

A Pastoral Letter to

The Reverend Clergy, Devoted Religious
and Faithful Laity of the Diocese of Rockford

On the Most Holy Eucharist

I. INTRODUCTION

Our Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, has called on us as Catholics, as the Catholic Church, to make the celebration of the Millennium an occasion of heightened enthusiasm and faith. This great Jubilee will celebrate the “fullness of time,” when God sent forth his Son for the redemption of the world. The Holy Father urges all of us, members of the Church, to make the year 2000 “intensely Eucharistic” because “in the sacrament of the Eucharist the Savior, who took flesh in Mary’s womb twenty centuries ago, continues to offer himself to humanity as the source of divine life.”¹

In response to the Holy Father’s call, I write this pastoral letter to help you prepare for the great Jubilee by a renewal of our Eucharistic spirit.

There is a special urgency about this worthy preparation because, as the Holy Father often reminds us, there are tendencies in our day to fail to give the Holy Eucharist its central place in our lives as Catholics. To intensify our Eucharistic spirit we must deal with these tendencies.

The first of these, mentioned by the Holy Father, is the failure of some Catholics to attend the Holy Sacrifice when they are obliged by the law of God and the Church to do so, and are able to attend. He laments the fact that even though the Mass is available to them, some of the faithful lack the “interior willingness” to take part in it according to the precept of the Church. In this they show “inadequate sensitivity toward the great sacrament of love.”²

The second unfortunate trend is for everyone to receive Holy Communion at Mass, even when they have not taken care to purify themselves of serious, that is to say mortal, sin by going to confession.

In this connection the Holy Father reminds us all of the serious admonition of St. Paul in his First Letter to the Corinthians (11:28) that each person must “examine himself” so that he or she may receive the Body of Christ worthily. A correct sense of moral responsibility is closely linked to the practice of approaching the sacrament of reconciliation. In this our consciences should be guided by respect for Christ, “who, when he is received in the Eucharist, should find in the heart of each of us a worthy abode.”³

Another unfortunate sign of diminution of Eucharistic spirit is the undue hurry sometimes shown during Mass, a sort of impatience which does not honor the Lord’s presence. The Holy Father also notes that some few who receive the Eucharist in the

hand have shown “deplorable lack of respect toward the Eucharistic species.”⁴

With the prayer that the Holy Spirit will enkindle in our hearts a renewed devotion to our Lord in the Holy Eucharist, I write this letter about the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in this sacrament, and about the Eucharist as our Christian sacrifice.

II. THE LORD IS TRULY PRESENT

The presence of God extends to every place and time. In his divinity, God the Creator is present to every creature, holding each thing in existence. He is present also in his knowledge; he knows us intimately, past, present and future. Our hearts are fully open to him.

As true God, Jesus Christ is present everywhere, along with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Even his sacred humanity, now that it has entered the realm of God’s glory by the resurrection, is present everywhere in the cosmos.

But there is a most sacred presence of Jesus Christ that is limited to certain times and places. It is the substantial presence of his Body and Blood, which he offered on the Cross for our salvation.

This most holy Body and Blood are not present everywhere, but only in the Eucharistic species, that is, the appearance of bread and wine. At the Last Supper,

Jesus changed bread and wine into his Body and Blood, and commissioned his apostles to “do this.” The Catholic Church has the most serious mission of carrying out the Lord’s command. The Church has as its most precious treasure this great sacrament in which the Body and Blood of Christ are contained, offered and received.

There are many ways that the Church expresses its deep respect for the presence of the Lord’s Body and Blood. The Church brings the power of consecration down through the ages and around the world by the sacrament of Holy Orders. We erect noble buildings and fashion dignified altars for our Eucharistic worship. We make our responses and sing our hymns at Mass with fervor. We require those who would receive Holy Communion to be members of the Church, instructed in the meaning of this sacrament, free of serious sin, and fasting. We ask communicants to be punctual, attentive, prayerful and worthily attired.

All of this is in response to our Catholic faith, which tells us that the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ is truly present in the Holy Eucharist.

There are some ways I might suggest for deepening our awareness of the presence of our Lord in the Eucharist.

We ought to have a deep appreciation of the ordained priest. It is the priest who has the sacred mission of bringing the Eucharistic presence to the faithful. In union with his bishop, it is the priest who is the one person in the Christian community who

has the authority, or sacred power, to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord. As Cardinal Ratzinger recently wrote, ordination brings about a change in the very being of the priest, so that he can act in the person of Christ, especially at Mass.⁵ In these days, when we are happy to have many lay ministers in the Church, we must hold in highest honor our priests, those who consecrate, and bring us the Lord in the Holy Eucharist.

Our church buildings ought to foster a sense of the sacred, so that the presence of the Lord is more easily recognized. The art work and music should help us to capture the awesomeness, the mystery, the transcendence of the Lord's being with us. We should try to recover the prayerfulness and silence that used to be characteristic of Catholic churches. Everything in our sacred buildings should draw our attention to the One we worship there, in his Body and Blood.

The way we approach Holy Communion is very important. Our external behavior can either help or hinder our internal dispositions and our keen awareness of the real presence of Jesus. Most importantly, we must never come to Communion just because others are doing so. We must abstain if we are conscious of unconfessed serious sin. I draw your attention to the offense that is offered to God when a person who has deliberately missed a Mass of obligation received Holy Communion without being absolved in the sacrament of Reconciliation. Our Lord clearly taught that our

consciences must be clear before we come before the Lord in worship. ⁶

In receiving Holy Communion, we are entitled to receive the Sacred Host on our tongue, or in the hand. At some Masses we are invited to receive the Precious Blood. These are the most sacred actions we perform from week to week, even daily. To perform them as they deserve, we should certainly think of what we are doing, and let our faith be expressed in true reverence. The Holy Father's words about the lack of respect for the Eucharist shows his deep concern about the manner we receive Communion.

Those who come to Communion should have an awareness of the great privilege we have, to be in such intimate contact with the Lord's Body and Blood, the food that gives us never-ending life. It would be good if we look upon the sacred species, step to one side for a moment, and receive the Lord with authentic reverence.

Catholics believe that the bread and wine, once consecrated, do not cease to be the Body and Blood of the Lord Jesus until the appearances of bread and wine are gone. To express our faith in this truth, Catholics honor the presence of the Lord in the Eucharist even apart from Mass and Holy Communion. The Church provides that we construct a solid and dignified repository for the consecrated hosts. Then, when Communion is to be brought to the sick, the hosts can be taken from the tabernacle. The Lord's presence in the tabernacle should make a profound impression on us. We

should enter the Eucharistic presence with joy and faith. We should greet him and pray to him as truly present. Our kneeling and genuflections (if we are able) and our refraining from distracting noises or conversation will help deepen our respect for Jesus' presence in his Body and Blood.

III. THE HOLY SACRIFICE

At every Mass the bishop or priest asks the people to pray that the sacrifice--his and theirs--may be acceptable to God. And as you know, the people respond with the prayer: "May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands..."⁷

The offering of sacrifice goes against the grain of a secular, materialistic and individualistic society. In our day the things that capture our attention are all the human problems, aspirations and pleasures. In times when people thought of God as the Supreme Being who created all things, and as the One for whose glory we were all made, it seemed so "natural" to offer him a gift, that is, a sacrifice.⁸

Sadly, the secularism of our days is keeping even some Catholics from appreciating the place of sacrifice in our religion. This leads to a diminished understanding of the central act of our faith, which is the loving sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. And that same failure to understand sacrifice can lead us to forget that in the Mass, the very sacrifice of Jesus is made present, and we are now called to give ourselves to God with Christ.

Before the Word became Flesh, God prepared a people of his own who would acknowledge him as Lord of all, by offering him sacrifices of many sorts. The old Testament people of God were solemnly commanded by the Lord himself to offer sacrifice. Hundreds of verses in the Bible refer to the tribe of priests, the temple, the altar, the sacred vessels and vestments, the things to be offered, and especially in the prophets, the proper interior dispositions. No one was to appear before God empty-handed. ⁹

This was so, because sacrifice is the opposite of disobedience. Every sin says “No” to God; it is a refusal to acknowledge his holy supremacy. But every sacrifice expresses one’s submission to God’s will. So while sin creates an abyss of immense proportion separating the sinner from the all-holy God, the rupture is healed by the offering of sacrifice. When the offered gift truly represents the interior surrender, submission and loving obedience of the sacrificer, sin is expiated, God is honored and a marvelous unity of love takes the place of the break caused by sin.¹⁰

The material offered in the Old Covenant sacrifices was nearly always items of food. In the holocaust, the entire offering was consumed by fire to show that the gift was truly passed from the sacrificer into the possession of God. But in the most common form of sacrifice, only a portion was burnt, while another portion was given to the priests, and a third portion was returned to the one who presented the gift for

sacrifice. That portion, usually the meat of cattle, sheep or goats, was then used for a holy meal with relatives and friends. The meal was shared with joy; it was the way to “make merry” before the Lord. ¹¹

The meal after the sacrifice had very deep meaning. The thing offered to God had become his possession. Then he “returned” a portion to be used in the holy meal. Those at table shared what belonged to God. To eat together meant that they were in peace with God, and were joined together in the surrender of themselves to the almighty. The meal meant unity and peace.

A. THE ONE GREAT SACRIFICE

Jesus saved the world by his sacrifice on the Cross. He was and is the light of the world, the way to the Father, the truth, the life of the world. All this was won by his death in obedience to his Father’s will. His obedience unto death reversed the disobedience of our first parents. The moment of Jesus’ sacrifice is the central moment of all human history. After that offering on Calvary, no more sacrifices are necessary. In heaven, Jesus, our great high priest, continually presents that sacrifice, the effects of which have the power to save every sinner. ¹²

To bring that saving power to people of every age, the Lord Jesus gave his

Church the Eucharist, by which believers could join him in the complete offering of himself that he made on the Cross. The central moment of all history is made present to us in the Holy Eucharist until Christ comes again.

When the Lord instituted this most Blessed Sacrament, he said, “This is my body, given for you.” “This is the cup of my blood...which will be shed for you...”¹³ The very Body and Blood which won our salvation is now the Christian sacrifice for every age. In the Mass, which is truly the Holy Sacrifice, we are present for the unbloody re-presentation of Jesus’ saving sacrifice. It is now in sacrament, in a form in which we can participate, by offering ourselves to God along with Christ, and by sharing Christ, the Bread of Life, in a holy meal.

B. TOWARD A EUCHARISTIC SPIRIT

The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides us with a very rich treatment of the Holy Eucharist. I heartily recommend that you read it carefully, for your study will surely deepen your Eucharistic spirit.¹⁴

One of the truths emphasized by the Second Vatican Council and faithfully set forth in the Catechism is this: the summit of the Church’s activity is the Mass. Think for a moment of all the activities and offices of the Church: pope, bishops, priests,

deacons, teaching, missions, prayer, religious life, scripture study, works of charity, acts of virtue, Church law, holy marriage and all the rest. Everything the Church does is intended to bring its members to give themselves to God in union with the supreme gift of Jesus on the Cross. ¹⁵

Since the Holy Father has asked the Church to intensify its Eucharistic spirit, I offer the following possibilities for deepening our appreciation of sacrifice, of Jesus' sacrifice, and of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.

First, meditation on the Passion of Christ has proven to be a powerful means of appreciating his sacrifice. Through the ages, especially since around the time of St. Francis of Assisi, the Catholic people have learned to treasure the sufferings and death of the Lord as a most excellent way to grow in love of God, and so to offer themselves with Christ in the Mass. And to this end, I urge everyone to do some penance on Friday, to pray the sorrowful mysteries of the Rosary with devotion, to make the Way of the Cross, to read the Gospel narratives of the Passion, and to unite one's personal sufferings to the sacrifice of the Lord. This will help to emphasize the Mass as the Holy Sacrifice of Christ and his Church.

When you prepare your gift of money for the offertory, you could think of your gift as an expression of your gift of yourself to God. The money you contribute will help the poor, and it will keep the Church afloat, and that is important. But if you

“feel the pinch” and make a really “sacrificial” gift, it will be easier for you to remember how the Lord suffered when he made the supreme sacrifice. After Calvary, we need not bring cattle, goats or lambs to be slaughtered in sacrifice. We bring ourselves to be given to the Lord. We should try to make our gift correspond to our interior self-surrender to the Lord. ¹⁶

At Mass, we should give great attention to the moment of consecration. This is the time of transubstantiation, when the Body and Blood, and therefore the sacrifice of the Lord, is made present. Concentrate on the elevated Eucharistic species. Adore in your heart. Make this a moment of loving praise, thanksgiving and self-oblation. Consider yourself a witness to the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross. You might say, in your heart, with St. Thomas the Apostle, “My Lord and my God.” ¹⁷ Or you might use the words of St. Alphonsus in his Stations of the Cross, “Grant that I may love thee always, then do with me what thou wilt.”

The next suggestion may require a rather advanced level of spiritual awareness. It is based on the Catholic belief, founded in the New Testament, that by our baptism, we all have a share in the priesthood of Christ. Only the ordained priest can consecrate the Eucharistic species, but every baptized believer can be united with Jesus, our high priest, to such an extent that it can be said that we all offer the Mass. We form one body with Christ, the priest, and so we can say we offer the sacrifice.

This is a noble thought indeed. If on the way to Mass you realize that you are truly priestly by your baptism, you may better appreciate the Mass as a Holy Sacrifice in which you play a vital part. ¹⁸

Finally, here is a suggestion that will help us avoid falling into an excessive individualism when we come to Mass. We celebrate our Eucharistic liturgy as a Church, a community, a people of God. And so when you prepare for Mass, it would be very helpful if you would think of yourself as about to intercede for the whole world. The fact is that Jesus offered himself in sacrifice for the whole human race. Each Mass has the same infinite value as his offering on the Cross, which opened the way to forgiveness for the whole human race. So when you join with your neighbors in offering the Holy Sacrifice, bring to the altar the agonies, the desperation, the poverty, the hostility, the suffering and the terrible sins of all our race. Make your Mass an earnest appeal for God's mercy, and a prayer that his kingdom may come, and his will be done. I pray that this will help you see the Mass as important for the world, since it is the sacrifice that brings God and mankind together in the unity won by Jesus Christ.

IV

This letter is written with the fervent hope and earnest desire that all of us as Catholics in the Diocese of Rockford will examine our own hearts as to our belief in the Eucharistic Mystery and our devotion to our Eucharistic Lord.

About this most holy sacrament of the altar St. Paul writes: “*Everyone is to examine himself and only then eat of the bread and drink of the cup.*”¹⁹ In this year of preparation for the Great Millennium, we are looking at a special way at God the Holy Spirit of hope for the future. The Church teaches us that:

It is by the conversion of the bread and wine into Christ’s body and blood that Christ becomes present in this sacrament. The Church Fathers strongly affirmed the faith of the Church in the efficacy of the Word of Christ and of the action of the Holy Spirit to bring about this conversion.²⁰

May all of us ask this Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the spirit of truth, so to enflame our hearts with love for Christ in the Eucharist and enlighten our minds to the beauty and purpose of this Eucharistic Mystery that we will all lovingly celebrate this sacred banquet in which Christ is worshiped, His passion is recalled and we receive a pledge of our future glory.

Devotedly yours in Christ,

The Most Reverend Thomas G. Doran, D.D., J.C.D.
Bishop of Rockford

1. On the Coming of the Third Millennium, nn. 1, 55.
2. Mystery and Worship of the Holy Eucharist, n.11.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. “The Ministry and Life of Priests,” by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, in Homiletic and Pastoral Review (August-September, 1997), pp. 7-18.
6. See Matthew 5:23
7. “Suscipiat Dominus sacrificium de manibus tuis...”. Ordo Missae, n. 25.
8. See St. Thomas Aquinas, the Summa Theologiae, IIA-IIae, q. 85 “Of sacrifice”, and IIIa, q. 22, “Of the priesthood of Christ.”
9. Deuteronomy 16:16.
10. Summa, IIA-IIae, a. 85.
11. Deuteronomy 16:14.
12. Mystery and Worship of the Holy Eucharist, n. 9.
13. See Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-24, I Corinthians 11:23-25.
14. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, nn. 1322-1405, and especially nn. 1373-1381, on the presence of Christ by the power of his word and the Holy Spirit.
15. Sacrosanctum Concilium, n. 10.
16. Summa, IIIa, q. 82, a. 4.
17. See John 20:28
18. I Peter 2:9, 4-5; Sacrosanctum Concilium, n. 14.
19. 1 Corinthians 11:28.
20. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 1375.

