



DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE BISHOP OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE TO THE PRIESTS OF THE DIOCESE REGARDING THE PROPER CELEBRATION OF THE EUCHARIST AND THE DISTRIBUTION OF HOLY COMMUNION

DO THIS IN MEMORY OF ME

Dear Father,

This reflection on the Eucharist along with some pastoral directives has been sent to you in order that you can know both the pastoral directives that it contains and the faith perspective of the Church which guides and determines the decisions I have made. I ask you, as a brother priest, to use this reflection of mine in whatever way it can help the People of God of our Diocese to understand the Eucharist, the “greatest gift” the Lord left us and to observe the pastoral directive and instruction this letter contains. For your own reference, may I commend to you *The General Instruction on the Roman Missal* (GIRM) and the recent pontifical documents, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* of John Paul II, and *Redemptionis Sacramentum* of the Congregation for Divine Worship and *Sacramentum Caritatis* of Benedict XVI.

I. THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH ON THE EUCHARIST AND HOLY COMMUNION

On the night before he died, the Lord took bread said the blessing and gave it to his disciples saying ‘this is my body for you’. Afterwards he took the cup and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘this is my blood to be shed for you; do this in memory of me’. What Jesus did at the Last Supper has become the central action of the Church. We are called into the mystery of the life, death and resurrection of the Lord. “As often as we do this we proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes in glory.” The whole life of the Church flows from the Eucharist and flows back to the Sacrifice of the Mass.

The centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the Church is manifest from the very beginning as witnessed in the *Acts of the Apostles*, the writings of Paul and the early Church fathers. Most recently, Pope John Paul II’s encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* added another chapter onto the clear and unchanged teaching that the Eucharist is the greatest gift Jesus left us. The celebration of the Eucharist gives us our identity as well as our life.

As we read the Gospels we recall so many instances in which Jesus shows us that “doing this in memory of me” is the action and the activity *par excellence* by which Jesus gives himself to us and we in turn are called to act as He did, to do what He enjoined.

The story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus; the feeding miracles, the Last Supper itself: all these show us that it is in the *action* of the Eucharist that Christ manifests His presence. The shape of the Eucharist involves the four *actions* of *taking* (the Presentation of the Gifts), *blessing* (the Eucharistic Prayer), *breaking* (the fraction rite) and *giving* (Communion). To celebrate the Eucharist means to do what Christ did, namely, offering to God the Father these actions that together form the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

We read in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* #72: “For Christ took the bread and the chalice and gave thanks; he broke the bread and gave it to his disciples, saying, ‘Take, eat, and drink: this is my Body; this is the cup of my Blood. Do this in memory of me.’ Accordingly, the Church has arranged the entire celebration of the Liturgy of the Eucharist in parts corresponding to precisely these words and actions of Christ...”

Thus when the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the action of the priest and community in union with the Holy Spirit brings about what is proclaimed and makes real what has been promised. The celebration of every Eucharist not only re-presents the one and unique sacrifice of the cross, it brings the Kingdom of Heaven into the world and joins us ever more deeply into the one body of Christ in union with the “cloud of witnesses”, Mary and the angels and the saints. Nothing we do can ever replace the celebration of the Eucharist. This is the heart of the community which makes real the gift of divine life that constitutes the Community of faith which is the Body of Christ here on earth.

The one sacrifice of Christ’s death on the cross cannot be isolated from what went before it and after it. Christ’s whole life was a gift to the Father. Jesus’ whole life was totally given over to God in every way at every moment. His death on the cross was the culmination of that life; it was also the beginning of his exaltation. Insofar as death leads to new life, the resurrection is the “mirror image” of the cross. Thus, it’s all one basic movement, most powerfully manifest in the cross. This is what we mean by “the Paschal Mystery”. This mystery is the very life of God, since Jesus is the Son of God. The eternal life of God contains the sacrifice of Christ.

So much follows from this. So much of who we are is built upon this. Without attempting to write a theology of the Eucharist, allow me to underline some important elements to illustrate what I mean.

In the celebration of Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer constitutes the central proclamation through which the action of the Holy Spirit brings about the sacramental reality of the sacrifice on the cross, the gift Jesus makes of himself to the Father for the redemption of the world. The term we use for that central part of the liturgy, *anamnesis*, reminds us that His sacrifice enters our space and our time to take place here and now for us. It does not

take place again; it happened only once, but through the prayer remembrance of the Church and the action of the Holy Spirit, it is made a part of our space and time.

When the Church remembers (*anamnesis*) the Paschal Mystery of Christ, we are allowing what is at the heart of the very life of God to reveal itself here and now and become a part of our space and time. The Eucharist “effects” the saving mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection and renders it effectively present for us in our lives, in our space and time.

In the celebration of this remembrance, the Church surrenders herself and is taken over by what is a part of God’s eternal life. Thus, the bread and wine symbolize the sacrifices of ourselves. Our giving thanks in the Eucharistic Prayer is the action of surrendering ourselves.

Again the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, #2 helps us:

“The sacrificial nature of the Mass, solemnly asserted by the Council of Trent in accordance with the Church’s universal tradition, was reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council, which offered these significant words about the Mass: ‘At the Last Supper our Savior instituted the Eucharistic Sacrifice of his Body and Blood, by which he would perpetuate the Sacrifice of the Cross throughout the centuries until he should come again, thus entrusting to the Church, his beloved Bride, the memorial of his death and resurrection.’”

The Eucharistic Prayer must be understood as being about more than only consecrating the bread and wine. Rather, that consecration must be seen within the context of the act of remembrance that is the Prayer. In the Eucharistic Prayer the Church recalls the saving activity of God as the Church acknowledges the wonderful things God has done to redeem and save His people, culminating in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We pray it so we can remember God’s saving action in Jesus, and in that prayer of remembrance the saving power of that event is made present.

Thus, as the high point of the celebration, the Eucharistic Prayer is a prayer of praise and thanksgiving addressed to the Father. Two Greek words used for the Eucharistic Prayer are *Anaphora* or *Prosphora*, both meaning “offering.” *Anaphora* literally means a “carrying up.”

Again allow me to cite the GIRM, #78:

“Now the center and summit of the entire celebration begins: namely, the Eucharistic Prayer, that is, the prayer of thanksgiving and sanctification. The priest invites the people to lift up their hearts to the Lord in prayer and thanksgiving; he unites the congregation with himself in the prayer that he addresses in the name of the entire community to God the Father through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, ***the meaning of the Prayer is that the entire congregation of the faithful should join itself with Christ in confessing the great deeds of God and in the offering of Sacrifice.***” [emphasis added]

And in GIRM, #79 we read about the different elements that make up the Eucharistic Prayer, particularly the *anamnesis* and the *offering*:

“e. *Anamnesis*: In which the Church, fulfilling the command that she received from Christ the Lord through the Apostles, keeps the memorial of Christ, recalling especially his blessed Passion, glorious Resurrection, and Ascension into heaven.
f. *Offering*: ***By which, in this very memorial, the Church—and in particular the Church here and now gathered—offers in the Holy Spirit the spotless Victim to the Father. The Church’s intention, however, is that the faithful not only offer this spotless Victim but also learn to offer themselves, and so day by day to be consummated, through Christ the Mediator, into unity with God and with each other, so that at last God may be all in all.*** [emphasis added]

This is admirably expressed in the *Prayer Over the Gifts, Holy Thursday Mass of the Lord’s Supper*: “Lord, make us worthy to celebrate these mysteries. Each time we offer this memorial sacrifice, the work of our redemption is accomplished.”

Within this vision of the centrality of **celebrating the Eucharist**, “doing this in memory of me”, we can have a deeper and more satisfying understanding of what **it means to receive Holy Communion. The celebration of the Eucharist should find its consummation in receiving Holy Communion.**

The reception of Holy Communion is never just passively “getting” or “receiving” Holy Communion. Instead, the reception of Holy Communion is the culmination of participating in the celebration (offering of the sacrifice). There is an inherent interconnection between sacrifice, Real Presence, and Communion. We should never sever the connection between receiving the Sacrament and celebrating the sacrifice; the two go hand-in-hand. Receiving the Sacrament is the culmination of participating in the sacrifice. In this sense, “receiving it” is a reciprocal reality: we receive Christ and in so doing, Christ receives us and presents us to the Father in the Spirit.

There is an inner dynamic of active participation in the Mass from the opening greeting and prayer to the Liturgy of the Word, through the Eucharistic Prayer to the rite of receiving Holy Communion which leads us all from the celebration out into the world to be witnesses of the one who has gifted us with His divine life. We leave the celebration of Mass to become missionaries to the world, announcing the Good News by the way we live and manifest his life in ours.

Thus the fruit of our active participation in the whole offering of the Mass will be found in an ethic of life that is not cultic or esoteric or sectarian. It is catholic and apostolic. It reveals itself in the unity that is ours as a community of communion with a life that is holy and striving for holiness, a life that is sent into the world from the celebration “that the world might believe”.

Therefore, “sacrifice” is given new meaning as well. Sacrifice is existential; it is a sacrifice of one’s life for the Kingdom of God. It is not a cultic, but an ethical ideal. True sacrifice is not centered in a formal act of cultic or external ceremonial worship, but rather is celebrated to become incorporated in the everyday practical life of Christian virtue, in the apostolic and charitable work of being a good Christian, *i.e.*, of being “for others” as Christ is “for us.” Our sacrifice is our totally free and loving response to Christ’s act of self-giving love by the way we live life, carried out on the practical level of human existence. The celebration of the Eucharist should transform us to live such a life of self-offering, *i.e.*, self-giving love.

In this way we come closer and closer to the full and active participation in the Mass which was the aim of the Vatican Council and which makes our life of worship in the Eucharist the well spring of our daily living life “in Christ Jesus”.

The GIRM, #95 again helps us understand this:

“In the celebration of Mass the faithful form a holy people, a people whom God has made his own, a royal priesthood, ***so that they may give thanks to God and offer the spotless Victim not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, and so that they may learn to offer themselves.*** They should, moreover, endeavor to make this clear by their deep religious sense and their charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them in the same celebration.” [emphasis added]

II. PASTORAL ISSUES

There are practical implications that flow from this. One is that we need to take very seriously the instruction that the faithful should communicate from hosts that have been consecrated at the Mass being celebrated, and that, insofar as is possible, hosts should not be taken from the tabernacle for the communion of the faithful. This is an ideal I would hope could be transformed into reality as a regular practice in all our parishes. (cf. GIRM, # 85)

But for our own purposes in this pastoral letter, it is even more central to recognize the connection between “offering” and “receiving” of ourselves that takes its form and its strength from the active participation in the Eucharist which we “do in memory of him”.

It is ***offering*** that differentiates Mass from a Communion service, and it is ***offering*** that provides the context for full, conscious and active participation. The internal participation of offering, expressed and deepened by external participation (vocal responses, singing, postures, etc.), is the heart of what it means to “celebrate the Eucharist.” Both internal and external participation are necessary, since each one deepens and reinforces the other.

In the popular mind, all too often the purpose of Mass is still seen as an action simply to consecrate hosts; some people think their participation in the Eucharistic Prayer is all about watching the priest and then receiving Holy Communion. They do not understand

the need to offer themselves with Christ to the Father in the Spirit during the Prayer, nor do they understand that their parts in the Prayer (Introductory Dialogue, Sanctus, Memorial Acclamation and Great Amen) are the outward signs of their participation in the entire Prayer.

With all this in mind, we turn now to some pastoral issues that I wish to clarify for the good of our Church here on Long Island.

The Holy See has published guidelines for the Celebration of the Word with the Distribution of Holy Communion **on Sundays and Feastdays** for those missionary areas where the absence of a priest makes the celebration of Sunday Mass a rare occurrence. In our diocese some committed priests began to have such celebrations with the distribution of Holy Communion on weekdays when they would be absent from the parish for a day off. In 1997, realizing that this initiative was problematic, Bishop John McGann issued a moratorium stating that those parishes who had these could continue until the matter was studied but that no new parishes could initiate such celebrations with the distribution of Holy Communion until the matter could be resolved. The study was begun but never completed. Well over a year ago, I asked the Diocesan Advisory Committee on Canonical Affairs to review this issue and give me their advice. They informed me that such weekday celebrations are not envisaged in any legislation of the Church. In fact liturgical legislation since Bishop McGann's moratorium, has clarified that while Celebrations of the Word, especially the use of the Church's *Liturgy of the Hours* is encouraged, the distribution of Holy Communion is not a part of such service nor should it be.

The clarification of this matter is found in the instruction of the Congregation for Divine Worship, *Redemptionis Sacramentum*: ##164, 165 and 166, published in 2004. Paragraph 164 calls for the Bishop to provide for celebrations of the Word with the possibility of Holy Communion **on Sundays** which are "however to be considered **altogether extraordinary**". Paragraph 165 reminds us that "it is necessary to avoid any confusion between this type of gathering (Celebration of the Word with Holy Communion **on Sundays**) and the celebration of the Eucharist". The Instruction goes on to insist that the bishop must act very prudently to discern if such celebrations ought to take place on Sundays. Paragraph 166 adds, "The diocesan Bishop, to whose exclusive competence this matter pertains, must not easily grant permission for such celebrations to be held on weekdays, especially in places where it is possible or would be possible to have the celebration of Mass on the preceding or following Sunday. The priest is therefore earnestly requested to celebrate Mass daily for the people in one of the churches entrusted to his care."

In light of this clear instruction, after having heard the advice and counsel of the Advisory Committee on Canonical Affairs and brought this matter to the Diocesan Presbyteral Council for their discussion, counsel and advice, I, as Bishop, am declaring that no weekday Celebrations of the Word with the distribution of Holy Communion will be allowed in this Diocese thereby bringing our Diocese into conformity with the liturgical norms of the Church. In those parishes where there have been such weekday

celebrations, the distribution of Holy Communion is to cease as of July 1, 2008. This should give ample time for pastors to explain the change and the reason for the change to their parishioners.

I am well aware that priests' right to a day off was the principal reason for providing such services in the past. Taking such legitimate time off means that there will be parishes where Mass is not celebrated every weekday. These pastors should publish in their bulletins the times of weekday Masses in neighboring parishes so that the faithful who wish to participate in Mass daily may do so.

This new policy must not be seen as "taking something away" from the laity. All of us are called to offer our proper roles in the Liturgy and none of us is other than servant of the Church when we fulfill any role in the Liturgy. Those persons, lay and religious, who have led such celebrations in their parishes, are to be thanked for the reverent way they have conducted these services. As leaders of prayer they have brought many graces to the people whom they served by the generous and reverent commitment they manifested in these celebrations. They will continue to have this opportunity whenever the pastor invites them to lead celebrations of the Word such as at morning and evening prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours.

The centrality of the Liturgy of the Hours in the life of the Church should inspire parishioners eagerly and willingly to gather daily to pray the Liturgy of the Hours, which is the official prayer of the Church. The Liturgy of the Hours is the preferred liturgy to be prayed when Mass is not available during the week. May I encourage pastors and parishes to develop the wider and more frequent celebration of Morning and Evening Prayer as an integral part of parish life and devotion.

At baptismal ceremonies, funeral rites celebrated outside of Mass and marriage ceremonies when either a priest or deacon officiates, Holy Communion is not to be distributed. If there is preference for a ceremony outside of Mass and the participants wish to receive Holy Communion, they should be encouraged to participate in the Eucharist the day of the baptismal, funeral or wedding ceremony.

With good reason and good intent, a few of our educational, social and charitable institutions have developed a custom of making Holy Communion available for the students or staff or others by means of Communion Services at certain times of the day. Without any criticism of the good intention and good fruit of such initiatives, they fall outside what the Church foresees as acceptable. These too must end as of July 1, 2008.

It is of course legitimate to give Communion to the sick outside Mass, following the proper ritual for Communion for the Sick (found in *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*).

III. CONCLUSION

For two thousand years the Church in her wisdom has, with a sense of her authority and responsibility, regulated the celebration of the Eucharist and the sacraments. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* is a profoundly important truth of our faith. While each of us has his or her role and responsibility through active participation in the Eucharist and the sacraments, no one of us can relegate to him or herself a role that is other than service: service of worship to the Triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, service to the community of faith which is Christ's Body, to be loved and embraced in the same spirit we show when we love the Lord and embrace Him on the cross. The words of Jesus to his disciples after washing their feet during the Last Supper must always be in our hearts and on our minds to guide our prayers and our actions: "If I then, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet".

This Instruction is to be published as of this date. After proper pastoral catechesis the Instruction is to be implemented throughout the Diocese of Rockville Centre no later than July 1, 2008.



Bishop of Rockville Centre

Given at Rockville Centre
this ninth day of May 2008



Chancellor

IV. SOME RECENT PAPAL DOCUMENTS

Ecclesia De Eucharistia

#3 — *speaks of the Church being born out of the Paschal Mystery; the celebration of the passage (the mystery)*

#5 — *speaks of the living of the passage (the mystery) as the life of the Church in the oneness of time*

#8 — *speaks of the Eucharistic action of offering and praise, an action of the whole world that is swept up into this*

#11 — *speaks of sharing in the sacrifice that is made present, in which each member takes part and gains its inexhaustible fruits; “sharing in it as if we had been present there”*

#12 and 13 — *speaks of the “given for you” aspect of the sacrifice; sacrifice as gift/obedience of Jesus’ whole life to the Father*

#16 — *sacrifice is intrinsically directed to the inward union of the faithful through communion*

#32 — *Communion Services are not the same thing as the celebration of the Eucharist*

Redemptionis Sacramentum

Sacramentum Caritatis

#10 — *speaks of the institution of the Eucharist within a ritual meal connected with the salvific meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection*

#66 — *the intrinsic relationship between celebration and adoration; “the act of adoration outside Mass prolongs and intensifies all that takes place during the liturgical celebration itself”*

#71 — *the Eucharistic nature of all of Christian life; “worship pleasing to God thus becomes a new way of living our whole life, each particular moment of which is lifted up, since it is lived as part of a relationship with Christ and as an offering to God”*

#79 — *connecting the Eucharistic sacrifice with the living of everyday life*