Pastoral Letter on the Holy Eucharist and Sunday Mass Attendance

July 2010

Dear Parishioners,

Peace of Christ!

God has expressed His love to us in so many ways. As His children, we follow His example in expressing love ourselves—We give gifts. Of course, God’s gifts are greater in every way. The greatest gift of all is the gift of Himself. He communicates His own life to us by imparting grace, a share of His life, in various ways, and especially in those special gifts, the Seven Sacraments of the Church. In each Sacrament we meet Christ. The life of the Father is shared with us. The Holy Spirit acts in powerful ways to effect in us the promise, the guaranteed results of what the Church teaches each of the Sacraments does. We celebrate Sacraments not in order to make God do what we want or to give us something, as if He were on our string and had to jump when we pull it. It is the other way around. We, the Church, act in response to His command to do what He says. He has given the Church His Sacraments, “super channels of grace,” and promises to bless us in powerful ways when we celebrate them as He has told us.

The greatest of all the gifts God has given to us is the gift of His Son. This Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, took complete human nature by the power of the Holy Spirit from the flesh of the Blessed Virgin Mary, God’s Mother and ours. In becoming man, the Son, Jesus, obeyed the will of the Father in all things. Ultimately, He would suffer and die on the Cross, then rise from the dead and ascend to the right hand of the Father where He receives the worship of all.

On the night before He died, Jesus celebrated the Passover Supper with His Apostles. At that Supper, He gave us the Sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and the Priesthood. When He said over the bread and wine, “This is my Body.... This is my Blood....,” the bread was changed into His Body, the wine was changed into His Blood. This is the Sacrament of the Eucharist. When He told the Apostles, the first of those who share the fullness of Christ’s priesthood as bishops, to “Do this in memory of me,” He gave to the Church a sharing in the Priesthood that is His, and manifested His intention that this offering, this sacrifice, this sacred meal of His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity should be celebrated in the Church to the end of time. This is the Mass.

In the Mass, Christ acts through the ministry of the priest. He accomplishes the miracle of the complete change of the bread and wine into His Body and Precious Blood. This miracle cannot be perceived with the physical eye. It can only be grasped by faith. Even so, we are not capable of ever fully explaining or comprehending the depth of this mystery.

Every Sunday (or anticipated Sunday Mass celebrated on Saturday evening) we Catholics gather to celebrate this feast of Love, this Mystery of Faith. I write to remind and instruct our whole parish of the importance of participating every Sunday.

The Apostles and the entire early Christian community celebrated the Eucharist on the day we call Sunday. For awhile, they also still met with other Jews on the Saturday Sabbath, but knew that the Lord had fulfilled His promise to send a Messiah, and more, that Jesus, the Messiah, was indeed God! Because the Lord rose from the dead on Easter Sunday, the Christian community “broke bread” on that day, that is, celebrated the Mass, the Eucharist. Is has been so and will remain so.

The Mass is a re-presentation to us of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus. In this great mystery, and by God’s power alone, we are mystically loosed from the restrictions of time and space. We are present to, and participate in these saving mysteries. It is not that we believe that Jesus suffers, dies and rises again at the Mass, repeatedly over time. Rather, His Church, at each Mass participates repeatedly in the same saving events. When we participate at Mass we, too, are present in the heavenly liturgy of praise.
of the Father, in the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit. We join the angels and saints in Heaven at the throne of God. How is this possible? Only by God’s power. Why? Only because of His love.

There is no greater expression of God’s Love accessible to us this side of Heaven than the Mass. In addition, we are commanded by God to worship Him, and the Church follows this command in the celebration of the Sunday Mass. Sadly, some of us do not take seriously this divine command. It is a most serious and grave obligation besides being the supreme opportunity to receive the greatest Love the world will ever know. And we can’t get it any other place or in any other way.

I want to clearly present what the constant teaching of the Church is regarding the Sunday Eucharist.

First, the third commandment of God is to keep holy the Sabbath day. This is a divine command, and a grave obligation.

Second, the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is the Sacrament of the Lord’s Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. He has told us in the Gospel of St. John, Chapter 6, that to have life within us we must eat His Body and drink His Blood. Of course, we must receive Him worthily to gain grace.

Third, once we have reached the age of reason, usually regarded as age 7, and having received First Penance and First Holy Communion, each individual Catholic is required to participate in Mass on Sunday, unless prevented by circumstances out of our control, or which are correspondingly as grave as the obligation, or unless the serious demands of charity prevent our attendance. If we miss Mass out of a frivolous reason, or from laziness, we commit mortal sin.

Some questions and answers based on attitudes I have observed, or conversations I have had with people, might clarify some aspects of this important pastoral matter:

Do I have to go to Mass every Sunday, or attend one of the Masses on Saturday afternoon/evening? Yes.

What if I have company at the house, and they don’t go to Mass? You still have the obligation to attend. Every Christian is responsible to God first. We also have an obligation to give witness of God’s will. Going to Mass when everybody else remains home can be a powerful influence, a channel of grace that God can use to awaken others to their responsibilities to God. If we fail to attend Mass, we give scandal by reinforcing in others the attitude that the Sunday Mass is dispensable, in addition to our own sin of neglecting the Mass.

What if I’m out of town or traveling? No matter where we are, we still must go to Mass. We have the obligation of trying to find a Mass celebrated in our area. If we are a hundred miles from anywhere, up in the mountains camping, that’s one thing. But if our travels have taken us somewhere we can get to Mass, we must attend.

What if I’m sick? There is never sin involved if a person is sick. Even if someone is getting over a sickness, and could still infect others, as in the case of flu, it is OK to stay home. But remember, it’s still Sunday, and we should offer the Lord extra prayers to honor Him.

What if someone else is sick, or so dependent on me that I can’t leave him/her? That’s a serious demand of charity, and no sin not to go to Mass.
What if I’m too busy? What’s more important than God and fulfilling His commands? Rarely circumstances do arise that make it impossible to attend. We should still try to arrange our schedule to meet our duties to God. It has been my personal experience that even in the case of work, most employers will respect an employee’s sincere desire to attend religious services on Sunday, and will arrange a work schedule to provide the time. It’s not always possible, but it’s worth a try. If a schedule really can’t be changed, and there is no opportunity to attend Mass at another time, there is no sin. I would also say, that if you are really too busy to attend Mass, you really are too busy, and your health, and family life certainly are severely suffering. Even if we are very busy, don’t we somehow find time to do what we want to do? Most people who say they are too busy to go to Church are just self-willed, and don’t want to go. It’s the most unimaginative excuse. Be more creative. Why not tell everyone you were abducted by aliens?

Did the early Christians think going to Mass on Sunday, celebrating the Eucharist, was important? First, Jesus wouldn’t have commanded the Apostles to offer the Eucharist if He didn’t want them to do it. The early Christians did this each Sunday in homes. See Acts 2:42. “They devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles, and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread (Eucharist), and to the prayers.” St. Paul writes of the Eucharist and its celebration in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, in which he recounts the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, and continues, “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes.” (V. 26) The Letter to the Hebrews also states, “We should not stay away from our assembly (the worship assembly of the Christian community, the Mass as the highest, most perfect form of worship), as is the custom of some, but encourage one another.....” (Heb 10:25).

What does it mean to receive the Eucharist worthily? It means that each of us must be free from mortal sin to receive the Holy Eucharist, or else we commit a sacrilege, which is the abuse of something holy. If I know I have committed mortal sin, I may not receive Holy Communion until I have repented and been absolved of my sins in the sacrament of Penance (Confession). We must follow the teaching of the Church in these matters, and judge our sins according to the Church’s teaching, not by how we feel about things, how we would like things to be, or how others have told us things should be. If we are in doubt, we must seek guidance from someone who will guide us in the ways of the Church, not according to personal opinion. St. Paul warned Christians (1 Cor 11:27-32) to examine themselves thoroughly before receiving the Eucharist. He writes that whoever “eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will answer for the Body and Blood of the Lord.” He goes on to say that “who eats and drinks without discerning the Body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.” The documents that we have from the earliest times of the Church call for repentance of sin before receiving the Eucharist, and those who do not must not receive. St. John Chrysostom (born 344-54, died 407 A.D.), compared the unworthy recipient to Judas, Christ’s betrayer.

If I can’t receive Holy Communion because I have not been to Confession, or am living in a manner that I will not change that I know the Church teaches is mortally sinful, do I still have to attend Mass? Yes. The obligation still applies even if you may not receive Holy Communion. Besides, at Mass we are in a place to hear God’s word proclaimed, and to receive the graces of conversion that the Holy Spirit bestows in the community worship. The celebration of the Mass is important for all because we are in the community of the Church where we are loved, and where great spiritual things happen. If we stay away, we make it impossible for these things to happen. Maybe that’s where God wants us so that He can communicate a special grace for conversion to us.
If I've been away from Mass for a long time, or even once, can't I just start over, and begin going to Mass again and start receiving Holy Communion? Start coming to Mass right away, but as in the case of any other mortal sin, ask God’s forgiveness immediately, but you must have all your mortal sins forgiven in the sacrament of Penance before you resume receiving Holy Communion again. Pope John Paul II wrote in *Dominicae cenae*, 24 February 1980, “But we must always take care that this great meeting with Christ in the Eucharist does not become a mere habit, and that we do not receive Him unworthily, that is to say, in the state of mortal sin. The practice of the virtue of penance and the Sacrament of Penance are essential for sustaining in us and continually deepening that spirit of veneration which man owes to God Himself, and to His love so marvelously revealed.” (Para. 7)

I’m a parent, and I don’t always go to Mass. God holds parents accountable for the spiritual formation of their children. This is a grave responsibility. God has entrusted to parents not just a little body and personality, but He has placed into the hands of parents, their children’s immortal souls. No one can take the place of parents. If the parents don’t teach living faith by example, they are really handing their children over to Satan. Does this sound too extreme? Think about it. In the first place, he’s happy that the parent is committing mortal sin. He’s got his hooks into that one pretty good. Now he can use the neglectful parent to get at the kids, especially the sons if the father is away from living the Faith. What a great setup for the devil! Two, or three, or more fall just because one, the father, has been sucked in. If the Eucharist is not important enough to parents that they insure they are there every Sunday, what will it mean to their children? Parents who do this really teach their children that they can override the wisdom of the Church and the command of God, by their own personal prideful decision and attitudes. This then infects every other aspect of life and any other teaching of the Church, that is really God’s teaching. Pride is the heart of every sin, and the downfall of many. It was with Lucifer, Adam and Eve, and each one of us when we sin. Parents who do not attend Church, even if they attend sporadically, or on “big occasions,” are a source of scandal to the children, and their sin is made worse by the fact that they lead their children away from God. There is no way to really gauge the importance of the parents’ example, especially a father’s--for good or ill.

I grew up in a family where we didn’t go to Mass very often. Or, my father didn’t go to Mass, and he was a good person. Sometimes our families, perhaps through no fault of their own, are themselves poorly formed in the Faith. But here we have to go beyond the limits of the past. There is a difference between being a “good person,” and being a faithful Christian. Being a good citizen, good neighbor, not hurting anybody, willing to help anyone, etc., does not mean we are fulfilling God’s will in all things. It is folly to point to good aspects of our lives, being satisfied with that limited sense, and ignoring other aspects that are just as important, or even more important. We need to pray for conversion of ourselves and everyone else. By the way, do you think you have to repeat your parents’ mistakes or continue their faults? Do you think that would be insulting them not to?

I’ve read all this, and I don’t agree with what my Pastor is saying. You’ve got it wrong. You missed the point. Like a lot of other people who want to decide what they’ll do or not do, you’re falling into the trap of pride. Furthermore, I’m not teaching my own thing. Your problem is not with me, it’s with God and His Church which He gave us to teach in His name. It’s His thing. Explain to Him why you don’t agree with Him.

I’ve talked these things over with Father “X,” and he disagrees with my Pastor. He’s got it wrong. He missed the point. His problem is not with me, it’s with God and His Church. At his judgment, he will have to explain why he considered himself smarter than God and His Church, and he will have to take responsibility for souls lost to Hell because of what he told them. Ouch!
I’ve talked with my friends about these things, and we all disagree with my Pastor. You’ve all got it wrong. You missed the point. It’s not about me. When it comes to rejecting truth, there is no safety in numbers. It just means there’ll be more fat in the fire. By the way, where did all those friends study for their degrees in Theology?

Sometimes a little humor goes a long way. I hope that it does not give the impression that I make light of a very serious matter. Please take to heart what I write here, and let the Holy Spirit guide you to the peaceful acceptance of God’s way in all things. Without that humility, repentance, progress in the spiritual life, and even salvation are impossible.

In Our Lord,