

LIVING EUCHARIST:
GATHERED, NOURISHED, SENT

A PASTORAL LETTER

FROM THE

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TO

THE CHURCH OF THE DIOCESE OF ST. PETERSBURG



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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Jesus, Our Lord and King,

Early this year a young couple told me about what had been an eye-opening occurrence for them.

Bishop, my husband and I wish to share with you an experience which we had last Sunday. We have three young children, ages seven, five and eighteen months. Our two oldest attend the parish school where my husband and I regularly attend Sunday Mass with all our children.

On the Sunday after Christmas, we awakened later than usual and in a general state of over-all holiday season fatigue. My husband and I thought that the Lord would understand if we missed Mass, just this one Sunday. The children were up and the oldest asked when we would leave for Mass. My husband looked at me and said, "I think we should go."

We rushed to prepare the baby, fed the other two, got them dressed and ready to leave, and we set off. We knew we would be about fifteen minutes late for Mass at our own home parish, so we decided to attend another, nearby parish where the Mass would begin on the half-hour.

As the five of us walked into the church, a greeter, a woman, warmly welcomed us (showing a lovely interest in our children). She asked if we would like to place the baby in the parish nursery service and we did. This was a new experience for us – attending Mass without our often-times hyper-active infant. We came back into the main church as the "Glory to God" was being sung.

It was Holy Family Sunday and the priest's homily focused on the life challenges that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph often faced. He suggested we not over-romanticize the manger scene, but think instead of the difficulties Joseph and Mary faced even from the birth of Jesus: death threats, dispossession and flight to a foreign land, separation from family and loved ones at the moment of birth, uncertainty about their future, strangers in a land which had no history of hospitality to foreigners. As he preached on the Gospel text as well as the other Sunday readings, my husband took my hand. The more he spoke of the feast and the readings, the more we both realized that being a family in today's world was a similar challenge. It takes commitment, sacrificial love, and mutual support

of one another in all areas of our life – like the love and commitment exhibited by Mary and Joseph. In that moment, the Holy Family seemed more real and we both sensed that; we also began to realize how much we have been missing in our faith.

Later we processed forward for communion. Suddenly there seemed to be more of a “connect” between the Word we heard, the homily, and the Eucharist we shared.

We were so glad that we went to Mass that Sunday – it renewed in a unique way our faith and our spirit. We will continue to attend Mass at our own parish. It is our hope that perhaps we can bring some of the good things we experienced at this parish to our own faith community.

We wished to share this experience with you in the hopes that you can encourage more and more parishes to strengthen the experiences we had that Sunday: welcome, great participation by the congregation, good preaching. I know I am thinking of another gospel story, but our hearts were afire at that Mass. The living Jesus was truly present and truly alive in the Word and in the “breaking of the bread” we shared with all those who worshiped there.

OUR SUNDAY EXPERIENCE

As you can imagine, it is a joy for me to receive comments like these. Every Sunday in every parish in the Diocese of St. Petersburg should bring with it an experience in which the faithful, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, feel their hearts burning and Christ truly present in the Word, the Eucharist, and those who gather with them around these “Tables of Plenty.” The very best celebration of the Eucharist is one where the Word of God is broken open by well-prepared readers and a skillful preacher. Such an encounter enables and ennobles us to go forth and spread that Word and do that good which Jesus did during his days among us.

But none of this is possible unless we comprehend the rich meaning of the Eucharist, which must be the starting point for every celebration. A good celebration of the Eucharist is more than just good music, a wonderful worship space, a praying and participating community, great preaching, a well-appointed environment, and the reverent observance of liturgical rubrics. All of these things help. But, good Eucharistic celebrations begin with a desire within us to become one with Christ and members of the Body of Christ. These celebrations form and transform us to go forth and be Jesus to the world. Full, conscious and active participation of the faithful, which the Second Vatican Council called for in its

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, begins with our full and active awareness that this is a supreme, sublime moment in our lives.

The Eucharist is at once a great gift and a treasure to be shared. With the aid of this pastoral letter and the diocesan initiative over the next three years (“Living Eucharist: Gathered, Nourished, Sent”), all Catholics throughout the Diocese of St. Petersburg are invited to rediscover this great gift, embrace it, and never let it go. Together let us pray that this letter and our three years of study and reflection will light a flame and set our hearts on fire with a newly discovered love for and understanding of the Eucharist.

THE PURPOSE OF THIS LETTER

Both practicing Catholics and those who have distanced themselves from the faith need to reflect on the great mystery of the Eucharist which the Church celebrates. Some may say: “I used to be a Catholic but I didn’t get much out of the Mass so I don’t go anymore.” Or, “I left the Catholic Church and now attend another church where everyone seems more welcome and welcoming.” I urge such people to think twice about what they have given up in separating themselves from the Eucharist. All people of the Diocese of St. Petersburg are invited and encouraged to reflect on this great gift and treasure. Even for those who believe, our study and reflection may revive a sense of wonder, awe and gratitude for the gift which is the Eucharist.

By reflecting on this pastoral letter and making a commitment to pray and study during the next three years, it is my hope that Catholics will achieve three things: first, a better understanding and experience of Eucharist as gift; second, a desire to participate more fully, actively and regularly in a liturgy that is better understood and appreciated; third, spiritual motivation and encouragement to carry Christ, whom we receive, into the world and spread his gospel there. Let us invite those who have left the Catholic Church to return and invite those with no religious affiliation to join us in our community of faith, prayer, and love.



Photograph by Scott Sharlow

ENCOUNTERING CHRIST

At Mass we encounter the Christ who suffered, died, and rose again. Our worship is not some kind of “play-acting” or historical re-enactment of the Last Supper. It is a real encounter here and now with Jesus Christ, who lived, died, rose from the dead, and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

At the end of his life on earth, Jesus promised that he would be with us until the end of time. He remains and will remain with us in a true and substantial way until we are definitively reunited with him in eternal life. St. Paul announces this reality in his First Letter to the Corinthians: “On the night he [Jesus] was betrayed, he took bread and wine and pronounced the words, ‘This is my body...this is my blood.’”¹ These words are not just a record of something that happened a few hours before Christ died. Catholics understand them as a command to continue doing what Christ did. Sunday, the Lord’s day,² is preeminently *the* day we celebrate and live this command, responding to the Lord’s words to his disciples, “Do this in memory of me.”

Evidence of the early Christian community’s response to this command is present throughout the New Testament. There is a particularly moving example in the story of Jesus’ appearance after his resurrection to two disciples on the road to Emmaus.³ Like them, our hearts today also burn within us as the scriptures are broken open; today we too recognize the Christ in the breaking of the bread!

The apostles, the disciples, and the whole early Church took it for granted that Christ meant precisely what he said on the night before he died. They also took it to heart. Soon Christian communities everywhere were celebrating this meal, this sacrifice, that today we call the Mass. The early Church understood that the great mystery of the Eucharist was an encounter with the living Christ. At the beginning of the second century, St. Justin, Martyr wrote:

*...we encounter
the Christ
who suffered,
died,
and rose from the
dead.*

We do not consume the Eucharistic bread and wine as if it were ordinary food and drink, for we have been taught that as Jesus Christ our Savior became a man of flesh and blood by the power of the Word of God, so also the food that our flesh and blood assimilates for its nourishment becomes the flesh and blood of the Incarnate Jesus by the power of his own words contained in the prayer of Thanksgiving.⁴

St. Justin teaches what Catholics have always firmly believed: In the Eucharist we encounter and receive Jesus himself. Throughout the Gospels and Pauline letters references to “the breaking of the bread” speak to what lies at the core of every Mass. The Acts of the Apostles attests to the power of the Eucharist in the life of the early Church and its under-

standing of what it did in gathering as a Eucharistic community. “They devoted themselves to the teachings of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers.”⁵

The Eucharist is the “source and summit”⁶ of our life of faith and worship. For two thousand years the Church has celebrated this gift as a family of faith. The Eucharist nourishes, strengthens, and sustains us as food for life’s journey. Jesus assured us that his “flesh is real food and his blood is real drink.”⁷

It is an awesome reality – Christ’s sacrifice and self-offering – that we encounter at Mass. How blessed we are to be nourished and nurtured by God’s Word and Eucharist at Mass on Sunday and every day. How humbled and awed we should feel in the face of Jesus’ great commission to make present again this mystery we have received. Thanks to the gift of the Eucharist, we are never alone in our difficulties. Christ is the source of our strength, the Eucharist the source and summit of our spiritual lives.

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A BRIEF THEOLOGY OF EUCHARIST

As Catholics, we believe that in the Eucharist we really and truly encounter the living Christ – body, blood, soul, and divinity.⁸ In theological terms, Christ’s presence has often been expressed by the word “transubstantiation.” The idea is that although the appearances of bread and wine remain, the essence has become the body and blood of Christ. The use of bread and wine in this sacrament truly signifies many things – sacrifice, offering, “the work of human hands,” “the bread of life,” “spiritual drink,” meal, forgiveness, salvation. But at the core of the Eucharist is Christ – Christ whom we receive under the appearance of bread and wine. In this way we become Christ, and in becoming Christ we are called to be Christ for others.

Each celebration of the Mass must be approached with humility, reverence, and awe. At the heart of the great mystery is Christ. We listen humbly as he speaks to us in his Word. We reverently take up ordinary bread and a cup of wine – basic, common elements of our sustenance – and invoke the Spirit’s action transforming them into the sacred, the holy, the Christ. We are moved as the living Lord draws together diverse people from many different places and makes them one. Truly, “Holy

Communion” happens in this moment and place – “communion” with the God who comes to us and in union with those with whom we join in celebration. Pope John Paul II said the “Church draws her life from the Eucharist.”⁹ Thus, my beloved sisters and brothers, the Mass is intrinsically communal while at the same time a deeply personal experience of one’s own union with Christ.

While all of us are called to understand, embrace, and live the mystery of the Eucharist more perfectly, in a special way I extend an invitation to my brother priests, and I ask them to take even greater care in the celebration of this sacrament. I urge them to be at pains to clarify for their people issues that can make the difference between being present at Sunday Mass as a duty and participating joyfully in Sunday Mass as a celebration of common faith and commitment. Priests and deacons who preach the Word must be even more attentive in preparing to share God’s Word and apply it to the challenges of life today. All those with any role in preparation for and celebration of Eucharist should review the performance of their respective ministries. Among these are: welcome, music, proclamation, extraordinary Eucharistic ministry, serving at the altar, and bringing the Eucharistic Christ to the sick and the homebound.

Everyone has an important contribution to make to improve the Sunday experience of the Mass. By means of this pastoral letter and the three-year process it initiates, may all Catholics more fully understand, participate in, and receive the fruits of the Eucharist – Christ’s gift of himself for all ages.

Let us now turn our attention to specific aspects of this celebration so familiar to us, the Mass.



GATHERING AND INTRODUCTORY RITES

PREPARING FOR MASS

Well-disposed Catholics start to prepare for Mass before leaving home for church. If a family traditionally worships on Sunday, Saturday night might be a good time to begin. People should ask themselves what challenges, sorrows, and joys they bring to the Lord this week. Even if one has avoided serious sin, this preparation should include a few moments spent considering our failings, oversights, and neglect of others and of the Lord, so that these too can be presented to the Church with a humble request for God’s love, mercy, and healing.



Reading the Scriptures that will be proclaimed at Sunday Mass is a wonderful

way to prepare for the celebration.¹⁰ Having become familiar in advance with the Word of God, one is able to listen more carefully as the priest or deacon “breaks open that Word.”

One of the Second Vatican Council’s gifts to the people of God was to provide a three year cycle of readings.¹¹ Our worship also explores significantly more of God’s Word, from the Book of Genesis to the last book of the Bible, which is called the Book of Revelation. Thanks to the many and varied scriptures proclaimed at Mass, Catholics truly are people of the Word, for the Word is a major part of our weekly worship.

Catholics are also called to support the mission of their parish community by a weekly tithe or offering. Stewardship like this is our “investment” in the good work of the parish. It expresses a commitment to help build the Kingdom of God in our midst.

Before leaving home for church, it is a good idea to give some thought to the question of appropriate dress. How we dress is an external expression of our interior attitude. When we visit the Lord’s house for Mass, our

attire should be clean, neat, modest, and in good taste. Finery worn for God's glory, not our own, is not out of place.

While traveling to Church, we should try to make a transition from hectic everyday life to the serenity and peacefulness of God's house. But even when traffic and other circumstances do not cooperate, it is the effort that counts. This is easy in some cases, difficult in others.

THE COMMUNITY GATHERS

The time spent in church before Mass is not the time for catching up with friends and neighbors. That can come after the celebration. Before Mass, a word of greeting or a smile are enough to give to those sitting nearby. It is far more important to use these special moments to place oneself in the presence of God.¹²

I trust that this letter and the study and reflection that will follow its publication will move all parishes and missions to become genuinely welcoming places. The greeter at the door, the ushers, the musicians, the lectors, extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, altar servers, deacon, and priest all contribute to this.

A NOTE ABOUT MUSIC

Music is an important part of our Sunday Eucharistic celebration. Many parishes work hard to provide fine music that suits both the Mass and the congregation.



Every Sunday liturgy should have some music. The music chosen should be reverent and should be selected from the growing repertoire of approved liturgical compositions. Music serves the liturgy, but liturgical music should not be a performance. Liturgical musicians are offering their gifts to the Lord, not seeking praise, applause, or fame. Applause should never be encouraged during the celebration of the Mass. When Mass is over, after the recessional or organ solo, it is time to acknowledge those who have contributed to the musical ministry of Mass with applause or some other discreet form of thanks. I encourage parishes in the years ahead to devote even more time and effort to improving the music played and sung in our churches.

THE MASS BEGINS



Each Eucharistic celebration begins with a procession accompanied by a gathering hymn. This hymn helps to unify us as a worshipping community. Together we make the sign of the cross, a sign of our faith. Next, the priest extends a ritual greeting, and then almost immediately we pray together a penitential rite reminding us of God’s mercy and love.¹³ (In many churches, especially during the Easter Season, the liturgy begins with a Rite of Blessing and Sprinkling of Holy Water that recalls our baptism.)

On Sundays, solemnities, and some feasts, the Gloria is proclaimed, preferably through communal singing.

The priest then invites the faithful to pray together (in silence and spoken word) so that “they may be conscious of the fact that they are in God’s presence and may formulate their petitions mentally.”¹⁴ This prayer “collects” the faithful or joins them together. It also expresses the liturgy’s theme. The prayer is addressed to God the Father through Christ in the Holy Spirit. It helps people change gears and slow down, shifting from their everyday concerns to an experience of God in Word and Sacrament.



THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

The Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist form “one, single act of worship.”¹⁵ In the Word of God, the Covenant of God’s love is announced – as it was to our Jewish ancestors in faith, to the disciples, and to the members of the very early Church, so now to us in this present moment.¹⁶ In the Eucharist, this new and everlasting covenant is celebrated.

All of the actions at Mass are in some way derived from the Word of God. A prime example is the institution narrative in the Eucharistic



Prayer (“take and eat...take and drink”). The prayers that the priest proclaims at Mass, the hymns that we sing, many of the actions of priest and people and many of the signs (water, wine, bread, even standing, sitting, and kneeling) are in some way derived from scripture, from the Word of the Lord. Christ is always present in the proclamation of the

Word – “it is a living and effective word.”¹⁷

Unlike a football game, where all the action takes place on the field, the Liturgy of the Eucharist invites us as it were, to come out of the “stands” and join Christ, the priest, and our brothers and sisters on the “playing field.” A Sunday Eucharist that is celebrated well involves full, conscious, and active participation, not just passive spectatorship.¹⁸

When it comes to selecting and preparing those who will read at Mass, parishes must choose and train only persons of excellent reputation who can proclaim the Word of God with feeling, clarity, and precision.¹⁹ It is a great privilege and a great responsibility to proclaim God’s Word at Mass. Proclamation that is careful and beautiful is a key feature of a good liturgical celebration.

Over time, the Mass readings unfold a sweeping panorama of humankind’s salvation history. The first reading is from the Old Testament (except during the Easter Season, when it is from the Acts of the Apostles), the second from the experience of the new Christians as reflected in the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul, Peter, James, John, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, and the Book of Revelation.

These scriptures are so important that the Church does not allow the substitution of readings from other, non-biblical sources, no matter how lofty they may be or how seemingly fitting they may appear for a special occasion.

A lovely transition from the writings of the pre-Christian era to those of Christian times is supplied by a sung response to the first reading. Usually this transition is one of the psalms. The psalm reminds us in some way of God’s presence in our lives, in good times as well as times of struggle. In the end, the Responsorial Psalm is a hymn of hope.

The Liturgy of the Word reaches its apex with the proclamation of the Gospel, announced through the year, except during the season of Lent, with the word “Alleluia.” The congregation rises as a sign of singular respect for the Christ who now speaks to us.

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After hearing those words of truth and life, we acknowledge and praise God for them, then sit for the homily. This is an integral part of the liturgy and a necessary source of nourishment for Christian life. Good preaching provides a faith-filled application of the Word to life. It guides us in the passage from contemplating God’s Word to taking ownership of it and then applying it. A good homily begins with the Scripture themes of the day and relates them to daily life. There is no mistaking a good homily when we hear it – or a poor one either.



Photograph by Scott Sharlow

The Liturgy of the Word continues with the assembly’s common response to the Scriptures. This communal assent takes the form of the Profession of Faith or Creed. It is a pivotal moment in our movement from being hearers to doers of the Word. The Liturgy of the Word concludes with intercessory prayers for Church leadership, the world, our neighbors, and the dead (who are united with us in the communion of saints). It is said that the best petitions are created with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. These prayers express not only trust in God’s goodness but commitment to pray and care for the least of our brothers and sisters.

THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

At various times during his public ministry Jesus exhibited a concern for feeding and nourishing the people. He fed thousands who gathered to listen to his preaching with only five loaves of bread and two fish. At the Last Supper, too, he used common elements – bread and wine – not just to satisfy the apostles’ physical hunger, but also to nourish them with his own Body and Blood. Now we join countless generations before us in taking Jesus at his word: by the power of the Holy Spirit, acting in the Eucharistic Prayer of the gathered Church, bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ, his continuing presence in the Eucharist. Nor is this the only transformation at Mass. Those who gather also are transformed. As St. Augustine said, at the Eucharistic celebration, “we are to become what we receive.”²⁰

PREPARATION OF THE GIFTS

The Eucharistic liturgy begins with the preparation of the gifts. Representatives of the congregation bring forward the bread and wine in a procession that anticipates the procession of God’s people at communion time. The focus of attention shifts



Photograph by Scott Sharlow

now from the “ambo” (the place in the sanctuary where God’s Word is proclaimed) to the altar. By long custom, this is also the time when the offertory collection takes place. On special occasions, incense is used at this point to remind us of the sweet-smelling offering being made to God – the offering of Christ himself.

THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER

Now the Eucharistic Prayer begins. This is a prayer of all the people, led by the priest. The assembly participates by prayerful listening, by sung and spoken responses, and even by their posture.

THE PARTS OF THE EUCHARISTIC PRAYER ARE AS FOLLOWS:

Thanksgiving – The whole prayer is literally a “thanksgiving” prayer. We give thanks to God for the work of salvation (we call this the “paschal mystery”).

Acclamation – The gathered assembly joins together in a song of praise and thanksgiving. The acclamation “Holy, Holy, Holy...” reminds us that the earthly liturgy is united with the heavenly.

Epiclesis – Our prayer, our transformation, our incorporation into this mystery is only made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Institution narrative and Consecration – We recall what Christ did before he died and we carry on what he commanded us to do.

Anamnesis – The Church recalls and remembers the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Through this remembrance, the faithful are truly and really united with the resurrected Christ.

Offering – Not only is this sacrifice offered to the Father, through the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit, but the faithful offer themselves. We commit ourselves to be more like Christ. We also share in his union with the Father, through the Son, and by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Intercession – This prayer unites us with all the faithful. We pray for the Church universal and for its universal pastor, the Holy Father, for its local successor of the apostles, the bishop, and for its clergy and for all the faithful, those living and those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith in death.

Final Doxology – The prayer concludes by offering praise to the Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We give our assent to all that has been said or prayed in the “Great Amen.”

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The Eucharistic Prayer highlights the communal aspect of the liturgy: “*We* come to you Father... *We* ask you to bless and accept these gifts... *We* offer them in spirit and in truth.” That we worship as a community at Mass cannot be emphasized too strongly. The liturgy is truly “the work of the

people” led by the priest and made possible by the power of the Holy Spirit. It belongs to all the baptized, speaks to and from the heart of them all, and proclaims the faith of all. Yet at the same time there could be no Eucharist without the ministerial priesthood. The priest is our spiritual father, leading us in the celebration and acting in the person of Christ.²¹

After the “prayer before the meal” called the Preface, the Liturgy’s words and actions become more full of mystery and especially rich in meaning. Our gathering is a meal. We are invited to participate in the central action of the Last Supper, when Jesus “broke bread.” Our gathering is also a sacrifice. It makes sacramentally present the sublime sacrifice of Jesus on Calvary, when he poured out his blood for us, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. The prayers also recall that Jesus rose from the dead, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come again. The liturgy is rooted in this “paschal mystery” – the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. And although these events took place at a particular moment in time, our Eucharistic liturgy re-presents them, as it were, thereby renewing and transforming the Church. We human beings cannot fully comprehend or grasp what happens at Mass, but every time we gather to worship, we have the opportunity to experience the mystery anew.

Each of the Eucharistic Prayers approved for use in the liturgy contains these essential elements, though sometimes in a slightly altered order. At the next few Sunday Masses you might find it helpful to listen carefully to the prayers and pick out these various elements.

Above all, the Eucharistic Prayer is a prayer of thanks (the word Eucharist itself means “thanksgiving”). We give thanks for the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. We thank God for the new life that comes to us through this “new and everlasting covenant.” We are grateful for God’s presence in and with the Church and that Christ continues to intercede for it. Our hearts naturally brim with gratitude as we break the bread and share the cup. In and through this mystery our lives have been changed.

While we pray the Eucharistic Prayer, fundamentally it is the Holy Spirit who prays in and among us. Our prayer is only possible through the presence and power of the Spirit in “epiclesis.”

Finally, but certainly not least, the Eucharistic Prayer is a memorial. “Anamnesis” or memorial in this special sense means that when the community, drawn together to celebrate the Eucharist, “remembers” what Jesus did at the Last Supper, on Calvary, and in his resurrection from the dead, it is not merely recalling past events but making them truly, sacramentally present here and now. We proclaim, “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” This Christ, who is everything to us, is with us until the end of time – and then for all eternity.

Jesus literally loved us to death. Now he is present in the assembly gathered for Mass, in the proclamation of the Word, and “especially in the Eucharistic species.”²² Believing this, we prepare ourselves to receive his Body and his Blood and in doing so, to enter into a still deeper unity with one another. This unity obliges us to treat our brothers and sisters in Christ as we would treat Christ himself.

COMMUNION RITE

The Communion Rite begins with the common recitation of the Our Father, the Lord’s Prayer. From the earliest days of the Church, this prayer has been used as a means of reconciliation, with the Father and among the Church’s members. What better way to prepare to partake in this heavenly banquet? In the prayers that follow the Our Father, we ask Christ to look not on our sins but on our faith and help us live in peace and harmony with all humankind. In this spirit, we offer one another a sign of peace.



Photograph by Scott Sharlow

After the sign of peace, we sing the “Lamb of God.” The priest breaks the host, the Body of Christ, dividing the pieces among the special vessels called ciboria from which they are distributed. The gospel

story of the Road to Emmaus is a vivid account of an incident in which the living Christ was recognized in this same breaking of the bread. This is understandable, for the breaking of the bread reminds us of other times that Jesus broke bread – the Last Supper and the feeding of the multitudes. It reminds us, too, of Christ’s body broken on the cross²³ and of our own bodies, broken by the trials of life and the weight of sin, then knit together by the Lord who comes again to feed, nourish, and nurture us.

Older Catholics remember when a rigorous Eucharistic fast was observed before receiving communion – no food or water from midnight until after the Eucharist was received. This fast, now reduced to a mere hour, underlines the sacredness of the Eucharist.

Now we receive Holy Communion. As St. Augustine says, not only do we receive the Christ, but we hope to become the Christ we receive.

If you are the body and members of Christ, then what is laid on the Lord’s table is the sacrament of what you yourselves are, and it is the sacrament of what you are that you receive. It is to what you yourselves are that you answer “Amen” and this answer is your affidavit. Be a member of Christ’s body, so that your “Amen” may be authentic.²⁴

Photograph by Scott Sharlow



Again there is a procession – this time, of God’s people coming to receive Christ’s Body and Blood. Usually a song highlighting the reality of the Eucharist and the communal dimension of what is taking place is sung.

Receiving Communion naturally fills us with joy – joy that is expressed in a song of thanksgiving. While there should be time for private prayer after Communion, the Church in its wisdom urges us also

to sing, and it is only right that we should.²⁵

Christ is truly present under both species, bread and wine. In most parishes of the Diocese of St. Petersburg, however, commendable efforts have been made to offer Christ’s Body and his precious Blood to the faithful. As Pope Benedict recently said, receiving the Eucharist under both species is the “fullest form of participation in the Eucharist.”²⁶ With the publication of this pastoral letter, all parishes are again requested to make Holy Communion available under both species at daily



Photograph by Scott Sharlow

and Sunday celebrations of Mass. Not to do so should be the exception, not the rule.

In the United States, the proper posture for receiving is standing. (No one who insists on kneeling to receive will be prevented, but people who feel this way should understand that what they are doing is not the proper practice, is no more reverent than standing, and may be a source of distraction or perhaps even danger to others). Before receiving, one should make a slight, reverent bow. When we respond to the words, “The Body of Christ” and “The Blood of Christ,” our “Amen” declares our faith that Christ is truly present. It also acknowledges our union in and with the Body of Christ and expresses our hope concerning what we wish to become.²⁷

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It is said that familiarity breeds contempt. It is crucial that none of us – bishop, priests, deacons, faithful – fall into the trap of receiving communion as if it were just one more thing we do at Mass. We must approach this moment with a vivid awareness of how sacred it is. Christ makes our bodies his tabernacle. What further incentive do we need to engage in serious self-examination concerning how we treat one another? The Christ who dwells in us is, after all, the Christ who also dwells in our sisters and brothers.

Mindful of the great mystery celebrated at each Mass, no one should receive Holy Communion if he or she is aware of having committed serious sin that has not yet been confessed or forgiven. While the Eucharist itself is a channel of God’s forgiveness and all of us can and do speak the truth in praying, “Lord, I am not worthy, but only say the word and I shall be healed,” Catholics who have committed mortal sin are obliged to approach the Sacrament of Penance before receiving the Eucharist. The Sacrament of Penance is the means established by Christ himself for the sinner to experience God’s immeasurable forgiveness and be reconciled with the community of faith.

With most people most of the time, nevertheless, it is reasonable to hope that their faults and failings do not reach the level of mortal sin.²⁸

Reflection on our personal lives – during the Rite of Penance, the Sign of Peace, before joining in the procession to receive Holy Communion – makes us aware of our failings and will move us to turn to the mercy, compassion, pardon, and forgiveness of our God.

It is important to be aware that this brief moment in which we call to mind our sins does not substitute for sacramental reconciliation. In these few seconds we simply ask God’s pardon for those less serious acts of omission and commission that are sinful but not seriously or mortally so. Nor does the priest absolve from serious sin in praying, *May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins and bring us to everlasting life.*

A simple prayer concludes the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Only after this prayer should brief announcements, if any, be made.

THE CONCLUDING RITE

The Mass, however, is not yet over.²⁹ After one last greeting the priest blesses us with the sign of the cross. This sacramental sign reminds us that in all things – our beginning, our end, birth and death, dying and rising – we are Christ’s.

Finally, the words “The Mass is ended go in peace.”, “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.” or something similar, are spoken to remind us that we carry Christ - whom we have just received - with us into the world. The mission of the Church is the mission of Christ, and each of us as a member of the Church has his or her special work to do in proclaiming and living the Church’s mission of healing, mercy, justice, and proclaiming the Good News.

Pope John Paul II often spoke of the “liturgy after the Liturgy.”³⁰ He meant that all of us are sent out into the world to be evangelizers – where we work, where we live, where we recreate, where we learn. Evangelizing involves serving those in need, building a more just society, and reaching out to the poor and marginalized in response to the Church’s social teaching. In this way what takes place in church during the Eucharist enters into the mainstream of daily life.³¹

As Pope Benedict says, “the love that we celebrate in the sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves...Missionary outreach is thus an essential part of the Eucharistic form of the Christian life.”³²

I realize that there are many things to do after Mass – places to go, people to see, obligations to attend to. Still, to the extent that circumstances permit, I encourage and ask those who can to remain for a few moments of silent thanksgiving – a very special time of personal encounter with the Lord. And now, having prayed with our sisters and brothers in faith,

listened to God’s Word, recalled Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary, and “remembered” his Last Supper, we leave church fortified, refreshed, and renewed, ready to be Christ to others.

DAILY MASS AND EUCHARISTIC DEVOTIONS

Some Catholics are fortunate enough to be able to attend Mass daily or at least several times a week. This exemplary practice expresses a love for the Eucharist. Others stop in at churches or chapels to spend time in private adoration. This is also a praiseworthy thing to do. Spending longer periods of prayer before the exposed Blessed Sacrament, along with Benediction, is another longstanding practice encouraged by this diocese according to the norms of the universal Church.³³

Private adoration and extended exposition of the Blessed Sacrament do not stand apart from the Eucharistic celebration but are in continuity with it. They seek to move hearts and minds to a more fruitful celebration of the Mass, which remains the principal act of worship performed by God’s people [cf. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, #13].

THREE YEARS OF EUCHARISTIC FOCUS

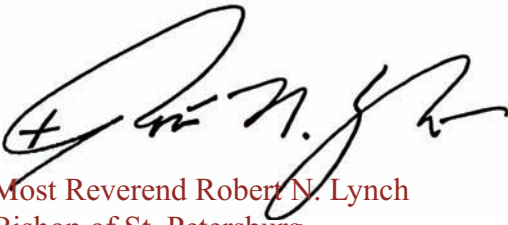
The publication of this pastoral letter marks the official, formal beginning of a three-year period of intense reflection on the Mass. Catechesis on the Eucharist will be examined and strengthened during this time, beginning with the instruction of first communicants – and their parents – and extending through elementary school, high school, and religious education programs. I am requiring all teachers and catechists, ordained and laity, to take part in this sustained effort to know and love the Eucharist better so that they can help others know and love it better, too.

The program’s first year will concentrate on the first pillar of the Mass, the Liturgy of the Word. The second year will focus on the second pillar, the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The final year will consider what it means to carry the Christ whom we receive in Communion out into the world, e.g. the ministries of mercy and justice. At the end of three years a special diocesan celebration of the Eucharist will give thanks for the new and deeper understanding of what it means to be a Eucharistic people which – please God – we will all by then have achieved. I ask that in preparation for the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Diocese of St. Petersburg in 2018, the faithful of this diocese concentrate in the next three years on the cornerstone of our Catholic faith – *that gift of finest wheat* which is Jesus Christ himself. Jesus told us, “Come, follow me.” Let us prayerfully support one another on this journey of faith. Ideally, every Mass should be a life-altering experience. Our hearts should be on

fire as we celebrate the Word, and meet Jesus in the breaking of the bread.

Nourished by the Eucharist, may we go out into the world to share the Good News and transform the face of the earth in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.

Given on the Solemnity of Christ the King, this 25th day of November, 2007.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "R. N. Lynch". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large initial "R" and "N".

Most Reverend Robert N. Lynch
Bishop of St. Petersburg

PASTORAL APPLICATIONS

I wish to express the following as anticipated applications of the Living Eucharist Initiative in our diocese, especially in regards to the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist.

PREPARATION AND HOSPITALITY

- Each parish community is encouraged to be open and welcoming to all: parishioners, strangers, visitors, and those who have fallen away or are alienated from the Catholic faith. Parishes are to develop intentional programs that reach out and invite Catholics as well as all people to participate in the fullness of the Catholic faith.
- In order to build community and better utilize parish resources, parishes are to review their schedule of weekend Masses to determine if fewer Masses can appropriately serve the parish.
- “Liturgical services are not private functions, but celebrations belonging to the Church” (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, No. 26); therefore, parishes should make provisions for communal celebrations that are available to the whole parish and not just special groups or interests.
- Each parish is to have a liturgy committee and the members should receive training in liturgy and education about church documents. The purpose of the liturgy committee is to prepare the Sunday celebration in accord with the seasons. The Church’s liturgy is already planned, allowing for options. The liturgy committee would evaluate specific liturgical celebrations and seasons in order to identify opportunities for enhancement.
- All liturgical ministers are to be well trained for their particular ministry and, when offered, they should participate in diocesan workshops focused on their ministry. Each parish should appoint someone who will be responsible for the recruitment, training, and ongoing formation of its liturgical ministers.
- The faithful should strive to come prepared for Sunday Eucharist by reviewing the Sunday readings in advance, reflecting on their personal shortcomings during the week, being on time for Mass, staying to its completion, and by coming appropriately dressed (i.e. not in casual or recreational clothing).

CONCERNING THE CELEBRATION OF MASS

- Parishes are to strive to make their weekend liturgies an experience that spiritually feeds the parishioners.
- Music is to be chosen that relates to either the readings for the day, the liturgical season or the particular focus of the celebration.
- Communal music is to be chosen that encourages the active participation of the faithful. The selection of music is to be based on the threefold judgments expressed in the 1972 bishops' document, *Music in Catholic Worship*, i.e., its musical, liturgical and pastoral appropriateness for Catholic worship.
- Priests, deacons, musicians/cantors and readers are to be mindful of the places in the liturgy that call for prayerful silence; most notably within the Act of Penitence, after the invitation to pray, between the scripture readings, after the homily, and after Communion. These are reflective moments that do not need to be rushed.
- The Word of God is to be proclaimed well and the homily should be thoughtful and applicable to the faithful.
- Where called for, the liturgical symbols and gestures are to be used lavishly.
- Communion under both kinds is the norm for all Eucharistic celebrations in the Diocese of St. Petersburg.
- The bread and wine used for the communion of the faithful should be consecrated at the Mass they are attending; taking the reserved sacrament from the tabernacle during Mass is to be the exception.

THE MISSION TO “LIVE OUT” EUCHARISTIC FAITH

- Every parish in the Diocese of St. Petersburg is expected to embrace the Living Eucharist initiative. During this process, parishes and schools, in partnership with the appropriate diocesan offices, will identify and implement evangelizing processes that strengthen sacramental, catechetical, and outreach ministries.
- Because of the inseparable connection between the liturgy and service, parishes should:
 - Renew their efforts to build and/or strengthen existing parish ministries that reach out to the poor and marginalized;
 - Develop ministries with action plans that promote and build a just and merciful society.

STUDY QUESTIONS

GATHERING AND INTRODUCTORY RITES

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following questions. Then share your thoughts.

1. Being well-prepared helps us to experience and participate in events more fully. How do you prepare for Sunday Mass?
2. What does your parish do to make you feel welcomed and drawn together as a community before the beginning of Mass? What could it do to improve a spirit of welcome?
3. Before Mass begins, do you greet those around you, including those you do not know? If not, what do you feel prevents you from doing so?
4. What ritual elements, gestures, or prayers of the Introductory Rites help you to enter into the Mass and focus on your participation in this act of worship?
5. What is the benefit of the Act of Penitence in helping you to focus on this act of worship and your relationship with God and others? What is the significance and meaning of the ritual sprinkling with holy water that is sometimes used at the start of Mass?

THE LITURGY OF THE WORD

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following questions. Then share your thoughts.

1. Preparing the Sunday readings beforehand can happen individually or in community. What are some of the opportunities available to break open the word in our various settings and how might we invite others to participate?
2. The Church tells us “Christ is present in his Word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church.”
 - a. How is the proclamation of the Word given due reverence in your parish?
 - b. Are the readers well-trained so that the faithful are able to listen to the Word proclaimed instead of reading along in the missalette?
 - c. Do the readers participate in diocesan and/or parish workshops?

3. Liturgical silence is important to the Liturgy of the Word. Where might your parish incorporate moments of liturgical silence during the Liturgy of the Word?
4. The homily is an integral part of the liturgy and a source where the mysteries of our faith and principles of Christian living are expounded.
 - a. Is the Sunday homily in your parish well-prepared and does it develop an aspect of the Scriptures or the day/season of the church year?
 - b. How could we assist the homilist with his preparation?
5. Is the Liturgy of the Word a place where evangelization occurs in your parish?
 - a. Does the Liturgy of the Word lead the faithful to wholehearted praise and thanksgiving during the Liturgy of the Eucharist?
 - b. Does it lead us to reflect upon our baptismal call?
 - c. Do the homily and the prayers of the faithful connect the faithful with current world and local issues?

THE LITURGY OF THE EUCHARIST

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following questions. Then share your thoughts.

1. What is the significance of the procession and presentation of the gifts of bread, wine, and the offertory contributions of the community during the Preparation of the Gifts?
2. What ritual elements, actions or prayers of the Liturgy of the Eucharist are most meaningful to you? Why?
3. What are the parts of the Eucharistic Prayer? What is the significance and meaning of each of these parts?
4. What is your experience of the Eucharistic Prayer as bringing forth the meal, memorial, sacrifice and thanksgiving aspects of the act of worship?
5. As you join your brothers and sisters in the Communion Procession, are you led into this mystery of the present and risen Lord in the Eucharist?
 - a. What is your experience?
 - b. Does it effect how you live your life during the rest of the week?

THE CONCLUDING RITES

Take a few moments of silence to reflect on the following questions. Then share your thoughts.

1. What is the purpose of the dismissal? How do you understand your role as a disciple?
2. How are you already helping to bring about the Kingdom of God?
3. What motivates you to engage in works of charity and justice?
4. Pope John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Letter, *Dies Domini* (On Keeping the Lord's Day Holy), "The Eucharistic celebration does not stop at the church door" and that there is "the liturgy after the Liturgy." What does this mean for you?
5. How does your faith community challenge you to be a better follower of Christ?
 - a. How might your faith community better respond to the needs of the world?
 - b. What are some concrete ways that we, as a parish community, might invite and encourage each other to be Eucharist to one another and to the world?

NOTES

¹ 1 Corinthians 11:23

² John Paul II, *Dies Domini*

³ Luke 24:13-35

⁴ *First Apology*, 66

⁵ Acts of the Apostles 2:42

⁶ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 10

⁷ John 6:55

⁸ *Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church*, p.29 and *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1374

⁹ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 1

¹⁰ Sources readily available for preparing by reading in advance the Scriptures are [Magnificat](#); the website of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops [[uscgb.org](#)]; *missalette*s, etc.

¹¹ Previously less than half of the Gospels were publicly proclaimed at Sunday Mass, 15% of the Old Testament, and 30% of the Letters of St. Paul, Hebrews, James, John and Peter. Today in the new Lectionary used throughout the three year cycle, about 95% of the four Gospels, and much larger percentages of the Old Testament and New Testament letters and the Book of Revelation are used. Today, Catholics too hear, respect and meditate on the Word!

¹² I have long admired the sacrifice and challenge of young families in just coming to Mass on Sunday. When I notice young parents with small children entering the church for Mass, I am deeply moved, knowing as I do what has certainly preceded this moment

— getting the children up, fed, dressed and off to Mass. There are moments when I suspect that it would be no exaggeration to call this sacrifice “heroic.” I salute each and every one of you, of whatever age, for whom just coming to Mass is a challenge to which you so generously respond.

¹³ The Act of Penitence is, as the title implies, a means for the faithful to seek God’s mercy and forgiveness for their sins; praise and thanksgiving for the gift of salvation also are a part of it. Certainly, several of the tropes used in this rite imply praise and thanksgiving in addition to seeking and experiencing God’s mercy.

¹⁴ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 54

¹⁵ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 56

¹⁶ “Covenant” means a contract or promise of binding relationship of love between God and his people. The first Covenant was a kind of pact made between God and Abraham and his descendants whereby God promised to remain with his people unconditionally forever. Israel understood this special relationship as placing them in a most favored relationship with God. The New Covenant came in the person of the long awaited Messiah, Jesus. In sending his only Son to assume our human nature and experience our human challenges of life and death, God renewed his covenant in and through a person, Christ.

¹⁷ *Hebrews 4:12*

¹⁸ *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 14

¹⁹ Refer to Guidelines for Readers, Diocese of St. Petersburg ([www.dioceseofstpete.org](#))

²⁰ Sermon, 272 as quoted in the THE EUCHARIST by Robert Cabie; vol. 2 of [The Church at Prayer: An Introduction to the Liturgy](#), pg. 118 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986).

²¹ In underlining this point about the essential requirement of a priest for the celebration of the Eucharist, I ask all our people to pray and work for an increase in vocations to the ministerial priesthood. In the Diocese of St. Petersburg, we have been spared in the last decade such practices as *Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest* thanks to the generosity of retired priests who help in our parishes and foreign born priests from India, Poland, Africa, Central and South America. However, without a significant increase of men studying for the priesthood for this diocese, it is possible that in a few years we will be a missionary Church of the receiving sort (as opposed to the traditional practice of being a “sending” Church) and some parishes may on occasion have to forego a Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. Vocation recruitment is the task of all in this local Church. While I work as hard as I can to encourage young men to consider priesthood and young women to consider religious life, in the end if Catholics want the Eucharist, they must be willing to pray and to encourage their sons to consider devoting their lives as priests to the service of Christ in his Church.

²² *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 7

²³ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 83

²⁴ Sermon, 272 as quoted in the *THE EUCHARIST* by Robert Cabie; vol. 2 of *The Church at Prayer: An Introduction to the Liturgy*, pg. 118 (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1986).

²⁵ *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 86; *Music in Catholic Worship*, 62

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 48 (cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 85)

²⁷ Refer to Guidelines for Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion, Diocese of St. Petersburg, pp. 6-7

²⁸ It is important to note that the “proper disposition” for the reception of Holy Communion involves a number of important aspects. Freedom from mortal sin is a necessary prerequisite. So is baptism into the Roman Catholic community and its concomitant belief in the Real Presence. Sadly some are prohibited from receiving Holy Communion because of irregular marriages (that is marriage involving a baptized Catholic performed outside the Sacrament of Marriage as defined and required by the Church). Couples involved in second marriage without having received an annulment often find themselves in this situation. Our diocesan Marriage Tribunal works very hard in helping couples in this situation regularize their marriage situation and I beg those who cannot receive Holy Communion because of this impediment to avail themselves of this healing ministry of the Church and diocese. Even if a couple is barred from receiving the Eucharist, they are still welcome among our praying community.

Also I have in my mind at this moment many faithful people who attend Mass with a Catholic spouse but out of respect for the great reverence we hold for belief in the Eucharist, find themselves unable to partake of Holy Communion with their Catholic spouse and sometimes even their children. Believe me I pray for that day when all may be one and this impediment no longer stands. Until that time I want you to know how welcome you are among us even though you cannot process with us to the altar for receiving Holy Communion.

Finally, much time and discussion recently have been devoted in the United States to the situation of Catholics in public office who take positions and actions directly contrary to Church teaching (the most familiar cases are Catholic politicians who by vote or rhetoric support abortion on demand). Catholics elected to political office should understand that they do not leave their Catholic faith in the anteroom before being sworn in. Their actions can and do give scandal to a faith community which values the sanctity of human life from conception to natural death. Should they choose to disregard, ignore or dismiss the teachings of their Church on such core beliefs, they should not approach the Eucharist. It is not within the province of others to deny them the Eucharist at the altar, but it remains principally my responsibility to dialogue with them and to encourage them to give up their error and accept the truth. I admire our Catholic women and men in political life who embrace the moral principles and teachings of their Church.

²⁹ Imagine yourself as a guest of the President of the United States at a State Dinner for the Queen of England in the White House. Would you leave early? Would you leave before the President, First Lady and Queen? Hardly. To leave Mass before its conclusion, the final blessing, dismissal and closing hymn indicates a lack of appreciation for the Lord’s presence. I ask those who may have gotten into the habit of hurrying out of Church before Mass is over to reconsider this unfortunate practice.

³⁰ Message to the people of Spain on the First Anniversary of the 45th Eucharistic Congress in Seville, June 5, 1994

³¹ Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 89

³² Benedict XVI, *Sacramentum Caritatis*, 84

³³ Guidelines “Concerning Eucharistic Adoration, Exposition, and Benediction,” Diocese of St. Petersburg; “Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside of Mass”



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