending the merciful and loving touch of Jesus Christ. We are called to be Christ for others, his living body still working, comforting and transforming hearts.

Transformed into eternal life: a foretaste and promise

A dying person is given Eucharist through the rite of "viaticum," or food for the journey. It is a reminder of the bridge the Eucharist builds to heaven, for the Jesus whom angels gaze upon is the same Jesus who comes to us on the altar even now. He brings salvation to his saints, the ones who have come to know him through the breaking of the bread. "The Eucharist is truly a glimpse of heaven appearing on earth. It is a glorious ray of the heavenly Jerusalem which pierces the clouds of our history and lights up our journey."²⁸ Inevitably, we feel an inspiring

²⁸ *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 19

closeness with those who have gone before us, for at the moment of reception, we come as close as we can to what our heavenly loved ones do every moment — behold the glory of God. It is the foundation of our theology of the communion of saints.

Transformed in joy and thanksgiving

On the night he was betrayed, denied and abandoned by his friends, when he saw the worst to which we, in our fallen humanity, can descend, he gave us a gift to see the best in ourselves. This depth of incomprehensible love is the reason for our joy and our giving thanks. After all, the word “eucharist” means “thanksgiving” and so being what we might call a “Eucharistic people” is all about our lifestyle and an attitude that is one of constantly giving thanks to God: of becoming like the one we have just received. So many spiritual writers tell us again and again that this “attitude of gratitude” is at the very root of a healthy human and spiritual life.

For we are made “holy,” a hopefully not-outdated word, that does not speak of superiority or arrogance, but humbly sees ourselves as blessed. Through the Eucharist, we are sanctified as Christ confers his gifts upon us. He literally meets us where we are, in the midst of our families and our community. Yet, he does not want us to stay where we are. He wants his Body and Blood to bring people to greater mercy and peace, greater happiness and blessing, greater justice and hope. Ultimately, he wants the Eucharist to build up the kingdom of God on earth as we prepare for his return in glory.

In this sense, we have come to realize that the Eucharist is at the very heart of evangelization. The Eucharist feeds us, and not only gives us the strength to be true disciples of the Lord; but also the courage and even the motivation to share with others the gift that we have received. As one contemporary writer puts it: “Evangelization is not an add-on dimension to the Eucharist, rather it is in and of itself an evangelizing experience...we eat and drink the body and blood of Christ in order to become the body of Christ to the world.”²⁹

This is the promise of all believers. We who possess and are destined for glory are to share that glory now. Our “Amen” as we receive Communion is a resounding “yes” to all that Christ is. It is this “Amen” that affirms we accept what the Eucharist really is: Jesus within us and Jesus transforming us. It would be, to say the least, dishonest to receive without some expression of our free will to at least want to love Jesus as he loves us. Without this loving, heartfelt “Amen” the gift is not really received, and the Eucharist would be treated as a travesty, sacrilegiously, a contradiction of itself.

That yes means receiving Jesus on his terms, not a God of our own making and thinking, but the true God who lived among us and saved us. Since he chose us to be the Body of Christ, we must

²⁹ Rivers, R. *From Maintenance to Mission, Evangelization and the Revitalization of the Parish*, pp 101-102.

be designed with a unique set of gifts, talents and charisms not found in anyone else. We are not necessarily worthy people, yet Christ instills a worthiness in us that makes us more beautiful, courageous and loving than we would dare to be on our own. In the Eucharist, we can see ourselves through the eyes of our Creator. This brings about a fundamental realization, as we rediscover ourselves through Christ's gracious gift. If you think about it, it is impossible to receive Communion in good faith without being changed, for it allows us to know ourselves as God knows us. How awesome is that! It takes the pressure off of us having to make or re-invent ourselves and define and defend our own identity. Becoming who we really are in God's eyes is the true and universal key to happiness and human fulfillment – and this is the precious gift that we have in the Eucharist.

No wonder the Eucharist changes us into a people of joy and of thanksgiving – if we realize and receive it as it truly is. From the beginning, God has used creation to communicate his love for us. God's covenant with Israel was a sign of his desire to save us. And in the fullness of time he sent his Son. From his Incarnation to the Last Supper, through his death and resurrection, and right up to today, Jesus has an eternal, burning desire to be with us and in us. It was not for his own peace but for ours that he extended his arms on the cross. It was not for his own salvation but for ours that he rose from the dead. Deeply embedded in our very being is a desire to be with the God who always desires us. The Eucharist is the fulfillment on earth of that quest. Or to put it another way, the Eucharist brings heaven to earth.

With the Eucharistic presence of Jesus Christ in our lives, we can live a life without fear or loneliness. For if God is for us, who can be against us? The soul hunger that has led so many people in our times to seek false comfort in things that cannot possibly satisfy this emptiness is really a yearning for eternity, and for the God who has created our souls with this hunger for heaven, an eternity with God.

Our endless search for meaning only ends on the road to God. Daily we echo the words of St. Augustine: "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you."³⁰ The "I" and the "us" we discover in the Eucharist is our true self as redeemed and transformed by God. Before the mirror of his love, grace and mercy, we find our only true self in the heart of all-loving Father – which is the Holy Spirit – giving himself completely through the Body and Blood of his Son. All this and heaven, too! This is the sacrament of joy, for in the Eucharist we have encountered perfect love. The love that lasts. And that love has embraced us, and makes us beautiful.

Epilogue

³⁰ St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book X

To anyone burdened by wounds suffered from the sins of any member of Christ's body - by the Church itself - do not be discouraged. The wounded face of Christ looks on you with tender love. His Eucharistic presence is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Before sending us forth to help one another, Jesus comes to save you personally, just for himself - because he loves you! Let him stay with you. Let go of everything and just be in his love. Many who leave the Church family, or the practice of being with it at Mass, long for this peace of his Presence. Survivors of abuse by clergy or family members, who feel like they live in exile, often talk about this longing.

All who seek peace, come to the heart of Jesus from all the business, the noise and the tangles that tie us to our electronic devices. And bring a friend, who may not have had such an invitation for a long, long time. For that loved one, you will be a lifeline.