

Holy Thursday

April 1, 2021

A bishop was making a pastoral visit to one of the parishes in his diocese. After Mass, he met with a group of parishioners whom he invited to share ideas with him and ask him questions.

As often happens, the topic turned to how to get more people to come to Mass. One gentleman stood up and said, "Well, bishop, if people aren't coming to Mass, maybe it's time we ask ourselves whether we should even be having Mass in the first place. Maybe it's time for us to do something else that people will be more interested in."

At first, the bishop was dumbfounded. He wondered whether he had heard the gentleman correctly. Then he said, "Not celebrate Mass? Why, that's unthinkable!" The bishop then took the opportunity to explain to the parishioners why we celebrate Mass. This is what he told them.

The Mass is the most important thing we do as Catholics. Even if no one came to Mass, the priest would still celebrate it. Even if all the churches were torn down, the priest would still celebrate Mass. In fact, even if all a priest did was say Mass and nothing else, he would be living his vocation to the fullest.

We celebrate Mass because Jesus commanded us to do it. At the Last Supper, He left us with the memorial of His passion and death in the Eucharist. Then, He commanded His disciples, "Do this in memory of me."

Ever since that Holy Thursday night, the apostles and those who followed them celebrated the Mass. St Paul writes in his First Letter to the Corinthians how it was handed on to Him from the apostles who were at the Last Supper and it has been handed down to every generation of Christians since. The writings of Christians in the first and second centuries confirm that they were celebrating the Mass in much the same way we do today.

The Mass is more than just a prayer service. It is THE PRAYER of the Church. Whenever we go to Mass, we gather not just as a group of individuals but precisely as the Church. At every Mass, the whole Church is gathered to offer the one sacrifice of Jesus Christ to the Father in the Holy Spirit. We are not just there to watch what is going on but to really participate by offering ourselves, all that we do, and all the sacrifices we make, together with that offering of bread and wine. Together with the bread and wine, our sacrifices are transformed and made life giving for ourselves and for the world.

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There is a reason that Jesus instituted the Eucharist on Holy Thursday night. It was so that His apostles could understand that the Blessed Sacrament is intimately connected to His sacrifice on the cross. We call the Mass the “memorial of His death and resurrection” because, at every Mass, the one sacrifice of Jesus is re-presented to us. Jesus is not sacrificed or put to death again. Rather, all the saving power that was displayed on Calvary is now made present for us in the Mass. At this altar, we go to the foot of the cross once again and all its transformative, healing, and redeeming power is made new for us once again. That is why we say, “When we eat this bread and drink this cup we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again.”

The bishop then explained that Jesus is present at Mass in a unique and unrepeatable way. He is present in the people gathered who form His body. He is present in the priest who acts in His person. And, He is present in the Blessed Sacrament. When we receive the Eucharist, we receive Jesus Himself. There is no more intimate and personal way to enter into relationship with Him than to receive Holy Communion.

Finally, the bishop told the people that there is nothing better their parish could offer than the sacrifice of the Mass. The answer is not to replace it with something else, he explained, but to celebrate it with all the devotion and dignity it deserves.

On this Holy Thursday, we celebrate this incredible gift that Jesus left us at the Last Supper - His Body and Blood given to us in the Eucharist and the Priesthood which makes that miracle possible. Jesus promised He would not leave us orphans. The gift of the Eucharist assures us that He continues to be present to us in our Churches and in our hearts.

The bishop was right to speak about our need to celebrate the Mass with devotion and dignity. This is a beautiful gift and we should receive it with all the gratitude and awe our hearts can muster. We should not only attend Mass, then, but participate in it, joining our prayers to the prayers of the priest, joining the sacrifice of our lives to the bread and wine that are offered, receiving Jesus' Body and Blood with humble hearts, and then leaving this place to share the love of God we have received.

By receiving the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, we become the Body of Christ. One of the most marvelous ways of describing the Church - that is, the people who make up the Church rather than just her institutions and buildings - is as the Body of Christ. It is the Eucharist which makes us the Body of Christ and empowers us to go into the world as another Christ bringing reconciliation, healing, and holiness to the world around us.

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This is the meaning of the washing of the feet in today's gospel. In the Eucharist, our Lord humbles Himself to enter us under the appearance of simple bread. If Jesus is so humble, then we should serve one another. We should wash one another's feet. We should feed one another. We should be humble enough to put the needs of others before our own.

On this Holy Thursday night, we celebrate how Jesus left us this most incredible gift of His love - His own Body and Blood in the form of bread and wine. We also celebrate the priesthood and all the men who give their lives to bring this Blessed Sacrament to us. We also remember Jesus' example of humble service. While it is true that many people choose not to come to Mass, we are called and sent to bring Jesus' love out to them. Once they've experienced God's love in us, hopefully, they will want to come to Mass to experience it for themselves.