

THE HOLY EUCHARIST, THE TREASURE OF OUR LIFE (Fifth lesson in the gospel of John 6)

“JESUS THE BREAD OF LIFE ” In John 6 we find Jesus has the following claims. *“I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst (35) “I am the bread that came down from heaven,”(41) I am the bread of life (48). This is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die (50) I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.”(51)*

Bread: Jesus was born in the manger where animals eat. Symbolically his birth in the manger means that he is the spiritual food for the humanity and he himself says that ‘he who eats his food and drinks his blood will have eternal life’. Some type of bread is part of the basic diet of almost every culture. Thus, in a symbolic way, Jesus is telling us that he is part of the basic food for our spiritual life. Just as bread is shared and valued in every culture, Jesus shares himself with all people who are willing to believe. Many of Jesus’ followers were troubled when he taught that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood in order to have true life (56-60). His words must have sounded strange yet this teaching about the body and blood of Christ is central to our catholic faith . We believe that Jesus is truly present with us and nourishes us when we celebrate the Eucharist together, the bread and wine being changed into the body and blood of Christ.

STORY: Alexandrina Maria da Costa was born in 1904 in Portugal. When she was with her sister and another girl in the house, three men knocked at the door. They came to molest her. They broke into the house. Alexandrina wanted to preserve her chastity and so jumped from the upstairs window. Her spinal chord was heavily injured. She had to remain in bed for the rest of her life. Even the slightest movement caused her pain. During that painful moment, she began to grow closer and closer to Jesus. She started realizing that she was suffering in a special way for the salvation of the souls. She received Holy Communion every day and her thoughts frequently turned to Jesus in the tabernacle. When she went to ecstasy, Jesus said to her, “love, suffer and make reparation”. She saw her vocation to make reparation for all sinners. She was asked to spread the message of Fatima and to urge the consecration of the world to the Immaculate Heart. She suffered the passion of Jesus many times in her life. She began an absolute fasting more than 13 years until her death. The only nourishment which her pain filled body received was Jesus in the Holy Communion every morning. News of her fasting spread and many people approached her for prayer. Some people doubted about her fasting and they accused her of fraud. Therefore she agreed to medical observation. The doctor asked her “why do you not eat”? She replied “I don’t eat because I feel full. I don’t need it”. She was admitted in the hospital for a thirty observation of her fasting. While she was in the hospital, many persuaded her to

take food but she would not. They extended another 13 days of her fasting. When the test was finally over, the doctor said to her that she would visit her at home not as a doctor but as a friend. One night the Lord appeared to her and said "You are living by the Eucharist alone because I want to prove to the world the power of the Eucharist and the power of my life in souls". How true are the words of Jesus **"I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst (35)** This is the power of Eucharist. To the world it is irrational to think that bread changes to become the body of Jesus and the wine changes to become the blood of Christ. It is equally irrational to the world to think that a human person can survive for thirteen years only by Eucharist. But Alexandrina is a sign given to the world by Jesus to remind us of his presence in the Eucharist.

Prefiguration of the Eucharist in the OT: Elijah was fed bread and meat by the ravens in the wilderness (1 Kings 17) Elijah commanded a widow to cook him her last loaf of bread. He promised her the bowl of flour and the jar of oil would not stop producing and it did not. We read in 1 kings 19 angel feeding Elijah. King Ahab of Israel married a pagan queen, Jezebel, who brought pagan worship into Israel. Elijah, the Israelite prophet challenged 450 false prophets of god Baal and defeated them in a public sacrifice-contest and killed all of them. The furious Queen Jezebel sent soldiers to kill the prophet. The prophet fled for his life. In discouragement and frustration, Elijah prayed for speedy death. God heard his prayer and sent an angel to feed him and strengthen him in his flight. The miraculous food provided by God sustained him through a 40-day pilgrimage to Horeb where Elijah would be commissioned again as God's prophet to carry on the struggle and to anoint his successor. The food of the angel in the OT is the type of food that Jesus gives in the NT.

6:27 Do not work for the food that perishes but work for the food that endures for eternal life

Workaholic Culture: Unfortunately our consumerist, globalized and technological culture and nuclear and single parent family system create more and more workaholics in our society. Many people seem to be RUNNING to STAND, giving no time to those who are close to them and less and less time to his/her spiritual life. Human life has become very much mechanical without inner joy and happiness. Doing takes over being. More and more anxious *Marthas* and less and less docile and reflective *Marys*. In this background, how meaningful the words of Jesus stand to us as individuals, family and as a society: "Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life"

Labor is life: Work is sacred. Work gives us self worth and growth to the society and that is why Labor Day is celebrated in every culture to honor the people who worked/work hard. In 1956, the Canadian government released a stamp on the Labor Day. The stamp had a very strong man holding a hammer, a pick, a hoe and an ax over his shoulder. His wife was seated by his side with a book in her lap

showing a small child how to read. There was also a beautiful phrase in it: "Labor Is Life" The meaning is quite clear: without labor there is no life—no means to feed, clothe, house, and educate a family or oneself.

The concept of work is very much biblical as we find many passages speaking about work. Proverbs 13:4 reads "Those who work hard will prosper". St. Paul in 2 Thes 3:10 says "if anyone is unwilling to work, then he should not eat". Nowhere does our Lord Jesus show contempt for work. He was a very hard working Rabbi, tirelessly talking, walking, healing and teaching the people about the kingdom of God. When he needed assistants, he went to the work spot and chose hard working fishermen as his disciples. He said of his own disciples, as he sent them out, "The laborer deserves his wages" (Lk 10:7) thus he intends people to work and to provide for their own and others' needs. He further speaks about work in different places "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." (Jn 4:34) "My Father is working until now, and I myself am working."(Jn 5:17). How come such a hard working Jesus who sanctified work and chose working class people says in today's gospel, "Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life". Does Jesus undermine physical work? Not at all.

The Mind of Jesus: By saying "Do not work for the food which perishes" Jesus does not mean that we should not work for our daily living like food, clothes, house, education, transportation, fun and leisure. What he really means is that working for our daily living should not be our supreme aim in our lives. Satisfying our physical appetite should not be the most important thing in life because we consist not only of body, but of spirit and soul as well and therefore we should work for the food which endures to everlasting life. What is the work that Jesus expects us to do in today's gospel? The answer is found in verse 29: "believe in him whom God has sent". In other words, Jesus says, "come to me, trust me, feed on me. Draw life from me and you will have the food that endures to eternal life. And therefore we should care for our soul, feeding day by day with personal prayer and the Word of God and the Holy Eucharist because "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God"

What does Jesus intend? Jesus does not mean stop working for a livelihood rather he exhorts us that in our work, we have to set our eyes on something other than the "food that perishes." The best parallel for "Do not seek the food that perishes" is found in Math 6:33, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness". And therefore we have to examine and re-examine our value systems and priorities in life. What am I really working for in this life? What am I trying to achieve in this life? Am I working for the physical food alone? What is my quest? What is my life purpose? We need food to live our daily life but that does not satisfy the longings of our souls. There is only one food that can truly satisfy our needs and that is the Holy Eucharist (eternal food), given by Jesus himself as his self donation and that gives us our eternal life.

THE HOLY EUCHARIST IS THE TREASURE OF OUR LIFE

1. The Holy Eucharist is the most important of the seven sacraments because, in this sacrament, we receive the very body and blood, soul and divinity of Jesus Christ. Innumerable, precious graces come to us through the reception of Holy Communion. Just as our bodies require food and drink for physical nurture and growth, so for nurture and growth, our souls need "soul" food. Sensing this deep need of the human soul, Jesus instituted the Holy Eucharist for the ages to come. Jesus whom we consume in the Holy Eucharist is our personal God who assimilates us into His very being. After consuming him He becomes part of us and we become part of him and that is what we call as the spiritual communion.

2. Dumb questions: Sometimes we hear people saying especially among young people and even some adults saying 'Mass is boring' 'I don't get anything out of Mass' 'why should I go? 'Why can't I just pray alone?' How to respond to such people and how can we inculcate deep desire for Eucharist in their minds? The venerable Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen once said, "If you don't get anything out of Mass, it's because you don't bring the right expectations to it. The Mass is not entertainment. It is worship of the God who made us and saves us. It is an opportunity to praise God and thank Him for all that He has done for us. If we have a correct understanding of Mass, it will become more meaningful for us and we will want to go to Mass"

3. We have some good and holy reasons to go to Mass. **A.** It is one of the ten commandments of God. The third commandments given to Moses by God is, "*Remember to keep holy the Sabbath day*" (Exodus 20:8). **B.** It is the command of Jesus Christ. While Jesus instituted the Last Supper before his Crucifixion, He said "*Do this in memory of me*" (Luke 22:14, 19). And therefore when we celebrate the Mass, we repeat the Last Supper as Jesus commanded us to do. In doing this, we remember and re-present his great act of love for us on the Cross. **C.** It is the Command of the Church. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that Mass attendance on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation is the first of the six Commandments of the Church. These Commandments of the Church also require receiving Communion at least once a year during the Easter season, confessing any mortal sin as a preparation for Communion, and observing the prescribed days of fasting and abstinence.

4) Why do we have to go for mass each week? Like our physical body needs regular nourishment to live in this world, our soul needs regular nourishment for our eternal life. secondly our salvation is not a one-time ordeal but a constant and continuous process. By receiving the Eucharist at least once a week, we receive the needed grace to grow in faith.

5) How to grow in Eucharist Spirituality? An hour prayer before the Blessed Sacrament on days like first Fridays. Coming few minutes before the Mass is a very good spiritual preparation to enter into the divine mysteries. Prayer after the Holy

Communion is important and after the mass, we can always spare few minutes for a silent prayer in stead of rushing home. Like Elijah, all of us at times go through powerlessness, discouragement, problems, anxieties and worries. But the Holy Communion which we consume strengthens us in our human and spiritual journey towards our permanent home heaven. (I throw myself at the foot of the Tabernacle like a dog at the foot of his Master."- St. John Vianney)

THEOLOGY OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST

Eucharist is a New Covenant: Jesus replaced the Old covenant and establishes the New covenant (Jer 31:31-34) by using His own Blood rather than that of sacrificial animals. **Eucharist is a memorial:** Jesus instituted the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist while eating the Passover meal, the feast on which the Jews still gather annually to commemorate their ancestors' deliverance from Egyptian slavery. We celebrate it because Jesus himself commanded us to celebrate it saying "Do this in memory of me". **Eucharist is a Sacrifice:** The Eucharistic celebration is a sacrifice because it is the re-presentation of Christ's Death on Good Friday and of his Resurrection on Easter Sunday. By means of signs, symbols and prayers in the Eucharist, we share in Christ's passion, death and Resurrection. Sacrifice is the heart and culmination of Eucharistic celebration. **Eucharist is a Mystery:** The Eucharistic Meal is a great mystery because during the Eucharistic celebration the substance of bread and wine are changed into the substance of Jesus' Body and Blood, while their appearances remain. We believe in this transformation of bread and wine. This is called as Transubstantiation.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SUNDAY MASS

Family Meals is important: Thanksgiving is a very important feast. We want to be with family members on Thanksgiving,. Why? We go because we know our presence matters to our parents, siblings, family and friends and we love them. We each witness to this love for each other when we are present at table for Thanksgiving and other milestones such as birthdays, anniversaries, baptisms, First Holy Communions, weddings and funerals. Our presence is a sign to each other of the gift and the importance of family in our lives. It is a moment of sharing our life experiences and stories.

The Holy Eucharist on every Sunday is our thanksgiving meal. The word *Eucharist* comes from the Greek word εὐχαριστία (eucharistia), which literally means "thanksgiving." Jesus Himself instituted this family tradition on the night before He died. When He gathered the disciples in the Upper Room for the Last Supper, He told them, "I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover meal with you." Jesus' eager desire is to celebrate this thanksgiving meal with every one of us each Sunday. We pray in many good and helpful ways but none equals the prayer that is the Sunday Mass. It is the one that Jesus implored us to do in His memory. As St. Paul wrote to

the 1st century Christians of Corinth, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes.”

Our culture today promotes an unhealthy individualism that has certainly crept into the way some members of our Catholic family practice their faith. But Christian discipleship is never a solo flight; it is a lifelong family pilgrimage. At the heart of that adventure is the Eucharistic banquet. Many Catholics today seem to take the gift of the Sunday Mass for granted. In the early days of the Church, Christians did not enjoy the freedom of religion that we do today in the United States. They were regularly persecuted by the Roman authorities for attending Mass. Pope Benedict XVI often tells the story of the martyrs of Abitene (in modern-day Tunisia). In 303, forty-nine Christians suffered torture and martyrdom because they defied the Roman Emperor Diocletian’s order not to celebrate the Eucharist on Sunday. When asked why they had disobeyed the emperor, one of them said, “*Sine dominico non possumus*” — “Without Sunday, we cannot live.” During the Reformation in England, priests were martyred when caught offering Holy Mass for English Catholics. In the past century, Catholics in former Communist countries like the Soviet Union or Vietnam were persecuted for practicing their faith. Today in places such as Egypt, China, North Korea, Iraq, Sudan and countless other areas, Catholics risk their lives and travel for hours to attend Sunday Mass. We give thanks to God that we do not have to put our lives in jeopardy to attend Mass at our local parish. We rejoice that, unlike those in poor areas, we do not have to walk for miles.

Why do we come to mass? Because we have our desires to do so

we desire to respond to God’s love “God so loved the world that He sent His only son so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life. The Mass is the best place to thank God for the gifts besides Himself that He gives us — especially life, family, friends, faith and love.

We desire to encounter Christ in the most profound way possible The Second Vatican Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy explains that Christ is present to us in four ways during the celebration of Mass: (1) in the community celebrating; (2) in the Word proclaimed; (3) in the priest presiding; and (4) in the Eucharist.

We desire to gather and pray with our parish family The celebration of Mass has vertical and horizontal dimensions. Christian life is a pilgrimage we make with our brothers and sisters in Jesus. Jesus set the example by gathering all the Apostles at the Last Supper. Our presence to each other is a symbol of our solidarity and unity with God and with each other. It is the fullest expression of our Christian identity.

We desire to strengthen our particular family Father Patrick Peyton, the great “Rosary Priest,” instructed us, “The family that prays together, stays together.” Likewise attending and praying at the Sunday Mass together as a family will strengthen our family to confront the various challenges today that often tear families apart.

We desire to provide a living legacy to our children and grandchildren Children are always watching their parents and grandparents. We form our young people by the way we participate in the Mass. Children who see that their parents get to Church early to pray before Mass will want to imitate them. Children who observe parents and other adults reverently receive the Eucharist will more readily realize that the Eucharist truly is the Body and Blood of Christ. The example of parents is an essential part of preparation for receiving First Holy Communion. Celebrating Sunday, the Lord's Day, is a legacy passed from generation to generation. The way we celebrate Sunday will affect the way we live the remainder of the week and is a mark of

For us, each Sunday is the day of the Resurrection. On that first Easter, Jesus appeared to two disciples on the road to Emmaus. The disciples were confused, hurt, and full of fear and doubts. They were trying to determine what to make of Jesus' death and the empty tomb. They discussed these developments with Jesus whom they did not recognize. When they reached the village they asked Jesus to stay with them. St. Luke says when they arrived at Emmaus, Jesus made as if He were going to continue on His journey. It was only the insistent invitation of the two disciples that brought Jesus to their table. I think that is a very important detail of this Gospel. The Lord does not force Himself on us; He likes to be invited into our lives. We too live in times where many people are confused, hurt, and full of fear. Jesus wants to meet us in the same way He met the disciples on the road to Emmaus. Like them, we will recognize Christ and encounter Him most profoundly in the breaking of the bread at Mass.

THE HISTORY OF THE HOLY MASS FROM THE BIBLICAL TIMES TO OUR TIMES

Journey from Passover to Eucharist (In gist): For the Jewish people, Passover was the most important celebration, remembering their liberation from Egyptian slavery. Jesus as a faithful Jew celebrated the Passover as the 'Last Supper' with his disciples during the last days of his earthly life. The apostolic community in the early church (Acts of the Apostles) celebrated the Last Supper as the Breaking of Bread in homes. In the post apostolic time and especially from the third century AD to our times, the Passover meal is celebrated as the Holy Eucharist

St. Justin Martyr in the second century wrote to the pagan emperor Antonius Pius (138-161) around the year 155, explaining what Christians did: On the day we call the day of the sun, all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place. The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, as much as time permits. When the reader has finished, he who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these beautiful things. Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves and for all others, wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions, and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation. When the prayers are concluded

we exchange the kiss. Then someone brings bread and a cup of water and wine mixed together to him who presides over the brethren. He takes them and offers praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Spirit and for a considerable time he gives thanks (in Greek: eucharistian) that we have been judged worthy of these gifts. When he has concluded the prayers and thanksgivings, all present give voice to an acclamation by saying: 'Amen.' When he who presides has given thanks and the people have responded, those whom we call deacons give to those present the "eucharisted" bread, wine and water and take them to those who are absent.

171 Clement of Alexandria and Ignatius of Antioch mention timeline of the Eucharist

From 100CE to 313CE: Once the apostolic community was no longer on the scene, the developing liturgy increasingly read and reflected on the writings of the Church Fathers such as Paul. When Jewish – Christians were no longer welcome at the synagogue service, they added its prayers, singing, chanting, and a homily to the Eucharistic liturgy.

From 313CE to 700CE: With the arrival of Emperor Constantine, Christianity became legal. Constantine protected the church from persecution with leaders. Bishops finance the building of churches. The simple celebration of the Eucharist was now celebrated in basilicas, the ceremony included processions, genuflection, candles, license and priests wore vestments. Latin is the main language used in Eucharist.

During 6th and 7th century the church spread throughout the world Rome became a symbol of unity. Liturgical books were introduced. The mass was first used to describe the celebration of the Eucharist. People participated in the celebration of the Eucharist, for example singing, choirs, acclamations and responses.

From 701CE to 1969: The priest would celebrate the Eucharist with his back to the people. There was no participation by lay people in the mass except for signing of the hymns. The clergy's role in the mass grew in status, he alone would read the readings. The elevation of the consecrated bread and wine gave the sense that the host was an object with "special powers". People considered themselves unworthy of communion. They believed that they needed to have the sacrament of penance each time before they received communion.

Liturgical Reforms of Vatican 11: The mass was emphasized as the celebrating community presented had a role to play in the liturgy. Readings were read by the laity. The vernacular was used which was the language of the people. Communion was received both kinds bread and wine. The priest turned around and faced the people. The prayer of the faithful, procession of gifts, sign of peace, singing of hymns, responses and acclamations are all restored.

Understanding the parts of the Holy Eucharist for a meaningful celebration of the Holy Mass

Part I: The Liturgy of the Word

Introductory rites: The Mass begins with a procession of, at minimum, the priest into the sanctuary. The priest and anyone who accompanies him represents the congregation, and their journey symbolizes the Christian journey through life to the heavenly courts. Oftentimes, at the front of the procession, one of the servers (a crucifer) carries a crucifix symbolizing that Jesus is our “leader to salvation” (Heb 2:10). The Mass then officially begins with the priest and people making the Sign of the Cross, a gesture that dates back to the first century of Christianity and summarizes the Christian belief in a Trinitarian God who descended from heaven to earth, who is now seated at the right hand of the Father, and whose death on a cross opened heaven’s gates. The priest greets the congregation echoing St. Paul’s words in 2 Corinthians 13:13, “The grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Love of God, and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Or, he can simply say, “The Lord be with you.” Either way, the people respond, “And with your Spirit,” acknowledging that the priest stands there in the person of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Penitential rite: Next, following the example of the tax collector in Luke 18:10- 14, who Christ commended for approaching God by first crying out, “O Lord, have mercy on me a sinner,” we acknowledge our sinfulness and ask God’s forgiveness. This can happen through the Kyrie — “Lord have mercy; Christ have mercy; Lord have mercy.” — An ancient penitential prayer with a petition for each of the Three Persons of the Trinity. It can also happen through the Confiteor, Latin for “I confess,” which calls us to admit we’ve sinned by our own free will (“through my fault, through my fault, through my most grievous fault”). Both expressions of contrition also call us to imitate the tax collector from Luke in another way, gently striking our breast in sorrow, demonstrating with actions as well as words, our remorse. (A third option, less frequently used, is sprinkling, with the priest casting holy water upon the people as a reminder of our baptism).

The Gloria: Part of the Church’s liturgy since A.D. 128, the Gloria is the hymn of praise the angels sang at Christ’s birth, and that John heard in heaven (Lk 2:13-14, Rev 15:4). The hymn is a doxology, literally “word of praise,” a prayer expressing the Church’s great joy in God becoming man and revealing himself to us. After the Gloria, comes a brief opening prayer called the Collect.

The readings: When the Word of God is proclaimed from the pulpit, Christ is really and truly present to his people. This encounter with Christ in his Scriptures has, since the days of the apostles, occupied a central place in the liturgy. We with utmost attention seek to heed St. Paul’s admonition that “Faith comes from what is heard” (Rom 10:17)

The first reading is drawn from the books of the Old Testament, the Scriptures of ancient Israel that tell of salvation history's beginnings and point forward to the promised Savior. Next comes a selection from the Psalms. In ancient Israel, the Psalms were sung antiphonally, with a cantor singing a series of lines and the congregation responding with a repeated line. This is how Jesus and his mother prayed the Psalms, and this is how we continue to pray them.

The second reading comes from the books of the New Testament, which were primarily letters from the Apostles to the Christian communities of the ancient world, and which were, from the start, intended for a liturgical setting. The second reading is followed by the Alleluia, the Hebrew word meaning "praise the Lord" used repeatedly in the Book of Revelation. Whether said or sung, the word calls the congregation to abandon our posture of sitting and stand out of respect for Christ, who will become even more immediately present in the Gospel reading.

Gospel Reading: Then, a priest or deacon proclaims the Gospel, meaning "Good News." Taken from one of the four Gospels in the New Testament, the Gospel often echoes themes from the earlier readings, demonstrating the Church's ancient understanding that the New and Old Testaments are only fully understood in light of each other.

The homily: In the homily, the priest follows the example of Christ on the road to Emmaus, explaining and interpreting the Scriptures. Sometimes this interpretation is biblical, sometimes theological, sometimes moral or catechetical (Lk 24:13-35). Always, however, again in imitation of the Emmaus encounter (where Christ "was made known ... in the Breaking of the Bread"), it should prepare the congregation for or point us toward what is about to follow: the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

The Credo and prayers of the faithful: Before the second part of the Mass begins, however, the congregation first rises to make our profession of faith. The Credo, literally "I believe," is a summation of Catholic belief. Each word is weighted with meaning and was the subject of much theological wrestling in the first three centuries after Christ. The Creed most commonly recited today is the Nicene Creed (or more accurately the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed), having emerged from the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381). When we Catholics proclaim the Creed, we do so as a testimony to our personal faith, as well as to the unity of the Faith across space and time. It is a sign of communion with Catholics in the next pew, in fourth-century Antioch and in the heavenly courts.

Notably, in the middle of the Credo, at the words, "and by the power of the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary," the congregations solemnly bows, acknowledging the pre-eminent importance of the Incarnation. The Credo is followed by the prayers of the faithful or the general intercessions of the Mass. In obedience to St. Paul's request in 1 Timothy 2:1- 3, the Church offers "supplications, prayers, petitions, and thanksgiving for everyone," beginning with

petitions for the needs of the Church, then public authorities and those oppressed by any need, and finally the local community. Part II: The Liturgy of the Eucharist

The offertory: Every sacrifice requires an offering, and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is no exception. On Sundays, at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, there is a collection, with the congregation placing our individual offerings in a basket. Today, those offerings take the form of cash or check. In third-century Rome, St. Hippolytus tells us, they included grapes, figs, apples, even lilies — anything that could support the community. Tertullian, writing from second-century Carthage, likewise said that the donations went toward burying the poor, supplying the wants of orphans, and providing for the homebound. The collection is then carried up into the sanctuary, often with the bread and wine to be consecrated. Together, they represent the fruits of the earth offered by man, its steward. They also represent the spiritual offering of the faithful, the offering of our lives to Christ.

Preparation of the gifts: While the collection is taken up, the priest prepares the altar. When all is ready, he elevates first the bread, then the wine, pronouncing a blessing over each. The blessing, which begins, “Blessed are you, Lord of all creation,” echoes the blessing Jesus pronounced at the Last Supper, the blessing of the Passover meal, “Blessed are you, Lord our God, king of the universe, creator of the fruit of the vine.” It also echoes the blessing of Melchizedek in Genesis 14: 19-20. Importantly, before pronouncing the blessing over the wine, the priest mixes into it a small amount of water. He does this in continuation of the custom of Jesus’ time, where wine was diluted before it was drunk, and as a symbol of the blood and water that gushed forth from Christ’s side on the cross (Jn 19:34). Next, the priest washes his hands, following St. Paul’s advice in 1 Timothy 2:8, that when praying, men should lift up “holy” or “clean” hands. Finally, with the priest, the whole congregation implores God to accept the sacrifices offered — both the priest’s and our own — and, by it, bless the world.

Preface and the Sanctus: The preface of the Eucharistic Liturgy has remained virtually unchanged for the past 1800 years. In the early 200s, St. Hippolytus’ account of the Mass in Rome included the dialogue between priest and people that enjoins the congregation to “Lift up your hearts to the Lord” and “Give thanks to the Lord our God.” His contemporary in North Africa, St. Cyprian, records the same dialogue in his description of the liturgy, a dialogue intended to remind Christians that “wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Mt 6:21). The preface continues with a short prayer. Like the opening dialogue, it focuses the congregation on the importance of what is about to take place and invites us to enter into the Mass even more completely. Then, with the reminder that we are praying “with the angels and saints,” the congregation sings the Sanctus, the “Holy, Holy, Holy,” taken from Isaiah 6:2-3 and Revelation 4:8. This hymn, as we know from a letter from Pope St. Clement (martyred in A.D. 99), has been sung in the Mass since at least the first century of Christianity.

The Eucharistic Prayer: After the Sanctus, the congregation kneels, assuming a posture of reverence in preparation for the central act of the Mass. The priest then prays the Eucharistic Prayer, or Canon. For this prayer, the priest has four options: ***Eucharistic Prayer 1***, published in 1570 but virtually identical to the Eucharistic prayer used by St. Ambrose in the fourth century and St. Augustine in the fifth century; ***Eucharistic Prayer 2***, drawn from the Greek liturgy of St. Hippolytus in 215; ***Eucharistic Prayer 3***, an abbreviated twentieth-century version of Eucharistic Prayer 1; ***Eucharistic Prayer 4***, a 20th-century prayer adapted from the ancient liturgies of the Eastern Churches.

Although the prayers differ in length and phrasing, they all have the following in common. Each offers thanksgiving and praise to God. Each includes a prayer for the sending down of the Holy Spirit, the epiclesis, for nothing in the Eucharistic sacrifice happens by man's effort alone. Each includes an institution narrative (the story of the Last Supper) followed by the words of consecration, taken from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, as well as 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. Each also includes the elevation, first the sacred Host, then the sacred Chalice, often to the sounds of ringing bells, proclaiming that a great miracle has occurred: Bread and wine are no longer bread and wine. Christ is now present in the Eucharist, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. And each includes the mystery of faith, a summary of the paschal mystery, which affirms the reality of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection, the saving power of the mystery unfolding before us, and the anticipated second coming of Christ.

Finally, each concludes with a closing doxology, the Great Amen. "Amen" is a Hebrew word that in this context means "truly" or "yes," and conveys the congregation's agreement with the entirety of the Eucharistic Prayer, as well as a "yes" to Christ, elevated on the altar.

The Lord's Prayer: In preparation for Holy Communion, the congregation stands and, with the priest, prays the Our Father. This prayer, taught by Jesus to his disciples in Luke 11:1-4, has been a part of the Mass since at least the second century. It is there both as a reminder that our relationship with God is essentially familial — he is our Father and as an act of supplication for "our daily bread" - the Holy Eucharist.

The sign of peace: Christ adjured his followers that before they could approach the altar, they first needed to be reconciled with their brother (Mt 5:23-24). Likewise both Paul and Peter instructed the early Christians to "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (Rom 16:16; 1 Pet 5:14). From the first century, when Justin Martyr wrote about it in his account of the Mass, both injunctions were heeded through the sign of peace, a ritual gesture (typically a handshake, embrace, or solemn bow) that says we are at peace with our neighbor.

The Agnus Dei and Domine, Non Sum Dignus: In Revelation, the saints and angels worship the Lamb, and in John 1:29 we hear John the Baptist cry, "Behold the Lamb

of God." That is exactly what the congregation does as the Agnus Dei or "Lamb of God" prayer is uttered. Three times, using a formula of prayer introduced into the Mass by the seventh-century Syrian pope, St. Sergius, we implore Christ, the Lamb of God, for mercy. Traditionally we then drop to our knees and adore him, as the priest repeats the words of John 1 and Revelation 19:9: "Behold the Lamb of God. Behold him who takes away the sin of the world. Blessed are those called to the Supper of the Lamb." The congregation answers in turn with the Domine, non sum dignus, the words of the centurion in Matthew 8:8: "Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed." That answer, like the centurion's, is an act of faith, a profession of belief that there are no wounds of mind, body, or soul which Christ cannot heal.

Holy Communion: Healing comes in Holy Communion, when the faithful receive the Body and Blood of Christ. The rite today is an exact image of the early Church's. As St. Ambrose in the fourth century wrote, "The priest says to you 'The Body of Christ' and you say, 'Amen.'" Communion may be received by all Catholics in good standing with the Church, who are not in a state of mortal sin and who have fasted for at least one hour. It may be received on the tongue or in the hand, standing or kneeling, and with a solemn bow or genuflection preceding reception. Communion is frequently offered under both species, Body and Blood, but the faithful need only receive under one kind to receive the fullness of both. After all have received Communion, the priest cleanses the Communion vessels, and offers a brief prayer.

The dismissal: Then, almost too quickly, it is over. The priest dismisses the congregation, blessing them once more with the Sign of the Cross and charging them to live what they have received. To do that, he says the same words which have dismissed the faithful since the days of the catacombs: *Ite, missa est*, translated as "The Mass is ended. Go in peace to love and serve the Lord."

"All the good works in the world are not equal to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass because they are the works of men; but the Mass is the work of God. Martyrdom is nothing in comparison for it is but the sacrifice of man to God; but the Mass is the sacrifice of God for man." (St. John Vianney)