



A Hunger for the Bread of Life

A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist

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December 18, 2020

We cannot live...without the Word of the Lord; we cannot live as Christians without participating in the Sacrifice of the Cross; we cannot be without the banquet of the Eucharist; we cannot be without the Christian community; we cannot be without the house of the Lord; we cannot be without the Lord's Day.

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I. Our Current Situation

To the clergy, religious, and faithful of the Church in Colorado Springs: grace, mercy, and peace!

As I write these words to you, we are in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. We are facing a virus that is exceedingly contagious, and in some cases lethal. Some of us may have lost loved ones to the virus. Some of us may have had it or have it now. Some of us are in quarantine because of exposure. We all live with state- and county-imposed restrictions on our activity, and most of us wear facial masks in public. Even our Church buildings are affected, as we have learned to accommodate social distancing. Our congregations at Mass are much smaller, and some of us are anxious about participating in Mass at all.

Against this background, I can see how we hunger in a more focused way for the Eucharist. I hear this from the lay faithful. I hear it from our priests and deacons. None of us is happy about the restrictions that the pandemic imposes on us. Yet still we must be prudent. If civil authorities and health experts advise us to do social distancing, to wash our hands frequently, and to wear masks, then we should do this. If the Catholic Bishops of the United

States collectively – though temporarily – lift the obligation to participate in Sunday Mass, this is a measure of how serious our situation is.

In all likelihood, with the passage of time, the application of good health habits, and the ingenuity of our medical science community, this health crisis will pass. It has had destructive consequences at local, national, and global levels. It has had a major impact on our economy. It has affected our social lives. It has paralyzed the entertainment and the arts community. It has made us strangers in our own churches. But this will not last. For the short term, we need to shore up our hope—both as individuals and as a community. For the long term, we need to work and pray that we do more than simply survive this crisis; we need to come back to a better place. We need to let ourselves be purified by what we are going through, and to come back stronger and more energetic.

I would like to share some reflections with you on the Eucharist, the center of our lives as Catholics.

II. The Summit and Source of the Church's Life

In the many comments I have heard in these months of social distancing, one the most touching and recurring is a lament for the loss of the usual place of Eucharist in so many lives. It is heartfelt, and it points to one of the underlying realities of the Church. We are a Eucharistic people. We are fed with the Eucharist and we hunger for it.

If the Eucharist is our food, it satisfies our hunger, like the manna in the wilderness or the multiplied loaves. Jesus even promises that those who come to him will never hunger (Jn 6:35). The Eucharist contains all delight, conforming to every taste (Wis 16:20). The psalmist invites us: taste and see that the Lord is good (Ps 34:9). The Eucharist gives us strength and nourishment (Ps 104:14-15). “Eat the Bread of Life,” St. Bernard tells us, “or your heart will wither.” The Eucharist gives us life. Jesus told us, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink” (Jn 6: 54-55). More than this, in the Eucharist the heavenly bread is the foundation of our relationship with Jesus: he satisfies our hunger and desire; he contains all beauty and delight; he becomes our strength and our sustenance; he is our life in grace. The bread is Jesus himself, and we worship him in the Eucharist.

We are not gods. We are not self-reliant. One of the lessons that the Eucharist teaches us is that God cares for us, takes care of us, provides for us, gives us what we need. This is the lesson of Divine Providence. Therefore we trust him as we trust a Father. BUT he gives us bread for the day only (Ex 16:4-35); otherwise we will try to be self-sufficient. So we humbly ask for our daily bread and humbly thank him for every meal. “All of these look to you to give them food in due time. When you give it to them, they gather; when you open your hand, they are well filled” (Ps 104:27-28).

The Eucharist is not simply food; it is also a banquet. We do not simply “put on the food bag” like animals; we eat our meals together at table, as a family, as a community. Dinner provides not only physical nourishment, but emotional nourishment as well. Most importantly the Eucharist as a meal provides spiritual nourishment, everlasting life. In the Gospels we see

Jesus present at meals and banquets, most famously at the Wedding Feast at Cana. Jesus was criticized for taking meals with tax collectors and sinners. In response, he told his critics to learn the meaning of the words, “It is mercy I desire, not sacrifice.”

The “banquet” played a role in a number of Jesus’ parables. A master hosted a banquet to which the invited guests refused to come, leading to guests being drawn from the highways and byways. When the Prodigal Son returns home, his father hosts a banquet to celebrate his return. These were foreshadowing of the Great Feast of the Kingdom, the Wedding Feast of the Lamb, to which all human beings are invited at the end of time. It will be an occasion of joy and abundance at the coming of the Messiah, the consummation of all human history.

At the Last Supper, Jesus ate the Passover meal with his chosen few. Like the meal with the elders on Mt. Sinai, it is a feast of the covenant (Ex 24:9-11)—but this is a New Covenant. Unlike that first covenant, this covenant cannot be broken by sin; it forgives sins. It is an everlasting covenant and for this reason it is a source of reassurance and consolation. One thing we should pay attention to in St. John’s account of the Last Supper is the new commandment. First, Jesus humbly washes the feet of his disciples and commands them to do the same for one another. Then over and over he repeats, “Love one another.” And he adds, “By this all shall know that you are my disciples.” Every celebration of the Eucharist is a meal with the Risen Christ, in which we remember and imitate his service to his disciples and to us.

In the Bible, covenants were inaugurated with sacrifice. We recall the strange story of the inauguration of the covenant with Abraham (Gn 15:1-18; Jr 34:18-19). The animals of sacrifice were split in two, and a smoking firepot symbolizing the presence of God passed between them. In other words, a subsequent covenant was enacted by symbolizing the curse of the previous covenant. A similar thing happened at the foot of Mount Sinai when Moses sprinkled the people with blood and splashed the rest on the altar. In effect, each ceremony was saying: may it happen to me what happened to these animals if I should be false to this covenant.

The New Covenant is given in the blood of Christ, for the forgiveness of sins. Christ takes the curse of the broken covenant on himself; he takes on the burden of our sin.

Christ ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, ‘Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree,’ that the blessing of Abraham might be extended to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Gal 3:13)

The sacrifice of Christ, the victim in whom the covenant is cut, has conquered the power of sin with the gift of forgiveness. It has also conquered the power of death, the wages of sin. To put it simply: the New Covenant is a fellowship with God *in the blood of Christ*.

In every celebration of the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ is made present again in an unbloody manner. It is as if time travel were possible. We are made present at the foot of the ancient Cross; we are rendered there and then. Or alternatively the ancient Cross is rendered present in our midst, now. Either way, we participate in the effort and in the benefits of Christ’s loving sacrifice. Every historical act of Christ has an eternal dimension because he is God.

When Jesus appeared in the Upper Room on Easter Sunday, his risen body still bore the marks of his Passion. It still did a week after. What does this mean? We might wonder if it were simply a matter of his body not having had the time to heal. But this is a glorified body. The wounds are a theological symbol, not a physiological accident. What they mean is that the sacrifice of Christ is part of his glory. They symbolize in time what the Son is in eternity: a perfect self-giving to the Father and now to the sinners he came to save. It is a living sacrifice.

The Eucharist is the presence of Christ. In the Old Testament, first the Tent Sanctuary then the Temple of Jerusalem were the places of God's presence to his people. He wished to take up his dwelling in their midst. With the Ark of the Covenant, he led his people through the wilderness. And when the Ark of the Covenant was brought into the Temple of Solomon at its dedication, a deep dark cloud filled the sanctuary, symbolizing the presence of God's glory. Now that glory dwells in Christ, and Christ dwells in his Church.

The Eucharistic Bread is not simply a symbol of Christ's presence, it *is* Christ. It is the sacramental presence of Christ to his people. At the Last Supper, Jesus said to his disciples: "I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you" (Jn 14:18). And at his Ascension he said: "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Mt 28:20). His being-present to us is important to him. And of course it is precious to us. He is our stronghold. In him, we can do anything.

II. It's Time to Come Home

I understand the desire of so many Catholics to participate regularly and often in the Mass. It is the sacramental center of our lives. This is for all of the reasons I have just recounted. The Eucharist is our food. The Eucharist is our fellowship. The Eucharist is our foretaste of glory. The Eucharist is our saving sacrifice. The Eucharist is the presence of our Savior.

The situation with COVID-19 is a dynamic one, changing rapidly. We had hoped at the end of the summer that we could be out of woods, but that does not appear to be the case just now. A second wave of the virus is affecting many countries, states, and localities. Our addressing the challenge will not be one-size-fits-all. No one is to blame for this. We can be thankful at this moment that we do not have to deal with shut-down orders.

The Sunday obligation has been generally lifted, but this is not intended to be a permanent state of affairs. Many remain in state of good health, and I hope as many of them as possible are able to participate at Mass. I say this as a word of encouragement. The dispensation is still in place for those who need it. And please let me amplify this. Any who are showing symptoms of COVID *should* not come to church. The risk of infecting others is high and the strain of leaving the house can sometimes worsen symptoms. Others who are not yet showing symptoms but are vulnerable to infection because of co-morbidities should also stay away from church.

Unrealistic fear, however, should not be the guiding force in our lives. Those who are healthy should return to the celebration of the Mass – if not on Sunday, at least a Mass during the week. Whenever someone is seriously ill, he or she is automatically dispensed from the Sunday

obligation. The current general dispensation was initiated when we were still very unfamiliar with the COVID virus, but we have learned a great deal in the past nine months. We know how to take precautions, and all of our parishes have incorporated the mandated procedures. Healthy Catholics should not understand the general dispensation to be permission to miss Mass for any reason whatsoever.

Some parishes have been asking congregants to make reservations to attend Mass; others may ask congregants to sign up when they arrive. The purpose of this exercise is twofold. Parishes want to make sure of available seating for everyone who comes. They also want a contact list, in the event that someone later turns out to be positive for COVID, requiring notification to everyone else at the Mass. I thank all of you for your cooperation and patience with this.

So, if we are not able to participate in the Eucharist by reason of illness or advanced age, what could we be doing during these days? How could we make use of the time and not just complain about the inconveniences? One suggestion is that we make the situation an occasion of growth in our relationship with God. He is not punishing us with this pandemic. We are not certain of its origin, but we know that viruses can mutate and spread rapidly. This is simply part of the experience of living in a fallen world. God is patient with us and with the mess that our sins have made of things. Nothing exceeds his Providence or his power to save.

We can always pray. We all know that we should be doing more of this anyway. Both Jesus and St. Paul tell us: pray always! We can say devotional prayers like the Rosary, like the Stations of the Cross, like litanies, like the prayers composed by numerous saints. We can pray the Liturgy of the Hours, which is available online. This is the Church's official prayer. When we pray it, we pray it with and on behalf of the whole Church.

Many liturgies are available online, and many parishes and dioceses are live-streaming opportunities for prayer. These are a help to many Catholics who must miss the scheduled liturgies in their own parish churches. But as they have found out, these are a poor substitute for in-person participation. These streamed or televised Masses can move us to prayer and to a greater sense of the need for the Eucharist; but watching the Mass on a screen at home is not taking part in the Mass. That cannot leave us with the taste of the consecrated host in our mouth. And tasting is a part of how God wants us to encounter him in the Eucharist.

Finally I want to thank the many priests, deacons, and other ministers who have assisted in making liturgical and devotional prayers available either online or within the churches. We have had to observe prudent restrictions, and I hope that everyone understands this. Just the same, I thank those who have gone above and beyond the call of duty. I know that you will continue to do so and I am truly edified by your zeal to serve.

I close by invoking God's blessing on this local Church and by fervently praying that we—as a people, as a nation, as a global community—be delivered from this pandemic and its devastating effects. We are all of us always in the hands of God's Providence. Let us never forget that.