

Teaching Masses and the Theology of Eucharist

June 9, 2019

About fifty-five years ago the Second Vatican Council proclaimed the cornerstone principle for celebrations of the Eucharist and the other Sacraments: The Church *“earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy”* [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #14]. All the changes that followed flow from this key principle—Mass in English (or the vernacular of each community); the altar moved out from the wall so that a visible sense of gathering around an altar can take place; baptismal fonts that are integral to the liturgical environment and, ideally, able to immerse adults when they are baptized; Communion under both forms with extraordinary ministers of Communion; lay readers of the Word; processions with the gifts; greeting of peace; on and on. And yet, fifty years after the changes were put into a new Roman Missal to guide all of our liturgical celebrations, we still struggle as a Church to fully participate in the Eucharist.

Take a moment and reflect: Is there any difference between receiving Communion from the bread and wine consecrated at the Mass we are participating in versus receiving Communion from the consecrated bread reserved in the tabernacle? After all, in both cases we are receiving the gift of Jesus’ Body and Blood, are we not? [Answer: There is!] Another question to ponder: Do we celebrate Eucharist so that the risen Jesus might become present to us in a special way? So that we can be fed by him in Communion? Or, so that we can become Eucharist for others? A third question: Is the Eucharist different depending on who is gathering as a community for the celebration? Is it different if I/we are there or not? [Answers: Yes to all of these.]

A “Teaching Mass” is a way to help us experience more deeply what it means to be fully, consciously, and actively participating in the Eucharist. During such a Mass the meaning of the main elements of the Mass will be explored. It is a full celebration of the Eucharist, but one in which the participants will be asked to be more consciously involved in the flow of the Mass. Most of us are very aware of the basic two-fold structure of the Eucharist (Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist). In times past, so much emphasis was given to the consecration of the bread and wine during the Liturgy of the Eucharist portion that the Liturgy of the Word became almost secondary. One of the great gifts of the reform of the Mass after the Second Vatican Council was the recovery of the necessity and importance of the Liturgy of the Word. Without it, there is no true Eucharist. In fact, the Council declared that *“The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God’s word and of Christ’s body”* [Constitution on Divine Revelation, #21]. The words “always venerated” are true from a doctrinal point of view, though a bit of a stretch in terms of actual practice. Nevertheless, with those words the Church is able to highlight that the Real Presence of the risen Jesus comes to us, not just within the gift of the consecrated bread and wine, but within the gift of his living Word as well. More next time.

June 16

* TEACHING MASSES ON THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI AND THE THEOLOGY OF EUCHARIST

I will celebrate all the Masses on the Feast of Corpus Christi next weekend (June 22/23) as “Teaching Masses.” By that I mean it will be a regular Mass, but interspersed with a few moments of teaching about what the Church sees happening at each stage of the celebration of the Eucharist. Last week I wrote about how the Eucharist needs our full, conscious, and active participation and how it is structured into the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Within that two-fold structure of the Eucharist, however, are five movements which are designed to take us from our individual lives, form us into a

community celebrating Eucharist, and leading us to become Eucharist in our daily lives. Each movement builds on the previous ones in such a way that it becomes clear, from a liturgical perspective, that the high point of the Mass is not the consecration or the reception of Communion, but being sent forth to be Eucharist—to be the Body broken and Blood outpoured—for the salvation and unity of all humanity. Each of these five dynamic movements requires for the community to experience the full reality of Eucharist, our conscious and active participation. The five movements are: 1) the risen Jesus invites us and so we gather in his name; 2) Jesus becomes for us a living Word which shatters and shapes us; 3) through thanksgiving and praise we join the offering of our lives to his once-for all offering of himself in his death and resurrection; 4) He gives his Body and Blood to us in Communion and so we take and eat and drink; and 5) He sends us forth to be his living presence in the world.

WE GATHER at the invitation of the risen Jesus. It is wonderful to arrive a bit early and pray, but whenever we get there, just take a moment to say “Yes” to the Lord’s invitation, bless yourself with the holy water of discipleship (that is why the baptismal font is near the main entrance rather than simply holy water fonts), greet people, join in the Opening Hymn and responses. Everything up through the Opening Collect (Prayer) is designed to take the many who are there and gather them into one worshipping community. And please let us always remember: it is the risen Jesus who is inviting us! Secondly, WE LISTEN to the Word of God who touches our heart during the Liturgy of the Word. We listen not so much with minds as with our hearts for the living Word that Jesus wants to plant within us. It is good to prepare by reflecting on the readings ahead of time. We participate also through our responses, especially singing

June 23, 2019

*** TEACHING MASSES THIS WEEKEND AND THE THEOLOGY OF EUCHARIST**

Some wrap-up thoughts on full participation at Eucharist. Please see the previous two bulletins for the other columns on the Teaching Mass. Because we as Catholics believe so certainly that there is a Real Presence of the risen Lord in his Body and Blood at the Eucharist, we sometimes neglect or do not pay attention to the many ways the Mass invites us to full, conscious and intentional participation. Yes, the Lord becomes present in the gift of his sacramental Body and Blood if we celebrate properly and with right intention. But there is a possibility of even greater transformation of the community at prayer if everyone enters fully into participation at the Mass. It is so easy to just “go through the motions” if we forget to remind ourselves that each of us is an essential part of what is taking place at each Mass. There are over fifty places in the liturgy that invite everyone present to some type of verbal or sung response, gesture, time of quiet reflection, or other way of actively participating. To enter purposefully into all of these moments both opens us more fully to what God wants to do in us at the Eucharist and energizes the whole community.

Here are three practices that I believe would make a difference in how we experience Eucharist at St. Regis.

- 1) For those who are able to do so, prepare for the readings ahead of time. It makes it so much more likely that we will be open to the Word of God touching our hearts at Mass if we have read and reflected on the readings ahead of time. Remember: we have Sunday’s Word books at each entrance. They can be used before Mass to prepare. But they can also be taken home and used during the week. Take one and prepare by reading and reflecting on the upcoming Sunday readings during the week.
- 2) Sing, even if the singing is not perfect. Singing has the ability, more than our verbal responses, to unite us as a community of prayer and worship. I noticed how much more powerful the Our Father sounded

when we chanted it during the season of Lent. No one needs to sing loudly, but everyone responding in song makes a huge difference.

- 3) Let verbal responses be intentional and enthusiastic. Can you imagine the difference it makes to a first timer or a guest to the parish when they hear enthusiasm in our responses? These people really want to be here! Be that joyful, energetic community of prayer and worship. After all, the risen Jesus is the one inviting us to gather. The Lord is the one trying to shape our hearts and lives through His Word and asking us to be open and to listen to His Word. Jesus, in his offering of himself eternally for the salvation of humanity, is the one inviting us to share in his offering of himself through thanksgiving and praise. Jesus is the one feeding us with his Body and Blood as we receive Communion. And the risen Lord is the one who goes with us, as we are sent forth from Mass to be his presence out to the world. Let us say “Yes” to the risen Lord in each of these moments by full, conscious and active participation in the Eucharist.

A final thought: Parents—dads please take note—you become an example to your children by how you actively participate in the Eucharist. They pick up very quickly whether you are there to “do a duty” or whether it is a conscious, faith experience for you. Also, it means that our children need to learn the responses. Go through them with your children, starting from a very young age. The Sign of the Cross, the times for “Amen,” the words of the Gloria, “Thanks be to God” and “Alleluia” and “Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ,” the Creed, “Lord, hear our prayer,” the words of the Sanctus (“Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God of power and might...”), the memorial acclamations, the Our Father and Lamb of God—we need to help our children know these by heart so they can participate fully in the responses at Mass.

The weekly Sunday Eucharist is the heartbeat of the Catholic Christian community. For that heartbeat to be as healthy and strong as possible, it needs our full, conscious, active and intentional participation. Thank you.

June 30, 2019

*** A FOLLOW UP TO LAST WEEKEND’S TEACHING MASSES AND THE THEOLOGY OF EUCHARIST**

A number of people, after last weekend’s Teaching Masses, asked questions about the Mass which I would have loved to address during the Mass if there had been time. But I do not want such Masses adding more than a few minutes to our regular experience. I see the Teaching Masses, which I do every year on the feast of Corpus Christi, as having a cumulative effect. Over the years, the core rhythm of the Eucharist—what I call Jesus’ five invitations to us to become intentionally and purposefully his Body in that time and place and how the liturgy enables us to respond through silence, gestures, active listening, song, procession, and sung/verbal responses—gets repeatedly emphasized.

One of the most asked questions is why I insist that we not “go to the tabernacle” and use the hosts reserved there for Communion at Mass, unless it is necessary. Many say that they have never seen that before and they ask why I am so insistent. One answer is “that is the way the Church’s own liturgical guidelines” envision it to be done. The Roman Missal, which contains the rubrics or guidelines for celebrating Mass, says that *“It is most desirable that the faithful, just as the priest himself is bound to do, receive the Lord’s Body from hosts consecrated at the same Mass.”* So, although it is not forbidden to go to the tabernacle, and many priests do so because there are so many extra already-consecrated hosts available, it is discouraged by the Church’s own guidelines. At the same time, I am fine with priests not being slaves to such guidelines. I know I do not follow the guideline about having ministers of Communion

approach the altar and come up and receive only after the priest has received. The intent behind that guideline was the worry that in some places of the world the distinct and necessary role of the priest-celebrant was being lost. The revised guidelines in 2002 emphasized a number of places where the priest-celebrant's unique role could be highlighted. It has not been my experience that my role or your understanding of the priest's unique and necessary role is in any way diminished by modifying that rubric slightly. It is not a matter of simply following or not following all the rubrics, but of understanding the theological intent of the Church's liturgical tradition so that when we celebrate the Eucharist we can be formed more easily and more deeply by the risen Jesus into his Body in that time and place. I think there are very important theological reasons for emphasizing the communion that results from receiving together rather than focusing so much on the priest's separate Communion, as well for using only the bread consecrated at the same Mass for Communion.

What are some theological reasons for not using hosts reserved in the tabernacle at Masses? For one thing, such a practice, in effect, turns Eucharist into a Communion service, as though there is no significant difference between Communion services and Masses. It also makes it acceptable to come into Mass as late as one wants, as long as one can receive Communion, as though our presence and active participation from beginning to end has no connection to what Jesus is doing in that time and place. Not using the bread consecrated at the same Mass contributes as well to a de-emphasis on the intrinsic communal nature of Eucharist. What the risen Lord does at Eucharist, he does with the community of people present there. The Church, in its liturgical tradition, recognizes this by having no guidelines for a Mass with only the priest present. The closest the Church gets is a Mass with one other person present, and she allows for a completely private Mass only if there is a "just and necessary" reason; for example, a priest who has been restricted from public ministry but is still a priest. Even for someone who is sick and cannot be at Eucharist, the Church envisions properly trained and delegated ministers of Communion to the sick being given hosts consecrated at the Sunday Mass and going out that day to distribute Communion to the sick or homebound.

Here is one way to highlight why Communion received at Eucharist from the bread and wine consecrated at that Eucharist is different from receiving Communion reserved in the tabernacle. If these actions are roughly equivalent, why not let priests consecrate thousands of extra hosts at one weekend Mass and then have as many Communion services as a parish wants on Sunday and the days following? Because such services can be led by deacons and trained lay ecclesial ministers, we could have Communion every hour on the hour, every day of the week, if the goal were simply to receive Communion. We could easily get Communion into many more people's lives. Why insist on the necessity and centrality of the whole community, even those who are not in a position to receive Communion, gathering for one of a very limited number of Eucharistic celebrations on Sundays, if the goal were simply to receive Communion? Another way to frame the conversation to make the same point: it would be more important for everyone to gather on Sunday and celebrate Eucharist—even if the vast majority of the community were not going to receive Communion—than for everyone to receive Communion but not celebrate Eucharist. Again, the point I am making is that Eucharist is about gathering and responding to the invitation of the risen Jesus to become more deeply his Body of Christ in this time and place. Communion is an intrinsic and significant part of that, but so is listening to his Word, offering together our lives in the Eucharist, and saying yes to becoming his body broken and blood poured out for the salvation of the world.

Theologically, then, Eucharist is the privileged way, established by Jesus, through which our own lives and every experience of our lives can become part of the once-for-all time, ongoing, eternal offering of Jesus for the salvation of the world. If we enter into the rhythm of the Eucharist—accept Jesus' invitation to gather in his name on Sunday, listen to his Word, join our lives through praise and thanksgiving to his

everlasting offering of himself, say yes to his invitation to receive his Body and Blood and be sent forth to be that gift to the world—we are transforming not just ourselves but everyone who we have been connected to since the last Eucharist. Done weekly, which was the Church's wisdom from the beginning, we are never more than a few days away from having everything in our lives become part of that once-for-all, ongoing sacrifice of Christ. Even if we are not in a position to receive Communion or are not able to receive Communion at a given Mass, we are still part of the Church's gathering and contribute our experiences to what is being offered through the risen Jesus. Our presence becomes part of the communion of all others present.

In short, "my" personal Communion is never just mine alone. That is why, theologically, the Church is so insistent on the faithful at a Mass receiving Communion from the bread and wine consecrated at that Mass. Each of us becomes part of everyone's Communion at that Mass and taking Communion from the bread and wine consecrated at the same Mass is a truer symbol of that reality. That is also why the Church envisions all of us sharing a common posture (such as standing) or at least continued singing together until everyone has received Communion, before taking an extended time of personal, silent prayer. Until the last person has received, "my" Communion is not yet complete. It is always "our" Communion. Communion services and taking Communion from the tabernacle do not accomplish what the Eucharist does. Yes, we receive the gift of the risen Lord's sacramental presence in that Communion, but the Communion we receive is not the one we have contributed to and offered at that Mass. Receiving Communion outside of Mass or even praying in the presence of the exposed Blessed Sacrament can be an awe-inspiring gift, but it is not essential to the Church's life. Gathering weekly for Eucharist is.

How did we lose touch with the importance of being part of the total Eucharistic experience? That will be the theme of the next few weeks of my articles on Eucharist. It is an interesting story, both historically and theologically. I will be going pretty deep theologically for those who want a more comprehensive understanding. But I do not want to lose the forest as we explore some of the trees. Let us remember: the risen Jesus wants us there on Sunday; each of our life experiences is essential to the Eucharist; actively participating and helping the celebration be a joyful, united communal celebration makes a huge difference in everyone's experience of Eucharist; the goal of celebrating Eucharist is to become Eucharist for the sake of the world; and that is why we receive Communion, if at all possible, because with the strength of that gift of Communion and the support of the entire community as the Body of Christ, our lives will become a way that God transforms human history into the saving history of God's love for the world.

Theology of Eucharist (Continued)

July 7, 2019

Last week I asked a question — when, how and why did our understanding of the importance of participating fully in all parts of the Mass become truncated. In effect, truncated to two moments—the Consecration and/or Communion. Over time the involvement of laity decreased more and more, reducing their participation to being prayerful and passive spectators rather than active participants. In turn, the focus on the Consecration (with bells, raised host and chalice, sometimes incense) made it seem as though the Consecration—changing bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ—was why we celebrated Eucharist. With the emphasis on the moment of consecration came the development of the practice of adoration of the exposed Blessed Sacrament outside of Mass. Since many were receiving communion only rarely, that "spiritual communion" connected to viewing the Blessed Sacrament became more important than active participation in the Mass. Also, with the focus on the Consecration came the emphasis on the unique, essential role of the priest and a decrease in the essential participation of everyone else. It also led, especially in the last 60 years, slowly but surely, to a sense that receiving communion

outside of Mass in a communion service, while not the full Eucharist, had the same individual personal “benefit” as going to Mass.

Looking at the entire history of how the Church celebrated Eucharist, especially in the Middle Ages, can give us some insights into why over fifty-five years ago the Second Vatican Council established one key principle for any reforms made in the Liturgy: the full, conscious, and active participation of all the faithful in the liturgical action. Attention to that principal makes a significant difference in how we view and celebrate Eucharist. Understanding and fully embracing that principal would lead us to never be late for Mass or leave early. It would lead to everyone responding and singing, and trying to do so as one voice, one community. It would lead to a desire to be ready to receive communion, a preparation ahead of time of reflecting on the Sunday readings, and an eagerness to go from Mass believing that everything we do in daily life can be part of the unity and salvation of the world. In short, I believe that if we understand the importance of this principle and why it had to be re-emphasized at the Second Vatican Council, we would be in a good position to embrace what I was trying to stress at this year’s Teaching Masses: the Eucharist is essential for the well-being of the Church as the Body of Christ; Eucharist and Communion services are not the same; the priest’s role is essential, but so is the role of the whole community at Eucharist; the purposeful and active participation of everyone in the Sunday Eucharist makes possible the fullest living expression of the Body of Christ in the world; and your participation is important from the very first moment of the Mass until its conclusion.

Although there were many steps toward what happened in the Middle Ages, I will focus on the 13th-14th centuries and the theology of Eucharist which developed at that time and continues to influence how many of us in the present day view the Eucharist. In the Middle Ages theologians began to ask questions pertaining to the sacraments such as “which signs are the most important?” “How many sacraments are there?” “What exactly happens to water, oil, bread, wine, etc. when used in a holy way?” These became the stuff of debate. Out of such discussion comes the realization that certain sacramental events are more central to continuing the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ and some less so. The core actions become designated as our seven sacraments. The ones less so are called “sacramentals” (blessings, use of holy water, lighting candles, devotional prayers, the rosary, and so on). Sacramentals invite us to be open to God’s gracious presence in our lives but do not guarantee it. Sacraments are considered “efficacious signs of grace”—that is, they truly bring about the presence of Christ not because we say so, but because Christ has promised it.

Along with such questions comes a desire in the Western Church for many distinctions, analyzing each of the sacraments and picking out exactly what is essential and what is not; which words are key and which are not; what the effect of each sacrament is that distinguishes it from the other sacraments, and so on. A three-fold understanding of the sacraments will result, which still influences us to this day. The 13th-14th century theologians will distinguish between (1) the “sign alone” (*signum tantum*), (2) a middle reality which has a bit of the character of a sign and yet contains a bit of the effect that the sacrament is intending called a “sacramental reality” (*res et sacramentum*), and (3) the “final reality” intended by the sacramental action (*res tantum*).

- For baptism the “sign alone” is seen as the action of water poured or immersion along with the spoken words “I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” The “middle or sacramental reality” is the character or so-called “indelible mark” on the soul. It is seen as accomplishing a new reality (taking away original sin and orienting us to a life of grace), but still only a sign of the potential full Christian life. The “final reality or effect” is a full, mature sharing in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus throughout our life that makes us ready for eternal communion with God.
- For Eucharist the “sign alone” becomes identified most particularly as the bread and wine offered by the priest with the words of consecration. The “sacramental reality” is then the Blessed Sacrament, the bread and wine that have become the body and blood of Christ; a change for which theologians coined a new word ‘transubstantiation.’ So, a new reality has been given, but not yet the final reality. The “final reality” is the union of the Church as the Body of Christ living their lives as Eucharist for the salvation of the world.

Notice, however, three less than desirable developments that happen in the western Church’s practice of the sacraments, working with such a three-fold distinction. First, how easy it is to stop at the middle reality that is not

yet the full meaning of the sacrament, because something new has happened by the grace of God. Original Sin has been taken away (Baptism); the bread and wine have been transformed into the body and blood of Christ (Eucharist); an unbreakable, permanent bond has been created (Marriage), sins have truly been forgiven (Reconciliation), the Holy Spirit has been given in a full way (Confirmation), and so on. In a sense, these are “guaranteed” to have happen by the presence of Christ (the term used is *ex opera operato*). Secondly, because these things happen as long as the minimum necessary actions, signs, and words are used, theologians and canon lawyers begin to focus on the minimally necessary words and actions, as though that is all that matters. The vibrant, creative, maximal celebration of the sacraments is lost. Baptism can be divorced from the community and done in a back corner of a church with nearly no one from the community present. Eucharist can be done quickly and in a language that almost no one understands, as long as the proper words are said by a priest. Confession can go from a more public, community sacrament to an individual, private sacrament. The sense that sacraments “make” the Church is lost. And thirdly, who is essential in most sacramental actions? The priest. With these theological developments comes the de-emphasis on the important participation of the lay faithful and an increasing emphasis on the uniqueness of the priest, especially in terms of his “power” to change bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ and to absolve sins. Only the priest needs to receive Communion. Only the priest receives under both forms. Only the priest reads the readings and says most of the prayers, and so on.

These developments influenced the Church for centuries. When the Protestant Reformation challenged some of these negative developments, the Council of Trent tried to institute some needed reforms. But in order to emphasize how the Catholic understanding of sacraments differed from a Protestant understanding, the Church found itself reinforcing a sense of the automatic nature of sacramental effects rather than recapturing a more robust and full appreciation of the whole community’s involvement in the sacraments. More next time.

July 14, 2019

*** THEOLOGY OF EUCHARIST (continued)**

Please see previous bulletin for the start of these ideas. In that bulletin article I looked at how the medieval Church developed a systematic understanding of our seven sacraments. They tried to come to a theological understanding which could explain how each sacrament guaranteed (*ex opere operato*) that some new experience of God’s saving grace has been accomplished if the sacraments were properly done. This systematic understanding looked at three “parts” to every sacrament. 1) The “sign alone,” which was the minimum necessary external symbols and words needed to make it an authentic sacrament. 2) The resulting immediate reality (the Blessed Sacrament in Eucharist, the indelible mark on the soul in Baptism, the character imparted by the Holy Spirit in Confirmation, and so on) which is a new reality but still pointing to a greater effect the sacrament is to produce. 3) And that greater “final reality” (for example, not just the transubstantiation of the bread and wine at Eucharist but the transformation of us into the Body of Christ, who in turn work for the unity and salvation of the whole world).

Properly understood and lived out, such a systematic view of the sacraments could be quite dynamic. We would never simply baptize an infant, but be attentive to the whole family and community faith environment needed to bring that infant to a mature adult faith. We would never think of Eucharist as ending at a devotion to the Blessed Sacrament or receiving Communion (as important and spiritually fulfilling as these practices are), but as flowing over into our daily lives lived as Christ’s Body and Blood for others. We would see the sacrament of Marriage as a daily yes to our spouses and not just a vow made years ago. We would experience the sacrament of Penance not just as a way for our sins to be forgiven, but as a calling to help bring the ministry of Jesus’ reconciliation to the whole world. And so on. But in practice, this medieval understanding of sacraments became connected to a philosophical development called nominalism which emerged hand-in-hand with the growing importance of canon (ecclesiastical) law. These two realities reinforced a view of the sacraments as rites to be performed correctly as

prescribed by the proper church authority, according to a strict set of minimally necessary guidelines (rubrics), with the focus on the “automatically guaranteed” spiritual middle reality mentioned above. Because there was no really objective way to measure how well the “final reality” intended by a sacrament was accomplished, theologians and canon lawyers tended to emphasize what could be objectively assessed—the minimum necessary words, symbols and actions needed so that the so-called middle reality (*res sacramenti* or *res et sacramentum*) had taken effect.

In Eucharist these concerns meant focusing on those words and actions, which guaranteed that the bread and wine became the Body and Blood of Christ. The focus of the Eucharist thus shifted to the reality of the Blessed Sacrament and to the moment of consecration and to the priest’s words and actions to the exclusion of the whole community’s participation. The Liturgy of the Word became secondary to the Liturgy of the Eucharist. For many it was more important to see the raised host and chalice (thus the advent of bells at the consecration and the practice of incensing at that time) than to receive Communion. For priests it became more and more important to focus on the correct saying of words and use of correct gestures, even if most of the people could not hear or see them or were even invited to be there. A Mass by a priest with one server had the same “infinite” value as a Mass with the whole community present, so it did not matter how good the sermon/homily was, how strongly the priest prayed out the prayers, how involved the people were—just so the priest did the proper rituals. Similar trends developed in the celebration of the other sacraments.

There is nothing complete or absolute about this three-fold schema for understanding the sacraments stemming from the Middle Ages. Earlier theologians made no attempt to be so precise as to the when and how or even the number of sacraments. The Second Vatican Council, accepting the defined nature of seven sacraments, defines the ordination of the bishop as a separate sacrament from that of ordination of a priest (a theological question that had never been defined prior to the council) and drops any understanding of sub-deacon as a separate ordination category. In other words, there continues to be developments in our theological understanding of the sacraments. Vatican II also treats the sacraments in their entirety and speaks about the Church as a whole as a “universal sacrament of salvation.” There is a renewed appreciation not just for what is “minimally necessary” for a valid sacrament, but for maximizing the signs, symbols and rituals in all sacramental celebrations. There is, most importantly, an appreciation not just for the necessary role of the priest but also of the full, conscious and active participation of all the faithful in celebrating a sacrament together as a community of disciples.

Consider two Masses. At one no one greets anyone else, everyone sits a fair distance apart, no singing is done, responses are lackluster and said as individuals with no attempt to be one voice, the priest prays rapidly and indistinctly, the lector is unprepared and uninspiring, as is the priest in his homily, no one participates as Communion minister, greeter, usher, cantor, sacristan, or server, at the end all either pray privately or quickly leave, but all the prescribed words and actions are done. At another, many have read the readings ahead of time and reflected on them, reach out in greeting to others in the community, especially newcomers and strangers, sing robustly and answer as a united community all the responses, some participating as well-prepared lectors and other liturgical ministers, many talk and linger at the end, and so on. On one level they are the same. Jesus is truly present. What guarantees the effective presence of Jesus at the Eucharist has been done at both Masses. Yet, the experience of the Eucharist is vastly different. What is a little sad, for me, is that a number of Catholics would prefer the first type of Mass over the second because it would be done much more quickly and not have much focus on being a community together. Because the Mass has been done validly and legitimately and reception of personal Communion is possible, all the rest seems like extraneous add-ons for some, so conditioned did we become to that medieval understanding of sacraments and how to celebrate them.

The changes after the Second Vatican Council re-focus us on all the words and gestures, signs and symbols as elements of what the risen Jesus is using to form us as his Body and connect all that we are to his once-for-all sacrifice. The fuller the sign, the better. Good preparation by priests, lectors, and everyone involved in that Mass; gathering as a community and not just as private individuals; strong responses and singing in relatively close physical proximity to each other; actively listening and participation in the gestures of the Mass—all of this not as an add-on but integral to the fullest celebration of Eucharist possible. This renewed attention on the full sign of the Eucharist has been a huge blessing for the Church. Yes, some liturgists go too far and make the external sign everything or get upset when everything is not perfect. And, yes, we can no longer expect the Mass to be an individual exercise of prayer or a quiet time where people will simply leave me alone and let me pray! At the same time, we must never forget that this attention to maximizing the words, gestures, symbols and rituals (the “sign alone” in that medieval understanding of the sacraments) is to lead us through a sacramental reality to a final and full effect. If we have the grandest liturgies of all but end up as a community that does not show forth Jesus’ inclusive, healing love, then we have missed the boat. More next time.

July 21

* **THEOLOGY OF EUCHARIST (conclusion)**

Please see previous bulletins for earlier articles or go to stregis.org and under “News” find the Pastor’s Perspective post labeled Archives/Series of Articles.

In the end, the goal of Eucharist is to send us forth as joyful disciples on a mission—the mission of intentionally continuing the ministry of Jesus, a small but essential part of God’s way of bringing salvation and unity to the world, not necessarily by huge efforts, but in all the little things we do each day. As mentioned previously, in the course of our history as the western (Latin-rite) Catholic Church we became so focused on making sure that the bread and wine were truly consecrated and became the Blessed Sacrament that we often lost sight of the importance of everything else that happens at Eucharist. Or, we became too scrupulous that everything had to be done in a very specific way so as not to jeopardize the guaranteed presence of the risen Jesus that would result at the Consecration, as though Eucharist is about external words and rituals done by the priest rather than about the living presence of the risen Jesus at work in all of us. And, if the bread and wine were truly consecrated, many thought the Mass had achieved its purpose, whether we received Communion or not, united as a community or not, lived the Eucharist in our daily lives or not. Searching for a way to name that belief, western theologians in the middle ages coined a new term “transubstantiation,” in order to highlight that something essential, something substantial, had changed. Gathered in the name of the Lord, doing what he asked the disciples to do, led by a properly ordained priest, the bread and wine, though still materially in the form of bread and wine, can no longer be appropriately understood as bread and wine. It has become the substantial presence of the risen Lord, his Body and Blood, his Real Presence.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church talks about Real Presence in this way: *“This presence is called ‘real’—by which is not intended to exclude the other types of presences as if they could not be ‘real’ too, but because it is the presence in the fullest sense: that is to say, it is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present.”* (#1374). This alerts us to the fact that the Lord is also truly present in many other ways, among which the Church highlights are his presence in the assembly of faithful gathered, in his proclaimed Word, and in ministry of the priest celebrant. But clearly our Tradition has especially focused on and even cherished that real, sacramental presence of his risen

Body and Blood under the form of consecrated bread and wine. It has led to the care we show the consecrated elements and to the beautiful practice of Eucharistic devotion and adoration. But, unless properly understood and lived, such a focus on the Real Presence can distort how we enter into the fullest celebration and understanding of Eucharist as possible.

If you ever wondered where the habit began of leaving right when Communion starts, it was due to this focus on the consecration as the high point of the Mass. Or the belief that the Offertory (Preparation of the Altar and Presentation of the Gifts) part of the Mass was more important than the Liturgy of the Word. You could miss the whole Liturgy of the Word and still only commit a “venial” sin, it was said, but miss the Offertory and it turned “mortal.” Or, not receive Communion and leave early and again a “venial” sin, but miss the Consecration and it was mortal. The good news or silver lining in all of this is, as mentioned above, that there came into our Catholic faith a dead-certain faith in the risen Lord’s real presence in the consecrated bread and wine. That is a gain and gift to Christian faith that Catholics have to offer, but it should not stop there.

If we do not gather for Eucharist primarily so that bread and wine are consecrated and available for Communion, why then do we gather? We gather for and do Eucharist to be faithful to what Jesus asked the apostles to do. We gather and do Eucharist because that is the pre-eminent way that the risen Lord made his presence known to the Church from the earliest times. It is significant that Jesus gave special meaning to the blessing with the bread and the blessing with the cup of wine. It is very significant that he chose the setting of a meal. But these blessings (our consecration) and our eating/drinking Communion are part of a larger whole in which the Lord is fitting us together as a people, forming us by his Word, praying with us and offering our lives to the Father, feeding us with the gift of his Body and Blood, and sending us forth not simply as individuals but as a community, the Body of Christ, to be broken and poured out for others.

At every Eucharist it matters to the Lord that we are there and ready to connect everything in our lives to his once-for-all eternal offering. Yes, in the course of the celebration of Eucharist bread and wine become more than just a symbol of our offering; they become the very gift of the risen Lord’s Real Presence to us. In the course of the celebration

of Eucharist it is important, if we can, to be properly disposed so that we can receive that gift at Communion. But it is our lives as they are, uniquely at that moment, that the Lord uses to transform the bread and wine, not simply some magical words of the priest. The deeper we understand that, the more we will know (and want, I hope) to participate consciously, actively, fully. We will move from being spectators or feeling disconnected from what is happening to recognizing that we are essential to what is happening. Each Eucharist is unique to that community at that time, because we never come to the Eucharist exactly the same each time. New life experiences, different people, new challenges—all shape what Eucharist is each time.

So, yes, the Lord is taking “John’s” struggle at work last week, “David’s” regret at hurting his family on Tuesday,” Jane’s” worry about a job, “Lucy’s” devastation at losing her mother yesterday, “Bob’s” discovery Friday that he has cancer, “Mary’s” grief in going through a divorce, “Jimmy’s” pride at doing well at baseball Saturday, “Miriam’s” joy of being asked on her first date, “Reggie’s” love for music that led him to practice many hours that week and so on. The Lord is taking all of that and more and making it the “stuff” of Eucharist. That is what is transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ, not simply the bread and wine.

In the end, we “get” what Eucharist is about, not simply when we reverently receive Communion or reverently reserve the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle, as important as that is to our faith tradition and our personal spirituality. Rather, we “get” Eucharist when we come to the awesome realization that we are Eucharist, our lives have been united and transformed into Christ’s Body and Blood, and that to receive Communion is to be given the mission of being communion—bread broken and wine poured out, our lives broken and poured out—for the unity and salvation of the world around us.

Fr. Buersmeyer