



Eucharist and Sunday

Fourth Festival Letter of
✠ Most Reverend Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C.
BISHOP OF PEORIA

Fourth Festival Letter - Diocese of Peoria Epiphany - Year of Our Lord 2006 Most Reverend Bishop Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C.

Eucharist and Sunday

Some months ago, at a meeting of American bishops, I heard a senior bishop from a southern state where Catholics are still a distinct minority describe a conversation between his mother and a long deceased bishop of the diocese where he now serves as chief shepherd. His mother was driving her car, with the bishop in the front seat and her own children in the back seat. She asserted at the time, that if anyone in her family ever missed Sunday Mass, she would throw them out of the house. The bishop then mildly chided her for her sternness, whereupon the mother pulled over to the side of the road, stopped the car, and said: "Your Excellency, if that's the way you feel about it, you can just walk to where you're going!"

While I can't imagine my own parents ever speaking quite that bluntly to a bishop, they would have had identical convictions regarding the absolute importance of the Sunday obligation. They were from a generation of Catholics that simply insisted that their children, including teenagers and adults, be at Mass every Sunday without exception, unless someone was at death's door or in the midst of a truly enormous emergency. Times have certainly changed, but I am convinced that in this regard we have drifted very dangerously in the wrong direction. Many of the same folks who today insist that their children receive all the prescribed inoculations against disease, brush and floss their teeth, exercise, do their homework, practice musical instruments, and prepare for their SATs, apparently *wimp out* when it comes to the obligation to worship Almighty God.

Priests in our diocese report that many children, even some in our Catholic schools, confess missing Mass. Now those under the age of sixteen certainly do not drive cars, so apparently the same parents who almost daily chauffeur their offspring to and from every conceivable form of bodily athleticism, seem decidedly less concerned about the health of their children's immortal souls. Obviously in their own lives, they have somehow come to minimize the essential importance of divine worship. It is now reported for the first time in our national history, that Catholics attend church less faithfully than our Protestant neighbors. People sometimes cite the hectic nature of today's world as an excuse. This notion would certainly have seemed ridiculous to our Catholic grandparents and great-grandparents who themselves worked as much as twelve hours a day, six days a week, on farms, in factories, and in mines, without any of today's safe guards or conveniences. What, in fact, has changed is clarity of doctrine and a clear sense of right and wrong. I and my brother bishops are now so concerned that we hope in the coming years to say much less about peripheral issues but teach more persistently about the essentials of our faith. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to

recall some very essential Catholic teaching about the importance of the participating at Sunday Mass.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church has this to say about the precept that on Sundays and other holy days of obligation the faithful are bound to participate in the Mass: *The Sunday Eucharist is the foundation and confirmation of all Christian practice. For this reason the faithful are obliged to participate in the Eucharist on Sundays and days of obligation, unless excused for a serious reason. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation are guilty of a grave sin.* (CCC 2181) This clear Church teaching is based directly on Divine law. God himself demands in the Third Commandment that his people observe the Sabbath. The Church celebrates Sunday as the Christian Sabbath, the day of the Lord's Resurrection, on the eighth day which is rightly called the Lord's Day.

As Saint Thomas Aquinas taught, we owe our Creator worship, praise, and thanks as an act of justice because of God's sovereign and absolute goodness. God is loving and merciful, but as the Scriptures reveal, our God is also a *Jealous God*, who demands our obedience and fidelity. Contrary to much of the *feel good* spirituality of today, God does not simply affirm our selfish preferences. There are consequences for our deliberate sins, and if we reject his grace and resist conversion, God will perfectly judge our choices. For the sake of our eternal salvation, we must remember that it is a serious sin, a deadly sin, a mortal sin, to miss Mass on Sunday.

There is, however, an even greater reason to be faithful to Sunday worship than the fear of hell. God is wonderful and lovable for his own sake. We were made for God. Our human nature is *hard wired* for the experience of God. We were created with an infinite hunger that only the infinite God can satisfy. Our humanity is oriented by a capacity for eternity that only the everlasting God can fulfill. As Saint Augustine once observed, *our hearts are restless until they rest in you O Lord.*

In the Mass, our adoration, praise, and thanks, gives us on earth an experience of the boundless beatitude of heaven. In the Eucharist, we *taste and see the goodness of the Lord*, as the Savior's one perfect sacrifice on the cross is renewed in our midst. Jesus is present both as priest and sacrifice, and we are fed with the *Bread that has come down from heaven*, the very Bread of Angels, the cure for sin, the antidote to death, the true Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of our glorified and resurrected Lord. We worship in *spirit and in truth* with all the angels and saints and *all those who have gone before us*, sharing a joy and consolation that can hardly be described.

The Eucharist is the Church's greatest treasure and the source and summit of the Christian life. So like lovers in love, we should long for our good and loving Lord, savor our communion with God and with one another, and then after Mass be energized to more generously love and serve. We should never neglect this wondrous experience. We should always be ready to promote this life changing reality to our children, our relatives, our friends,

our neighbors, and even to strangers.

Among the last precious blessings that our beloved Pope John Paul the Great gave to the Holy Roman Church was his declaration of 2005 -2006 as *The Year of the Eucharist*. Here in our Diocese and throughout the world, the great mystery of the Eucharist was the focus of extended teaching and celebration. I was especially edified and consoled by the Forty Hours Devotion that took place in our Cathedral. For three days, all day and all night, large crowds filled our mother church, Saint Mary of the Immaculate Conception, with prayer and intense devotion. People of all ages, members of many Catholic organizations, clergy and religious, and almost every ethnicity contributed their fidelity and tradition to the worship and praise of our Eucharistic Lord. We honored Our Lady who offered the gift of her humanity both to the mystery of the Incarnation and to the mystery of the Blessed Sacrament. We celebrated the Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Church and prayed together the Office of Vespers. Most especially, in all our Masses, in our solemn processions, and in Benediction, we gave to the Most Holy Eucharist the worship of *latría*, that is the honor of a creature to the Creator, that reverence, praise, and adoration rightly reserved for God alone.

I believe it is important to remember that the Blessed Sacrament is honored and reserved in our churches and chapels, not only that it may be brought to the sick and the dying but also as a focus of our love, prayer, and contemplation outside of the celebration of the Mass. Rather than being in competition with our appreciation of the liturgy, the Reserved Sacrament in our sanctuaries fosters deeper understanding, love, and appreciation for Holy Communion. That bundle of traditional rituals and forms of prayer such as genuflection, the sign of the cross, kneeling, preparation, attentive reverence, and thanksgiving centered on the Reserved Eucharist embodies essential and instructive teaching about the transcendent nature of our liturgical worship.

I strongly believe that those unhelpful and imprecise comparisons between a so called *dynamic presence* in the Eucharistic liturgy and the *static presence* in the Reserved Sacrament has undermined rather than enhanced our collective faith in the amplitude of the Real Presence. The notion that Eucharistic devotion was a 14th century invention is nothing more than the prejudiced myth of some liturgists. According to the clear testimony of the ancient church in both the East and the West, the Reserved Sacrament was revered, both directly on or suspended over our altars, regularly carried on the breasts of the clergy, and sometimes even carried by the faithful when on a journey or in some special need.

It was in the 10th century, that the heretical Cathars promoted among other errors a dramatic disdain for the human body and the entire created order. In the 12th century, this sect evolved into what came to be called the Albigensians who denied any spiritual value to the sacraments. When the significance of Eucharist itself was attacked, the Catholic Church vigorously renewed its constant faith in the Body and Blood of Christ, truly born of the Virgin Mary and truly present in the Sacrament of the Altar. It was Saint Juliana of Mont Cornillon in Belgium who first promoted the idea of a special feast in honor of the Blessed Sacrament. Among those who heard her speak was Jacques Pantaleon, the Archdeacon of Liege, who later

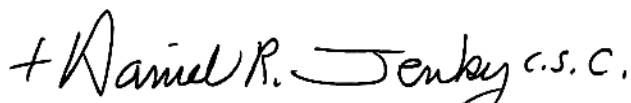
became Pope Urban IV. In 1246, it was this pontiff who introduced the Feast of Corpus Christi to the calendar of the Church. Absolutely without exception, all the saints of mediaeval Europe added their voices to the unwavering faith of Catholic Christianity that Jesus Christ was truly and substantially present in the sacramental form of bread and wine and that the Eucharist was at the very heart of Christian life and worship. In the 16th century, Protestants opposed the doctrine of transubstantiation, the sacrificial character of the Mass, Eucharistic reservation, and all forms of Eucharistic devotion. In stark contrast to the teaching of the Fathers and the cult of the ancient church, they either minimalized or entirely denied the centrality of the Eucharist for Christianity. Since American religious culture is so strongly Protestant, and because many Catholics are not well formed in the doctrine of their faith, our religious ethos needs to be clear and intentional. Catholic liturgy, prayer, custom, devotion, and even sacred architecture should be consciously distinct from any form of spirituality that reduces the significance of the Church's sacramental tradition.

In order to continue the intense Catholic renewal fostered during the *Year of the Eucharist*, I have asked my Vicars to organize a Forty Hours Devotion this coming year in every region of the Diocese. All the priests, deacons, religious, lay ministers, parishes, choirs, schools, groups and organizations in each Vicariate, should come together to plan the prayer, adoration, instruction, and liturgies of a Forty Hours Devotion. I also believe there must be very explicit and extended teaching about the moral necessity of faithful Sunday worship at Mass.

All these efforts would significantly enhance a shared experience of Catholicism that extends across parish boundaries. This will also provide a continuing opportunity on a local level for witness, evangelization, and sacramental reconciliation for young and old alike. Holy Communion defines how we live our Christianity and supports and sustains all the corporal works of mercy. The Eucharist is the ultimate epiphany on earth of God's infinite love and offers us a foretaste of the endless bliss of heaven. The grace of the Blessed Sacrament is the source of the Church's being. For the sake of our eternal salvation, we must never neglect or grow indifferent to this most holy of all God's gifts.

O Sacrament most holy, O Sacrament divine, all praise and all thanksgiving be every moment Thine!

May the prayers of the Blessed Virgin Mary, who brought Jesus Christ into this world, deepen our love and reverence for the Sacrament of his Body and Blood.



✠ Most Reverend Daniel R. Jenky, C.S.C.
Bishop of Peoria