

April, 2021

Returning to grace: A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist



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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with all of you (2 Cor 13:13).

When church historians write about the Year of Our Lord 2020, I predict they will call particular attention to the “Great Eucharistic Fast.” COVID-19, the pandemic that has taken the lives of millions, obliged dioceses throughout the world to take the unprecedented action of closing our churches and effectively denying our people the opportunity to receive Christ’s Body and Blood in the Eucharist. Some scholars may point out that, as a result, Catholics in Europe and North America experienced what others have suffered for many years due to a

shortage of priests or outright persecution, namely, the absence of the sacraments.

Although this profoundly disturbing decision was taken to control the spread of a deadly disease while protecting the most vulnerable members of our communities, the closure of our churches produced astonishing suffering. Thank God, we have begun to reopen and are slowly returning to full participation in the Church’s prayer and sacramental ministry, but much still needs to be done to ensure the health and safety of our people and recover a sense of social, economic, and spiritual wellbeing.



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Social Distancing



Do you think there will be long-term effects to separation imposed by the pandemic? Will some of us prefer virtual worship, if we worship at all? Here is what I think.

During the first four months of the lockdown, I was not able to visit my mother, who is in her 90s and lives in southwestern Ontario, near the border with the United States. We talked on the telephone and saw each other “virtually” via Zoom calls, but we were not able to meet in person. During those months, too many people in the Archdiocese had similar or worse experiences, even being

denied the opportunity to comfort the dying or bury their loved ones. While modern technology can somewhat ease these burdens, the forced separation remains a great tragedy.

When I was finally able to travel this summer and visit my mother in person at our home, I realized how much I had missed her and how different it was to sit across the same table and share a cup of tea! Ancient wisdom says that “absence makes the heart grow fonder.” I know that was true in my case. My love for my mother, which has always been strong, deepened as I was prevented from being physically close to her. And when the day came that we were reunited, I experienced true joy.

Millions of Catholics across the world have had a similar experience with their love for Jesus. One of the greatest blessings of our faith is our deeply held conviction that our Lord is truly present to us in the Eucharist. We use different terms to describe this great mystery, but never fully explain it. Simply stated, we believe that when a priest invokes the power of the Holy Spirit during the celebration of Holy Mass, repeating the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, ordinary bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #'s 1373-1381). When we go to Communion, we receive Christ in the most intimate way possible during our life — allowing Him to become one with us — so that we actually become what we receive, the Body of Christ.

St. Augustine wrote and preached about this mystery often. In one of his most famous homilies, he asked:

*How can bread be His Body? And the cup, or what the cup contains, how can it be His Blood? The reason these things, brethren, are called Sacraments is that in them one thing is seen, another is to be understood. What can be seen has a bodily appearance, what is to be understood provides spiritual fruit. So, if you want to understand the Body of Christ, listen to the Apostle [Paul] telling the faithful: You are the Body of Christ and its members. So if it's you that are the Body of Christ and its members, it's the mystery, meaning you, that has been placed on the table of the Lord; what you receive is the mystery that means you. It is to what you are that you reply Amen, and by so replying you express your assent. **What you hear, then, is The Body of Christ, and you answer, Amen. So be a member of the Body of Christ, in order to make that Amen true.** (Sermon 272, emphasis mine)*

What we receive when we receive Holy Communion is the same “Body of Christ” that St. Paul tells us we **are**. When we say “Amen,” we are committing to truly reflect the presence of our Lord in our daily lives and to share Him with everyone we encounter. In other words, when we receive the Eucharist, we **receive** Christ and agree to **be** Christ with and for others.

Spiritual Closeness

When our churches were closed and it became impossible for most Catholics to receive the Eucharist, our Holy Father Pope Francis strongly urged us to find ways of maintaining “spiritual closeness” with God and with each other. As liturgies were live-streamed from the Vatican, our Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart, and so many of our parishes, provided the faithful with opportunities to make a “spiritual communion,” a traditional means of seeking intimacy with Jesus when the physical reception of the Eucharist is not possible. Many people have told me that these live-streamed liturgies were a great blessing, for many, they still are. But they are not same thing as being physically together and receiving the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion.

Now that we are gradually reopening our churches, and increasing the numbers of people who can attend daily and Sunday masses, I have been asked whether it isn't time to discontinue live-streamed liturgies and restore the obligation to go to Mass in person on Sundays and Holy Days. Some pastors and lay faithful are concerned that when things finally return to “normal”, many Catholics will have grown accustomed to staying at home and either watching Mass online or not participating at all.

As I'm sure you are aware, declining Mass attendance was a serious concern long before the pandemic. Has the current crisis accelerated this trend, or have we grown in our appreciation for the Eucharist precisely because we denied access to it for so long? Has absence made our hearts grow fonder?

When I was young priest serving in the Archdiocese of Detroit, I used to preach retreats at a diocesan retreat house across the Canadian border. The resident Retreat Master there was an older priest, a bit gruff in his manner but with a heart that was pure gold. One day he told me a story that I've never forgotten.

Father Adrian was directing a retreat day for young people from a new Catholic high school in the Detroit area that had been recently created by the merger of two others—one predominantly white and the other largely African Americans. Throughout the day, the priest felt some tension among the students but he couldn't identify the cause.

The day was to close with Mass. During the General Intercessions, the priest invited the young people to add their own petitions. The first to speak, a white student, offered a petition that was clearly offensive to the African American students. As a result, the offended students stood up and walked out. The student who had offered the petition spit out, “Let them go! We don't need them!” After a few minutes of stunned silence, Father removed his stole and asked the remaining students to return to their rooms and wait for their bus, saying, “We can't celebrate the Mass today.” But, that's not how the story ends.

A week later, Father Adrian was beginning a retreat with a group of adults when he noticed several young men quietly enter the rear of the conference room. As he walked back to welcome them at the conclusion of his talk, he recognized them as the students who had walked out of that liturgy a week before. They told him that two reasons brought them back. First, they needed to apologize for not handling their problems in a more Christian manner, and secondly, to tell them what they had learned. They didn't fully realize what the Eucharist was until they couldn't celebrate it.

Returning to Grace

Is it possible that Catholics who have been denied access to this great sacrament — including those who have “walked away from it” over many years—may realize what they are missing and return to experience the loving presence of Christ in this mystery of grace?

I use “grace” or “graciousness” to describe the Eucharist in two senses: First, I have in mind the gratuity, the “gifted-ness” of the Eucharist. That Jesus “loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end” (Jn 13: 1). We don’t participate because of an obligation to do something for God but rather, our participation permits God to do something unimaginable for us. St. Alphonsus Liguori says that for God, “paradise is the human heart.” Jesus gives the gift so that God can go where God wants to go. *All* is grace.

The other sense of “graciousness” is “beauty”. Whatever the aesthetic quality of the ritual (which, as Pope Benedict XVI has observed, is not insignificant), the “way of beauty” (the *via pulchritudinis*) may be the way to faith for modern men and women. “Art and the saints are the greatest apologetics for our faith,” our retired pope says. “What faith must see is Beauty.” St. Alphonsus glimpsed this and wrote the lyrics of a hymn most of us have sung many times:

*“ O God of loveliness, O Lord of Heaven above,
How worthy to possess my heart’s devoted love.
So sweet Thy countenance, so gracious to behold
That one, one only glance to me were bliss untold.”*

To invite our sisters and brothers to return to full, conscious and active participation in the Eucharistic liturgy, we must emphasize the graciousness of this great gift and its incomparable beauty. I have given this pastoral letter the title *Returning to Grace* because I firmly believe this is what all of us are called to do after and in response to the Great Eucharistic Fast imposed on us by COVID-19.

Words of Encouragement from Pope Francis

Our Holy Father Pope Francis has not been silent during this pandemic. He has continually spoken out urging us not to be afraid, to remain spiritually close to God and one another, to call on Mary, Mother of the Church, St. Joseph during this Holy Year of St. Joseph, and all the saints, and to remember those who are most in need, especially the poor, vulnerable and displaced members of the human family. Pope Francis has also warned us that the sin of indifference can be a far more deadly virus than COVID-19.

Our Holy Father reminds all of us who are in positions of co-responsible leadership and service in the Church, that we are simply “altar servers” for the Holy Spirit. We are not in control of situations like this pandemic that confront us — often without warning. Our job is to listen, pray, discern, stay close to the People of God, and decide without fear. As baptized and confirmed Christians, we are called to accept humbly yet confidently the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Beginning with us bishops, we must seek to understand “what the Spirit is saying to the Churches” (cf. Rev. 2: 29). It is the Holy Spirit — not us — who gathers the Church together and makes reconciliation possible.

During the celebration of the Eucharist, there are two moments of epiclesis



when the priest invokes the Holy Spirit, first to transform the bread and wine, then to transform those who will receive the Gift. We are servants of the Spirit and of the sacred mysteries which the Holy Spirit makes possible. Returning to Grace means handing ourselves over to the Spirit of God, who makes Christ present to us, and who transforms those of us who receive Him in the Holy Eucharist into the Body of Christ.

As I seek to understand what the Spirit is saying to us today, I trust that the prudent path we are pursuing here in the Archdiocese of Newark is the best available option. We are gradually reopening our churches, expanding our capacity and encouraging our people to return to inperson participation and the sacramental reception of the Eucharist. At the same time, we continue to make available live-streamed liturgies to those who are unable to join us in person. The day will come when the obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days will be restored since the Eucharist is vital to our spiritual flourishing. Until that day, we must allow the Holy Spirit to guide us in helping those who cannot receive the Eucharist to encounter the person of Jesus in personal prayer, Scripture and in service to God's people.

Making the Lord's Day Holy

One of the most serious challenges before us is the recovery of a sense of the sacred in our observance of the Lord's Day. Sunday holds a place of honor in the Christian community because it is the day when our Lord rose from the dead. From the beginning, followers of the risen Jesus considered this day to be the holiest day of the week, and our Church rightly instructs us to make the Lord's day holy by our attendance at Mass, by avoiding unnecessary work and by devoting our time and attention to family members and friends.

Our understanding of Sunday as sacred time is a treasured inheritance from our Jewish sisters and brothers for whom the observance of "Shabbat" (the Sabbath) is an integral dimension of Judaism's spirituality. According to Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, who was a leading theologian and professor of Jewish mysticism in the mid-20th century:

There is a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be, not to own but to give, not to control but to share, not to subdue but to be in accord. Life goes wrong when the control of space, the acquisition of things of space, becomes our sole concern (The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Man).

Rabbi Heschel taught that "Spiritual life begins to decay when we fail to sense the grandeur of what is eternal in time," and he invited all of us who want to find meaning in our lives to seek God not in places or things but in "the seed of eternity planted in the soul." Time is sacred. For the Jewish people, "the Sabbath symbolizes the sanctification of time" just as for Christians the Lord's Day (Sunday) represents "a realm of time where the goal is not to have but to be."

Building on the reverence for the Sabbath that was so essential for their Jewish roots, Christians discovered an even more profound meaning for the Lord's Day. St. Gregory the Great declared: "For us, the true Sabbath is the person of our Redeemer, our Lord Jesus Christ." The truth helps us to understand why a fourth-century martyr would reply to his accusers: "*Sine dominico non possumus*" – "we cannot live without this 'thing of the Lord,'" referring to the celebration of the Holy Eucharist on Sunday, prohibited by the emperor but in which he and his companions had chosen to participate even at the cost of torture and death. Can the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist assume such vital necessity in our lives? Can we recover a sense of sacred time as we emerge from this pandemic? Or will work, shopping, sports and the entertainment media capture our hearts? Will we again devote ourselves to the Grace and Beauty of the Eucharist? Or will we settle for whatever distractions the world has to offer us?





Recognizing Jesus—and ourselves—in the Eucharist

Like true love, the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is a mystery we can never fully comprehend. It is grace itself, an unmerited gift from God that we are invited and challenged to accept with an open mind and a grateful heart. We are called to recognize Jesus as truly present in the consecrated bread and wine, His Body and Blood. We are also called to recognize ourselves as true members of the same Body and Blood of Christ who are intimately united with Him and with each other through the miracle that occurs each time we receive the Eucharist. For this reason, the priest or minister never says “receive Jesus,” but rather, “The Body of Christ.”

The “Amen” that we respond can never be perfunctory. It should be a genuine, heartfelt expression of our faith in Christ who *comes* to us as Lord and brother, who *becomes* one with us in the most intimate communion that is possible for us and creates communion among all the members of His Body. Each time we receive the Holy Eucharist, we accept the Lord’s great commission to proclaim His Gospel and to minister to His people in every nation to the ends of the earth.

What can each of us do to help our brothers and sisters here in northern New Jersey return to the Grace and Beauty of the Eucharist? How will we encourage those who hesitate to join us in personally celebrating the Mass with our fellow parishioners each Sunday, when it is safe to do so in greater numbers? Is it possible that the Great Eucharistic Fast of 2020 will prove to be a blessing in disguise—a great awakening—for those of us who have consciously or unconsciously “walked away” from Jesus and His Church?

With this pastoral letter, I want to invite all members of this local Church to follow the counsel of Pope Francis quoted above. We should *listen* to those who no longer see the beauty of Christ’s Eucharistic presence, *pray* that we can help our sisters and brothers Return to Grace with open minds and grateful hearts. We should *discern* what is truly good for ourselves, our families and our communities. We should stay *close* to one another—spiritually if not physically. And we should *make prudent decisions* about our participation in the life of the Church, especially her worship and her ministry, without anxiety or fear.

If we trust in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the continual reopening of our parishes, schools and archdiocesan ministries will truly be a Return to Grace for the Archdiocese of Newark. As Pope Francis reminds us, we are now in a crisis and no one will emerge from this pandemic unchanged. Things *will* be different. The challenge is: will they be better or worse? We hope and pray that God’s people will emerge from this crisis renewed in the Spirit with an even greater love for Jesus’ astonishing gift of Himself to us in the Eucharist.

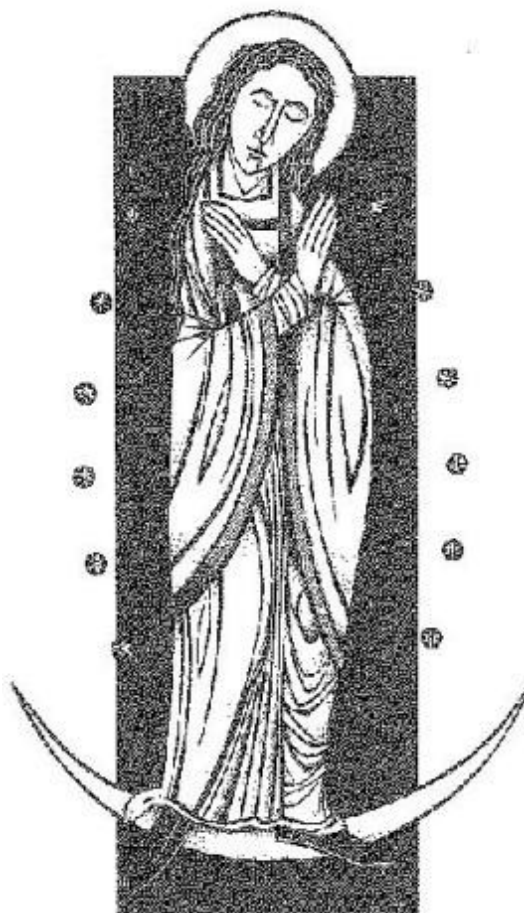
Imploring Mary’s Protection and Care

Ever since it became clear that this pandemic posed a grave threat to the lives and well-being of millions of people throughout the world, I have asked Mary, Mother of the Church, to intercede on behalf of all who are suffering as well as all who respond to the needs of others. I now ask our Blessed Mother to help us return to the Grace and Beauty of the Sunday Eucharist and the reverent reception of Holy Communion by inspiring all of us, clergy, consecrated women and men, and lay faithful, with an ardent love for her Son Jesus, and a deep trust in the Holy Spirit’s skill to guide us safely home.

May Mary's example inspire us all to discern God's will for us and help us to find ways to be close to one another, even as we are keeping a safe distance.

In conclusion, I would like to once again make my own Pope Francis's prayer to Our Lady, Health of the Sick, which ends with the words of an ancient chant, *Sub tuum praesidium*, actually the oldest hymn to Mary, the Mother of God, to implore her protection during the coronavirus pandemic and help us all Return to Grace in new ways when the time is right:

O Mary, you shine continuously on our journey as a sign of salvation and hope. We entrust ourselves to you, Health of the Sick. At the foot of the Cross you participated in Jesus' pain, with steadfast faith. You know what we need. We are certain that you will provide, so that, as you did at Cana of Galilee, joy and feasting might return after this moment of trial. Help us, Mother of Divine Love, to conform ourselves to the Father's will and to do what Jesus tells us: He who took our sufferings upon Himself, and bore our sorrows to bring us, through the Cross, to the joy of the Resurrection. Amen.



We seek refuge under your protection, O Holy Mother of God. Do not despise our pleas – we who are put to the test – and deliver us from every danger, O glorious and blessed Virgin. Amen.

Sincerely yours in Christ the Redeemer,

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