

# *St. Paul of the Cross Lenten Retreat 2014*

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Presented by Fr. Donald Ware & Fr. Michael Salvagna

## **Theme: The Eucharist... Why Go to Mass?**

### **Introduction**

Several years ago a man who was not a Catholic asked me why we Catholics had to go to Mass every Sunday. Then he said, "You get up and sit down and kneel... why's that?"

If someone asked you why you go to Mass on Sunday, what would you say? We know it's part of our Catholic heritage... but why do we do it?

### **I Story... Keep the Log Burning**

*A member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, suddenly stopped coming to Church.*

*The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire.*

*Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him, led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited. The pastor made himself at home but said nothing. In silence he contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs.*

*After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet contemplation.*

*As the one lone ember's flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and lifeless.*

*The pastor glanced at his watch and realized it was time to leave. He stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.*

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*As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said with a tear running down his cheek, "Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the "fiery sermon". I shall be back in church next Sunday.*

Regular attendance at Sunday Mass is at the heart of being a Catholic. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says:

*Participation in the communal celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is a testimony of belonging and of being faithful to Christ and to his Church. The faithful give witness by this to their communion in faith and charity. Together they testify to God's holiness and their hope of salvation. They strengthen one another under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (# 2128)*

Mass is the blazing fire of Christ's love which keeps our lives aflame with love and devotion towards God.

(See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Part II, Sacraments, # 1322 – 1419.)

## II Gathering at the Eucharist... The Liturgy of the Word

Now let's talk about what happens when the body of believers, the Body of Christ, gathers at Mass.

*Our encounter with the very words of God*

In the Mass we come together to listen to the Word of God. Listening is a very important part of prayer.

So often, when we pray, we do all the talking.

But God gave us two ears and one mouth. Why?

Because *listening* is an important part of life, and a most important part of any relationship.

This is true of our relationship with God also.

Vatican II reminds us that in the Mass we are fed at the table of God's word, and at the table of God's sacrifice.

At the very beginning of the Mass we humbly prepare ourselves to be taught by God.

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We hear the word of God...  
hopefully it is explained a bit to us,  
so that our spiritual life may be nourished by learning about God..

This listening to God's word is part of our prayer at Mass – an important part  
–  
because we hear God's story...  
what God is like and what God's will is...  
and not just what we want.

The Scriptures so often tell us stories about God.  
The stories we hear or read about influence our lives.  
Some authors have said that we become the stories we tell...

Violent video games influence so many people's lives...  
and so many people mistakenly think that's what life is about.  
We even call this "entertainment".

We disciples of Jesus have different stories in our lives...  
stories about God and about Jesus in our Sacred Writings.  
These tell us what life is about.  
(Give a brief reflection on one of the daily texts here?)

## **III Gathering at the Eucharist... The Offertory**

In the Offertory of the Mass  
we are invited to join Jesus in offering our lives to our loving Father.

At the Offertory we offer the bread and wine,  
part of our physical world, our planet earth,  
so in need of redemption... "Groaning for redemption" says St. Paul in  
Romans 5:22.

In his encyclical on the Eucharist John Paul II reminds us that our bread and  
wine which we offer are transformed into the very Body and Blood of Christ  
– a foretaste of that new heaven and earth which we eagerly await... the  
redemption of our world. (#8).

Our bread and wine also represent our whole life,

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our successes and our failures,  
our ups and downs,  
our daily routines...  
our sufferings too, physical and emotional...  
and our relationships – both the healthy ones, and the strained or ended  
relationships...  
we bring our entire lives to the altar,  
and we join Jesus who offered His entire life to His Father.

None of us are perfect,  
but God wants us to bring ourselves,  
as imperfect as we are, to the altar.  
And there, through Jesus, with Jesus, and in Jesus, we offer our own lives to  
our Father who loves us.  
For we are the Body of Christ, present at this altar.

### IV Gathering at the Eucharist... The Miracle

Now a wonderful miracle happens at our Mass...what was natural food and  
refreshment, bread and wine, become for us spiritual food and refreshment.

We remember Jesus at the Last Supper and we remember Jesus' love  
poured out for us on the Cross.

As Jesus broke the bread and shared the cup at the Last Supper with his  
disciples... and gifted them with himself...

We are gifted in this Eucharistic Meal, this Banquet of Life, this Covenant  
Sacrifice – we are gifted with the Body and Blood of Jesus.

Recall too that our lives represented by the bread and wine become the  
Body and Blood of Christ... The Body of Christ feeds us, the Body of Christ –  
said St. Augustine.

We also remember Jesus' body broken and blood shed on the Cross as Jesus  
confronts the darkness and ugliness of sin and hatred with his forgiveness  
and love... to heal our wounded world – to heal us.

What a generous God – God knows that we are so much in need of God's  
presence and healing,

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God's strength and compassion...

and so God gifts us with His own Son.

To the eyes of our faith we see God's Spirit hovering over the bread and wine and making from them something new, something precious, something powerful – the Body and Blood of of Jesus.

For this we say:

Thank you Father. Thank you Jesus. Thank you Spirit...

## **V St. Thomas Aquinas on the Eucharist**

Let me briefly present some of St. Thomas Aquinas' rich reflections on the reception of the Eucharist...

St. Thomas lists four effects of Holy Communion with the Body and Blood of Christ. In receiving Christ the faithful are:

- 1. Healed from their sin – here read especially "bondage to self."*
- 2. Joined with Christ in His self-offering – here emphasize our offering our lives to our loving Father thru Christ, with Christ, and in Christ.*
- 3. Inebriated with love – here focus on our loving response to Jesus' love for us...our "devotion."*
- 4. Nourished – here understand spiritual nourishment to lead the kind of lives Christ wants us to lead. We need Christ's help to do that.*

## **VI Pope Francis on the Eucharist**

Pope Francis emphasized the need for a "sense of the sacred" at Mass, as he celebrated the Eucharistic sacrifice on February 10, 2014.

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The Mass, the Pope said, is a "theophany," a direct encounter with God. This encounter, he said, is "different from the Word: it is another presence: closer, without mediation, near."

The Mass, the Pope stressed, is not a "representation" of the Last Supper. He explained: "Nativity scenes, the Way of the Cross: these are representations." At the Mass, something quite different occurs.

"It is a theophany: God approaches and is with us, and we participate in the mystery of redemption."

A "theophany" is an intense presence of God.

- Moses and the burning bush
- Moses and the pillar of cloud by day and of fire by night protecting the Israelites
- Joseph's dream calling him to marry Mary

These are all theophanies – descriptions of an intense presence of God experienced by someone.

In the Mass we are privileged to be blessed with God's intense presence. A number of saints speak of this intense presence.

What keeps us from experiencing it?...

Too preoccupied with ourselves and our own fears, worries, concerns and plans for the day?

How many of us can honestly pray, "Loving God I believe, help my unbelief."

The Pope added that it is wrong to say that one "hears" Mass; the Mass, he said, is "participated in, and it is a participation in this theophany."

To participate fully in the Mass, the Pope added, one must "have this availability to enter into the mystery of God."

Participating properly in the Mass requires a sense of the sacred, and an awareness of God's presence, the Pope said. "It is God's time, it is God's space."

### **VII My Own Theophany**

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I remember when I visited the Holy Land in the Fall of 2000. Our tourist group entered Jerusalem early one morning. We entered the Church built around Calvary and the empty tomb.

As you enter you are invited to go up the steps to your right to the next floor which was constructed right on top of the mount of Calvary where Christ was crucified.

As we moved forward slowly in a line, each of us took a turn reaching thru a hole in the floor and touching Mt. Calvary where Christ's cross was standing as he was crucified.

To the right of this spot was a small chapel, where Mass was being celebrated by another tourist group. As I knelt down to put my hand thru the opening to touch Mt. Calvary, the consecration was taking place at the Mass.

I was overcome with awe. Tears came to my eyes – what a blessing. What a theophany for me! I remember it vividly to this day.

### **Conclusion**

What a miracle of God's presence the Mass can be for each of us. We hear and are taught thru God's words – God's stories.

We offer ourselves together with Jesus to our loving Father.

We remember vividly the Last Supper and Calvary where Christ's love and forgiveness are poured out upon us.

We are invited to receive the Body and Blood of Christ, food for the journey of our lives.

No wonder this is called The Eucharist... Eucharist means thanksgiving. We thank God for this miracle in our lives... God's presence to us.