



Catholic Diocese of Sioux Falls
Office of the Bishop

523 N. Duluth Ave.
Sioux Falls, SD 57104
(605) 988-3798
(605) 988-3898 fax

Truth, Goodness and Beauty: The Mass
March 11, 2021

My Beloved Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Lenten greetings to you and your loved ones! We are fast approaching Holy Week and the great feast days of Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, and this seems like a perfect time to continue my teaching series on Truth, Goodness and Beauty of our Catholic faith by focusing on the Holy Mass.

Many of us have spent years or even decades attending Mass. It has simply been an automatic part of our weekly or even daily lives. For others—the young among us, or new Catholics—the Mass is still a new reality. Either way, our participation in the Mass and the difference it makes in our lives can be enriched by a deeper understanding of this beautiful prayer which is such an important part of our Catholic faith. Therefore, I would like to offer a few thoughts, based on the Bible and the teachings of the Church as found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that I hope will allow you to both appreciate and participate more fully in the Mass.

The Mass is a Prayer

Let's begin by highlighting something we often take for granted: the Mass itself is a prayer. Prayer, after all, is essentially conversation with God: us listening to and speaking with Him. That is precisely what is happening at Mass—we spend time with our God, both conversing and communing with Him. In particular, we listen to His inspired words in the readings from the Holy Bible and we receive Him, His Real Presence—Jesus Christ, His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity—in Holy Communion. At the same time, we express to him our praise, our gratitude, our sorrow for our sins and our many needs, both for ourselves, our loved ones and others.

The Mass is a Gift from Jesus that He Commands Us to Celebrate

The Mass isn't only a prayer. It is a prayer we have received as a gift from God. This is not a prayer we made up ourselves but one that we have received from Jesus Himself. Again, we are fast approaching Holy Week, and on Holy Thursday we celebrate the establishment of the Mass and the Holy Eucharist by Jesus at the Last Supper. We read about this beautiful gift in the Gospels, in which Jesus celebrates the Jewish Passover meal with His Apostles. Here is part of St. Luke's account of that sacrificial meal:

Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me." And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you." (Luke 22:19-20)

At the Last Supper, Jesus establishes the Mass and the Eucharist, giving us the great gift of His own Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity in Holy Communion. I'll offer some more thoughts on this amazing truth below, but what an incredible blessing! At the Mass, we are able to receive Jesus Himself, the living God, our Savior and Messiah, into our bodies and souls to spiritually nourish us, which is essential for us Catholics. Without receiving Jesus' Body and Blood on Sundays, we are removing ourselves, limiting ourselves from essential spiritual blessings God wants to give us.

Not only that, but Jesus directly commands the Apostles to "Do this in memory of me." In other words, it was not a "one-time" sort of thing, but rather was to become the center of the Church's prayer. This is one of the central reasons why the Church obliges us to participate in Sunday Mass: because of Jesus' command to His first disciples that they are to do so. So when we participate in the Mass, we are responding to Jesus' expectation to continue to offer this greatest of prayers for all of our lives and for all time, every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation. Participation at weekly Sunday Mass and Holy Days is an obligation for Catholics because God Himself places that obligation upon us so we can be spiritually healthy, happy and holy. For example, the Third Commandment of "keep Holy the Sabbath" is not merely a suggestion or recommendation from God. It is a commandment because God knows we need His spiritual gifts which we receive at Mass in order to attain the spiritual potential we all have of being spiritually healthy, happy and holy as much as possible on earth and to be eternally healthy, happy and holy with Him, the angels and saints in heaven. Like any good mother or father who wants the best for their children, there are certain expectations that parents know what is best. God knows what is best for us, His beloved adopted sons and daughters.

The Mass is the Re-presentation of Jesus' Death and Resurrection

We might ask, why is the Mass the greatest of prayers? We find the answer both in Scripture and in Church teaching: it is because the Mass is our participation in Jesus' own offering of Himself to His Father for our salvation. Consider these words from the *Catechism* which speak of Jesus' command to "do this in memory of me":

1357 We carry out this command of the Lord by celebrating the *memorial of his sacrifice*. In so doing, *we offer to the Father* what he has himself given us: the gifts of his creation, bread and wine which, by the power of the Holy Spirit and by the words of Christ, have become the body and blood of Christ. Christ is thus really and mysteriously made present.

1358 We must therefore consider the Eucharist as:

- thanksgiving and praise to the *Father*;
- the sacrificial memorial of *Christ* and his Body;
- the presence of Christ by the power of his Word and of his *Spirit*.

The *Catechism* goes on to offer a beautiful teaching on the Mass as Thanksgiving, as Memorial and as Presence, and I highly recommend that you prayerfully read these teachings. For now, I want to highlight one aspect: that at the Mass, Jesus' self-sacrifice to the Father on our behalf is made present for us to participate in (cf. CCC 1362-1366). When we attend and participate in the Mass, we are mysteriously yet truly spiritually present at both Jesus' death and resurrection, at Calvary and at the Empty Tomb, and we are able to join our own prayer to that of Jesus as He gives Himself to the Father for us. Again, what an incredible gift!

Mass is a Communal, Family Prayer

One final point about the Last Supper, which was truly the first Mass. It was the prayer of a community: Jesus offering His prayer to the Father, and His disciples joining Him in that prayer. Throughout Scripture we see time and time again in the Old and New Testament times as well as today that God's family comes together to pray together. While the Mass is a very personal prayer which we each offer, we offer it as a community of faith, or better, as a family of faith. Not only that, but the Mass also *forms* us as a family...our participation in the Mass *makes us into* a community as God designed things to be. We pray and celebrate *together*, as a *family*, not as individuals gathered in one place. God has created us to be in community with Him socially and in prayer with each other, and we see this most beautifully when He calls us together to honor God at Mass. God in turn blesses us even more with more spiritual grace, and we get to help each other receive and share the incredible love of God.

Mass is where Jesus is Really, Truly Present in the Eucharist

Finally, let's dig deeper into the wonder and beauty of the Real Presence. As I have already noted, at Mass we not only *converse* with God, but we *commune* with Him as well; in Holy *Communion*, we receive the living God, Jesus Christ, truly present under the appearance of bread and wine. This is a teaching we may well be familiar with, but we shouldn't allow familiarity to lessen our sense of awe and wonder when we are before the Real Presence and when the Real Presence of Jesus enters into us when we eat His Body and drink His Blood. In the Eucharist, Jesus is not only present to us in an utterly unique way, but we *receive* Him into our own bodies and souls. Jesus desired not merely to teach us, nor even to save us "from a distance," but rather to dwell with us and even *within* us. Once again, we find this powerful truth proclaimed in the Gospels, specifically by St. John. In chapter 6 of his Gospel, we read first about the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, then about the walking on the water, and then about Jesus' teaching on the Eucharist at the synagogue in Capernaum. Listen to His words:

"I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world." The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?" Jesus said to them, "Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever." (John 6:48-58)

Hear what our Lord says, with an open heart and as if you've never heard it before: He is offering His very self to us in the Eucharist, that we might share in His own eternal life. Jesus desires to feed us, to nourish us, with His own life, His own being, His own existence, His own Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity. This is indeed an unimaginable treasure! All we need to do is recognize and receive the truth, goodness and beauty of God's spiritual gift for each of us.

The words of those holy men and women who have died (the saints), who have gone before us and show us how to live our faith, can help us understand the incredible gift of the Mass and the Eucharist. For instance, consider St. Damien Molokai, a priest who lived and died serving a leper colony in Hawaii during the time of the American Civil War. This is what he said about the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist: “Were it not for the constant presence of our divine Master in our humble chapel, I would not have found it possible to persevere in sharing the lot of the lepers in Molokai...The Eucharist is the bread that gives strength...It is at once the most eloquent proof of His love and the most powerful means of fostering His love in us. He gives Himself every day so that our hearts as burning coals may set afire the hearts of the faithful.”

Or consider these beautiful words of our wonderful saint, St. Teresa of Calcutta (Mother Teresa): “When you look at the Crucifix, you understand how much Jesus loved you then. When you look at the Sacred Host you understand how much Jesus loves you now.” There are many more quotes like these from the saints. Time and time again we find holy men and women like these calling us to deeply pray the Mass and devoutly receive Our Lord in Holy Communion.

I invite you, my beloved brothers and sisters, to consider anew the great gift we have in the Mass. When we attend and participate in the Mass with our family of faith, we participate in Jesus’ own prayer to the Father made on our behalf, His own death and resurrection for our salvation. When we attend and participate in Mass, we are able to receive the greatest of foods: the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, given to us that we might share in His own divine life. Whether you have been coming to church regularly or have yet to return, I invite you to deepen your participation in the Mass this Holy Week and EVERY Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation and receive the incredible gift that our Father desires to give you: His own Son, for your salvation!

Additional Resources: Here are just a few additional resources for more study on the Mass and the Eucharist.

From Sacred Scripture

- The Last Supper accounts: Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-20
- The Bread of Life Discourse in the synagogue in Capernaum: John 6:22-71
- St. Paul’s teaching on the Eucharist: 1 Corinthians 11:23-32

From Church Teaching (all of these can be accessed online for free)

- *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 1322-1419
- St. Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*
- Pope Benedict XVI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis*
- St. Pope John Paul II, Letter to Bishops, *Dominicae Cena*

From Theologians

- Brant Pitre, *Jesus and the Jewish Roots of the Eucharist*
- Scott Hahn, *The Last Supper*
- Scott Hahn, *The Fourth Cup*
- Fr. Benedict Groeschel, *In the Presence of the Lord: The History, Theology, and Psychology of Eucharistic Devotion*