

Corpus Christi, 2016

Perhaps the greatest gift that Jesus left behind to his fledging Church, apart from the example of his own life and death, was the Eucharist. With justification, the Eucharist is often spoken of as the very center of Catholic living. There is a very real danger for Catholic communities of collapsing or degenerating when deprived of the Eucharist for any length of time. No one can in effect remain a committed Catholic without participation in the Eucharist.

Every persecuted Church realizes this and struggles to keep the Eucharist alive in its communities. We have seen that in countless examples over the centuries, including our own—note how Catholics in China went to enormous lengths to celebrate the Eucharist in spite of appalling difficulties.

It is sad, then, to find today in our persecution-free societies how many have lost this sense of the centrality of the Eucharist in Catholic spirituality.

And so what is our role with regards to the Eucharist?

Basically, two things:

First, we remember and we give thanks. The word “Eucharist” is derived from a Greek word for “thanks.” Above all, we remember with deep gratitude all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ, through his life, suffering, death and resurrection. We also remember and give thanks for all our own personal experiences of God’s love at work in our lives. It is a time to count our blessings. And we remember and give thanks not only for what happened a long time ago, but most especially for what is happening in our lives at this time.

And secondly we also come together to celebrate our being a community and a fellowship in Christ. The Mass, by itself, does not make community. It is the celebration of a community already existing. For, although the Eucharist is at the center of our Catholic life, it is not the totality of that life. It cannot survive in a vacuum. From the way a congregation celebrates the Eucharist one can immediately know whether it is a living or a dying or dead community. A dead or non-existent community cannot have a living Eucharist.

Some people ask why they have to go to Mass and why they cannot just pray at home. Of course, we can pray at home and sometimes that is a better place to pray because there can be less distractions. But Mass is not just a time for praying; it is a time for celebrating community and that cannot be done at home; we can only do that together.

Or some argue that they feel closer to God when they are out in nature. And it is certainly a wonderful experience to worship God the Creator for the gift of our beautiful world. But then let me ask: Doesn't that by-pass the role of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, the Jesus who is the Way who opens for us a path to salvation? In both cases, this should not be seen as an "either or" situation, but rather as a "both and" spirituality.

As we learned as children, Mass is a sacrament. That means it is a sign pointing to something bigger than itself. That is why the Mass is a measure of the quality of our fellowship and community. Some people treat Mass like a meal in McDonald's, eating alone in a corner; when it should really be like a Chinese banquet, with everybody sitting in a

circle and dipping into the same dishes. We don't just receive Jesus in Communion; we share together the broken Body of Christ.

Today is the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ. But whose Body? And whose Blood? Is it the body that died on the cross? The body that walked and talked and taught in Galilee? Not really. The Body we celebrate today is the Body of the Risen Jesus. All of us who are baptized are members of that Body. Some of us are alive and healthy and contributing to the overall life of the Body. Others are sick or dropping off, others are in need of healing or nourishment...

When we approach the altar to receive Communion, the priest or minister says: The Body of Christ. When we say our "Amen," it is our faith statement that "yes," we do believe that to be true.

For we do not just "receive" the Body of Christ. It would be better to say that we share it. Paul once emphasized this when he wrote: The blessing-cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ and the bread that we break is a communion with the Body of Christ. Body here means the whole Body of the Risen Christ—Jesus and the community of His followers. He continues by saying that the one loaf which is broken and distributed is a sign that "though they see many of us, we form a single body because we all have a share in this one loaf. It is unfortunate that nowadays the sense of sharing the one loaf has been largely reduced because of the small unbread-like discs that we now normally use for our communion hosts.

And so communion is not just with Jesus, but also with all those around us. That is why, before this communion we need to say the Lord's Prayer in which we ask forgiveness of those we have offended. The sign of peace further gives us an opportunity for genuine reconciliation so that the unity expressed through communion may be genuine. It is sad that some people deliberately avoid each other at the sign of peace

and then piously approach the altar. They have forgotten the instructions of Jesus to stay away from the altar until we have reconciled with a brother or a sister.

Of course it is difficult to have a sense of sharing in the one loaf as the sacrament of the one Body, if in fact, we are not one body. And we are not one body if, outside the church building, we are not united and caring for each other. One gets the impression that many come to Mass as a purely personal act. They come in and out as self-contained individuals. Some come late and leave early apparently with no sense whatever that this could be construed as a lack of respect for the celebrating community.

If we are not already a community before we enter the place where the Eucharist is being celebrated, we are not suddenly going to become a community after we come in. **A parish where Mass-going is basically the only activity of its members is going to be a dead parish and its Eucharist will also be dead.** After all, the Eucharist is the measure of the life of the parish. And a parish gets the Eucharist it deserves. Poor community, poor Eucharist. A vibrant community cannot have a bad Eucharist. Maybe some of those who have stopped going to Mass are in fact acting more honestly because the Mass no longer is a source of nourishment for them. Perhaps they are looking to be entertained as if Jesus' torture and death on the cross was not particularly inspiring/entertaining enough for them.

I read a story of a parish where the people complained that their parish was dead, and so the pastor organized a final requiem Mass with a coffin in front of the altar. At the end of the Mass, the people were invited to file past the open coffin. When they looked in they each saw an image of themselves in a large mirror placed at the bottom of the casket. And so yes, if our parish is dead, if our Masses are boring, it is

not just because of bad sermons or poor singing (we can't possibly have bad homilies here, but I am not so sure about the singing 😊). The problem is more basic. And so before we give up going to Saturday or Sunday Mass, we might ask to what extent are we responsible for the situation about which we complain?

We need to celebrate as a people who becomes daily more and more aware that we are parts of the Body of Christ. The more we grow in this awareness of Christ's living and acting through each one of us, the more meaningful will be our gathering around his table to share together, to eat and drink together the body and blood of the Risen Lord.

On a slightly different plane, do you remember the last time you had dinner out at a restaurant? Occasions that merit such a meal might be a birthday, an anniversary or perhaps a celebration of some major life event. A special moment almost requires a special—but not necessarily expensive—meal. And often that special meal is shared at a table for two: you and your spouse, or you and that special friend or family member or you and someone you hope will be that special person for meals together as far as the eye can see. When you think about it, there's something profoundly intimate about a table for two. And that is why "date night" is so important for married couples with children.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Bread of Life, tells and shows us through one loaf and one cup that we are included in the one body that is the Church. No strangers here, no outcasts, no "fifth wheels," no one excluded because the One who bids us share this meal sees us all as God's children, God's family. Imagine with me what could have happened among us and through us as God's people if we begin to live fully this great truth—one loaf, one cup, one body? Why... we might just be able to change our corner of THE WORLD...