

The Real Presence



Nineteenth Festival Letter of
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To the priests, deacons, seminarians, religious, teachers, catechists, sponsors, parish leaders, our Catholic movements and organizations, and all the faithful of the Catholic Diocese of Peoria:

I am releasing my 2020 Festival Letter at this early date in the hope that it may at least in some ways assist a renewed witness regarding the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Most Blessed Sacrament. While every doctrine of our Faith is important, faith in the Eucharist is clearly foundational for Catholic Christianity. I therefore ask that this year and in coming years, at parish councils, religious houses, faculty meetings, chaplain meetings, RCIA and catechetical meetings, that our entire Local Church look for ways to reinforce our teaching and witness regarding the Blessed Sacrament. This Letter is being sent to you without an accompanying list of the next year's feasts and observances. At a later date, the letter will be published more formally with the customary calendar.

May the Lord help us all to be faithful and bless us daily in his service.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Daniel R. Jenky C.S.C." in a cursive style.

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BISHOP OF PEORIA

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Nineteenth Festival Letter - AD 2020

Divine Revelation is the way that Almighty God personally invites us to know, love, and serve Him. It is God's self-communication of the fullness of truth, revealed in Scripture and Tradition. Being grounded in true doctrine is therefore absolutely necessary for living our precious Faith. Yet today, we are forced to admit that for several generations, the Church may not have effectively passed on even some core elements of Catholic Christianity to those whom may now constitute the majority of our members. A shocking example is evidenced by a recent opinion poll that indicates that in the United States, more than half of today's Catholics may no longer believe in the Real Presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist. This failure in faith and conviction has happened despite the fact that the received teaching goes back to Apostolic times and has always been held as foundational to our Catholic identity. So as your bishop, I believe it is a grave personal obligation for me to try to state as clearly as I am able some basic truths about the Blessed Sacrament.

We are a Eucharistic Church, whose life and service revolve around the gift of the Eucharist. Just as truly as Christ ascended into heaven, so truly he descended into the Sacraments, *until he comes again in glory*. As the Catholic Catechism teaches, the Eucharist "is the Sacrament of sacraments," empowering us to appreciate and then live all the other Sacraments. We are baptized and confirmed into a Eucharistic community. Reconciliation restores us to grace so that we may worthily receive the Eucharist. The Sacrament of Holy Orders is intrinsically connected to Eucharistic service. The covenant of Holy Matrimony is based upon Christ's spousal love for the Church embodied in the Eucharist. The Anointing of the Sick heals and restores to wholeness in Christ, corporally present in the Eucharist. As Saint Thomas Aquinas once so succinctly summarized: "The Eucharist contains the entire spiritual wealth of the Church."

Certainly the Blessed Sacrament is the richest possible symbol of our Faith, but through the transforming words of Christ and power of the Holy Spirit it also truly makes present what it signifies. Jesus clearly bestowed enormous importance to the Bread and Wine of the Last Supper. He took pains to prepare for the holy meal, expressed special instructions, and invested certain gestures with new meaning. He then gave a personal commandment: *Do this in memory of me*. (Luke 22:19) His unambiguous words: *This is my body, this is my blood*, rather obviously mean: "This is truly me, this is myself." Rather than speaking metaphorically, he intentionally established for the community of his disciples an outward sign that effected an entirely new reality. After his passion and death, the Risen Christ would continue to abide with them and confirm them by his Real Presence at each and every celebration of the Eucharist. On the first Easter Sunday, two disciples after traveling with Jesus and even listening to him along the road to Emmaus,

only finally recognized him at the *breaking of the bread*. It is this very same awesome reality which today the Western Church calls the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass and which the Eastern Church celebrates as the Divine Liturgy. It could quite accurately be asserted that Christ's living presence in the Blessed Sacrament is the most real thing men and women of faith may ever experience in this passing world.

As the Apostle Paul teaches, in the earliest New Testament witness to faith in the Real Presence: *The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ?* (1st Corinthians 10:16) The word Paul uses for participation in the Eucharist is *koinonia*. This Christian theological term indicates much more than mere social fellowship but rather a new mode of existence. The experience of *koinonia* plunges believers into a true participation in the life of Christ and a sharing of that life with one another. Again, this sharing is not given simply as a metaphor but rather as a truly life changing encounter with Jesus. Just a "form" of spiritual communion would certainly have been an alien concept to early Christianity where participation in the Body and Blood of Christ was understood as only being possible because bread and wine truly became the Body and Blood of Christ.

The institution narratives of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the rich theology of John regarding the Lord's Supper, as well as the testimony of the Fathers of the Church all give persistent evidence for a shared faith in the Real Presence of the Risen Christ in the Eucharist. This ancient witness is well exemplified by Saint Ignatius of Antioch: "The Eucharist is the medicine of immortality, the antidote to death, and the gift of everlasting life in Jesus Christ." As Saint Irenaeus explains: "Our way of thinking is attuned to the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our way of thinking." Saint Augustine observes: "The reason these things, brothers and sisters, are called sacraments, is that one thing is seen, while another is understood." Saint Gregory of Nyssa also expresses the unchanging conviction of the ancient Church: "Through the Eucharist, the body comes into intimate union with its Savior. The immortal body of God, by entering the one who receives it, transforms his entire being into its own nature." Or as that bold and eloquent preacher, Saint John Chrysostom summarizes in shockingly realistic language: "To show the love he has for us, he made it possible for those who desire, not merely to look upon him, but even to touch him and consume him and to fix their teeth in his flesh and to be commingled with him, in short, to fulfill all their love."

It is a defined dogma of the Catholic Church, revealed by the Holy Spirit and preserved from any possibility of error, that the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ are truly and substantially present in the Most Holy Eucharist. This is not an opinion to be measured against any opinion poll but rather Divine Revelation as expressed by the absolute authority of Scripture and Tradition. The Lord once said: *Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood shall live forever, and I will raise him up on*

the last day. (John 6:54) So for any Catholic to deny the Real Presence is in a certain sense to deny Jesus and place themselves outside of the convictions of our Faith. The clergy and faithful therefore share a perennial responsibility before Almighty God to pass on Divine truth to future generations, *in season and out of season*, uncompromised and undiminished. As the Second Vatican Council insisted in the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: “The Church in her teaching, life, and worship, hands on and perpetuates to all generations all that she herself is and all that she believes.”

There is a long established theological dictum, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, which could be translated as “the law of what is prayed, is the law of what is believed.” How we pray is certainly integral to how we believe. I rather suspect that it was not so much our teaching about the Real Presence that has changed during some recent decades but instead a noticeable decline in our ritual reverence and recognition. What had once been universal practice in any Catholic church regarding attentive silence and a whole bundle of other rituals such as genuflecting, blessing with holy water, the Sign of the Cross, kneeling, intentional architecture, the location of the Tabernacle, multiple candles, bells rung during the Liturgy, carefully prepared sacristies and sanctuaries, the care of sacred vessels and linens, prayers before and after Mass encouraged a kind of shared awe before something experienced as numinous and wondrous. Contemporary American culture tends to be relentlessly informal and sometimes our churches may seem more like hotel lobbies than an awesome House of God. The technical theological term for Divine worship is called *latria*, that is the honor and worship we offer exclusively to Almighty God. It is Catholic doctrine that the Most Blessed Sacrament is at all times to be given the *latria* of the Church, because through the power of the Holy Spirit, the consecrated Bread and Wine truly become the glorified Body and Blood of Christ. We therefore rightly recognize and adore the Most Blessed Sacrament as our Lord and our God.

Reverence for the Real Presence can certainly be enhanced through regular instruction, Benediction, processions, visits, holy hours, and quiet times of personal prayer before the Tabernacle. These Eucharistic devotions are obviously also intended to deepen our conscious recognition of the centrality of the Real Presence of Jesus within the liturgy of the Mass. Quiet Masses, sung Masses, solemn Masses, and especially the ordinary ritual Masses for weddings and funerals are certainly great opportunities to witness to our faith in the Eucharist as a pastoral gift to those who may have been poorly catechized or even have fallen away. Where there are a sufficient number of Eucharistic ministers, I also strongly recommend that Holy Communion be offered under both the forms of bread and wine for the sake of the fullness of the sign instituted by Christ. In all circumstances, the greatest possible care should be devoted to public worship in the preparation of homilies, and the training of servers, readers, ushers, and musicians.

It must always be remembered that it is at Mass where Jesus gathers the Church into the Eucharistic assembly. It is at Mass, that his Word is proclaimed and heard, preached and pondered. It is at Mass where Jesus renews in our very midst his One Perfect Sacrifice on the Cross, because it is at Mass, where we *proclaim the Lord's death until he comes* (1st Corinthians 11:26). It is at Mass where Jesus our High Priest offers the atoning sacrifice of praise and thanks to his Father. It is at Mass where through the power of the Holy Spirit the whole substance of the bread and wine are transubstantiated, that is fully and completely changed into Christ's true Body and Blood. It is at Mass where through that same Spirit we may actually become a part of what we receive. It is at Mass where the presence of Jesus becomes both the source and the summit of our entire life as Catholic Christians. It is at Mass where the way we live is formed and the way we serve is inspired and sustained. How could we ever dare neglect Sunday Mass or fail to share with future generations the infinite treasure of the Real Presence of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament.

The First Letter of John begins with some striking words that describe the sheer wonder, perhaps even the spiritual rapture of a disciple who had personally known Jesus: *What existed from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and touched with our hands.* (1st John 1:1) In the Most Holy Eucharist, that same intimate contact with the *Word made Flesh*, is just as possible for us today as it was for the Lord's first disciples. Jesus is our Lord, our Savior, our Teacher, our Priest, and our King, who together with the Father and the Holy Spirit is now and forever adored as our good and gracious God. In the Blessed Sacrament, we actually *taste and see the great goodness of the Lord.* There is a much revered prayer in our Catholic tradition called the *Anima Christi* which expresses the faith, hope, and especially the intense love of believers for Jesus Christ truly present in the Holy Eucharist.

Soul of Christ, sanctify me.
Body of Christ, save me.
Blood of Christ, embolden me.
Water from the side of Christ, wash me.
Passion of Christ, strengthen me.
O good Jesus, hear me.
Within your wounds, hide me.
Never permit me to be parted from you.
From the evil enemy defend me.
At the hour of my death call me
and bid me to come to you,
that with your saints I may praise you
for age upon age. Amen.

May the Catholic Diocese of Peoria, its clergy and religious, its young and old believers, its parishes and schools, its ministries and charities be intentionally centered around the Real Presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in the Most Blessed Sacrament. May this faith always be the unshakable conviction of our Holy Church: *O Sacrament Most Holy, O Sacrament Divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment Thine.*

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