

Extended Homily For Corpus Christi 2016

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What is the mass? On this Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ it's a worthy question: What is the mass? When I ask parishioners, or when people tell me what they like about the mass... what they love about our parish, they almost ***always*** say, "It's about community... We love the community... What a great community we have." And it is certainly true that the celebration of the Eucharist has an important communal dimension to it; as one option for today's preface says, "by this mystery you make them holy, so that human race may be enlightened by one faith and united in one bond of charity." It is also true that this communal dimension is feeding an important yearning of our hearts, so isolated in a world of anonymity and cold technology. So, communion with each other *is* part of the Eucharist.

If you were to ask my grandparents, now in their nineties, what mass is about, they would *mention* community, but they would mention it as a second benefit of the mass. My grandmother - no great theologian, but a lifelong Sunday mass goer - said, "Mass is where we worship God and offer up our lives to him." Here we find the real purpose of the Eucharist... not because my grandmother said it (*though that's usually good enough reason for me to believe anything*) but because **Jesus** defines it as such.

In Genesis, Abraham meets Melchizedek the priest-king of Salem (ancient Jerusalem). Celebrating Abraham's arrival in the holy land, Melchizedek - a priest without lineage or offspring said, "Blessed be God most high!" and offered a sacrifice on

the altar that God might bless Abraham's people. Such is the pattern of praise and sacrifice throughout the Old Testament. Such is the context of our own worship. Paul says it best: "on the night Jesus was to be handed over," -that is, the Passover memorial of Moses liberating his people- Jesus said, "This is my body that is for you... Do this in remembrance of me... This cup is the *new* covenant in my blood... Do this in remembrance of me." The Last Supper is the First Mass... it is first and foremost linked with Jewish sacrifice and memory. For the Jews memory meant not just remembering but re-experiencing. Each Passover memorial sacrifice brought to the present all the realities experienced in the past by which the people were freed from slavery and death in Egypt to live in God's presence in the Promised Land. No longer the blood of a white lamb... now, we re-experience the offering of the blood of the Son to the Father on the altar of the Cross... to free us not from temporal slavery but from death itself! This, we hear in the Preface, "He is the true and Eternal Priest who instituted the pattern of an everlasting sacrifice and was the first to offer himself as the saving Victim commanding us to make this offering as his memorial. When we join Christ the Son in this priestly praise and sacrifice to the Father offered in the Holy Spirit... we join in the action of the Holy Trinity (which we celebrated last Sunday).

In this we give eternal meaning to the things we suffer on this earth... and in **that** we rejoice. If I know that my sufferings, joined to Christ have meaning if I know they contribute to saving souls... then suddenly my life has more than mortal significance and I can rejoice because death no longer binds me. This is the GREAT power and meaning of the Eucharist.

How is it that this Scriptural reality about the mass has so escaped our contemporary awareness? It may have something to do with the current *choreography* of the mass. For most of our history, The Eucharist has been celebrated facing God, “*ad Deum.*” This remained the intention of the Second Vatican Council... but an exception granted to the norm quickly became exploited. The Council said that priest *may* face toward the People (*versus populum*). As this exception became more and more the practiced-norm so did the understanding of the mass as *singularly* a representation of the Last Supper at which Jesus, gathered in community with his Apostles, faced them at the seder table. While the Last Supper is rightly understood as the first mass, even it points to a higher reality: the sacrificial worship of the Father by the Son in the Holy Spirit happening continually in the heavenly court. **Heaven** is the pattern of the mass.

So... if I were actually following the rules on how to celebrate mass - as printed in the law of the Church - I would face God and not the congregation. Because the priest acting in the person of Christ offers the People’s sacrifice to the Father and leads them in a pilgrimage of worship *to Him (ad Deum)*. Such was the express will of the Second Vatican Council as reiterated just this week by Pope Francis’ chief advisor on worship, Cardinal Sarah.

“But as soon as we reach the moment when one addresses God – from the Offertory onwards – it is essential that the priest and faithful look together towards the east. This corresponds exactly to what the Council Fathers wanted.”

“It is legitimate and complies with the letter and spirit of the Council... As prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, I wish to recall that the celebration **versus orientem** is authorized by the rubrics, which specify the times when the celebrant must

turn to the people. It is therefore not necessary to have special permission to celebrate facing the Lord.”¹

Now, why should we care? Where does the rubber hit the road for us here today in DC? Well at the grand level it's obvious that this is the truth handed to us by our Lord, by Scripture and by the constant practice of the Church... so we should care. At the individual level we should care because, this gives context and meaning to our lives as a community of priestly people. And finally, at the level of popular consciousness, we should care because a proper scriptural understanding of the Mass defuses a terrible bomb, a hot potato in our contemporary American Catholic minds: when should I receive communion?

If mass is, according to Scripture, primarily a matter of offering sacrifice and offering praise. It is not strictly speaking necessary to receive Communion every single time we attend. One can successfully offer sacrifice without that... and indeed that's how people lived for 1900 years of our history: They'd receive communion on Christmas and Easter. They were no less Catholic than we are today when we receive frequently. In fact it's really only in the US that EVERYONE gets up in lockstep to receive EVERY Sunday. In Europe, Africa and Asia there's no shame ascribed to someone who for WHATEVER reason chooses to abstain from receiving on a given Sunday... maybe its because they're visiting and not Catholic... maybe it's because they didn't have a chance to go to confession... maybe it's because they have indigestion or feel too distracted... who knows... who cares. That's between them and God... and **they're no less a part of the family for having abstained** because the

¹ Robert Card. Sarah. At: <http://www.catholicherald.co.uk/news/2016/05/26/vatican-liturgy-chief-urges-priests-to-celebrate-mass-facing-east/> Accessed 26 May 2016.

basis of this family is not a demonstration of moral perfection by approaching the altar...

the basis of our family is offering praise and sacrifice to Father with Christ in the

Spirit. That's what the Eucharist is and each of us is called to participate in it as our

conscience dictates as that conscience carefully observes the objective norms offered

in the Gospel. I conclude with the words of Cardinal Wuerl:

When you're talking about a judgment of your personal state of soul before God - and isn't that what we all have to assess before we go to communion - not just vis a vis the *sixth* commandment of the *eighth* commandment; it's against the whole Gospel: Be perfect as your heavenly father is perfect... Seek first the kingdom. Everyone of us has to make a moral judgment *every* day about our culpability our fitness before God to approach the Eucharist and I think that's what this is saying. You make that judgment. There are very real objective norms for right and wrong: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty. When you did this to the least of my brethren you did it to me. when you didn't... you didn't do it to me. Those are pretty strong words and we have to make a judgment in conscience about how well am I doing that. The objective norm is there. But there's a difference between my knowing the norm and my situation and how is my conscience before God right now in light of those norms.²

² Donald Card. Wuerl. At: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=youtu.be&v=fh6tw-eeVKk&app=desktop> (transcribed) Accessed 27 May 2016.