

- Reflections for a Time of Pandemic –  
Feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord  
\* ‘Do we really need the Eucharist?’ \*

Many over the past century have questioned: ‘Why do I need to go to Mass?’ They ask questions such as ‘Can’t I be a good Christian without going to Mass?’ ‘What is the relevance of the Eucharist to life today?’ ‘Is not the need to go to Mass on Sundays just a Church law?’

Underlying these questions are views of what is a Christian. To answer them, we need to recall Jesus’ vision of someone who follows him.

After all, Jesus gave us the Eucharist for a purpose: not for no reason.

***A Christian shares in Jesus’ divine life***

The first clue into Jesus’ vision of the Christian is his teaching as to why he came. He came, he taught, to share his divine or ‘eternal’ life as the Son of God with all who believe in him <sup>1</sup>

**I came that they may have life and have it to the full.**

**For God loved the world so much that he gave his only-begotten Son so that everyone who believes in him ... may have eternal life.**

We only need to think of the universe to realise that God is all-powerful. As the divine life Jesus shares – God’s own life – grows within us, God’s power grows in our lives.

Jesus shares his divine life with us through Baptism. This is the experience of the kingdom of God which Jesus proclaimed from the start of his ministry. <sup>2</sup> He taught <sup>3</sup>

**... no one can enter into the kingdom of God without being born of water and the Holy Spirit.**

*Relevance to daily life*

God’s life empowers. As it grows within us, it changes us. Jesus gave examples of how by visible miracles. Jesus’ miracles showed, for example, that divine power heals; gives sight; frees from whatever cripples us.

We may need healing from life hurts and griefs; freedom from crippling attitudes, such as low self esteem or habits; enlightenment when we cannot see our life direction or meaning, or cannot see answers to life questions or solutions to life problems.

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<sup>1</sup> John 10:10; 3:16

<sup>2</sup> Mark 1:15

<sup>3</sup> John 3:5

The power of the divine life frees also from fears. These can range from fear of social and political pressures, to fear of seeking professional help if we need it.

Sin stunts the divine life. Jesus' vision of the Christian, therefore, includes them seeking forgiveness of their sins so that the divine life can flourish in them again.

The power of the divine life is greater than human weaknesses. It is greater than selfishness, jealousy, greed, lust, avarice and the tendency to hold on to grudges.

Anyone growing in the divine life is empowered increasingly to live as Jesus taught – especially where, otherwise, they would find his teaching difficult (if not impossible). This includes his teachings on marriage and human sexuality.

***The Christian is empowered to love by God's love***

God is a God of love. When we share the divine life of Risen Jesus, the Son of God, we share also God's powerful divine love. So, when we receive Baptism, <sup>4</sup>

**... the love of God (is) poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit.**

The love of God grows in our hearts as God's life grows in our hearts.

It is with the power of this love that we can obey what Jesus taught are the two greatest love commandments of the Old Testament <sup>5</sup>

**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself.**

Jesus' call to love God 'with all your heart' is demanding and uncompromising. It is a call to love God to a degree of complete selflessness that is not possible without the power of the love of God.

Nor is it possible, without the power of God's love, to live the self-sacrificing love for one's neighbour that Jesus demands <sup>6</sup>

**This is my commandment, that you should love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to lay down his life for his friends.**

Self sacrificing love is needed to forgive others who have caused deep hurt; to keep giving when we are taken for granted; to remain faithful when others are unfaithful.

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<sup>4</sup> Romans 5:5

<sup>5</sup> Luke 10:27

<sup>6</sup> John 15

Jesus' vision of the Christian, therefore, includes someone who is growing in the power of divine love so that they can love others 'as I have loved you' – who is growing in *Christ-like love*.

How different would be the relationships of millions today if they were empowered increasingly by divine love. How different would be their married and family lives; their other relationships, including work relationships.

The two great commandments summarise the Ten Commandments as Jesus taught them. The divine life empowers them to be lived from the heart <sup>7</sup>

### ***The Christian is a 'new creation'***

Jesus taught that, through Baptism, a believer is 'born from above' and 'born of water and the Holy Spirit'. <sup>8</sup> Sharing now his divine life as the Son of God, and being born human already, they are 'new creations' for <sup>9</sup>

**... anyone who is in Christ is a new creation: the old order has gone and a new being is there to see.**

The 'new being' emerges to the extent that the divine life grows so that its power strengthens their potential to love; to conquer selfishness; to be compassion, to conquer judgementalness; to behave justly; to conquer self centredness; to be merciful; to conquer hard heartedness.

Jesus vision of the Christian, therefore, is of a believer who is on the journey of faith so that, increasingly, 'a new being is there so see'.

### ***The Christian relates intimately with the Risen Jesus***

Jesus taught that his followers will love him. Christian faith is a personal relationship with him. His relationship with the Christian who lives as he taught is closer even than his relationship with his mother and family members. <sup>10</sup>

Closeness with Jesus is not a feeling. Jesus made clear that <sup>11</sup>

**Whoever holds to my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me ...**

**If you keep my commandments you will remain in my love ...**

**Anyone who does not love me does not keep my words.**

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<sup>7</sup> eg Matthew 5:20-49

<sup>8</sup> John 3:3, 5

<sup>9</sup> 2 Corinthians 5:17

<sup>10</sup> Mark 3:35

<sup>11</sup> John 14:21; 15:10; 14:24

Jesus described the intimacy between himself and the Christian living his commandments in terms of each being in – not just with – the other <sup>12</sup>

**Remain in me, and I in you ...**

**Whoever remains in me, and I in that person, bears fruit in plenty ...**

**If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for whatever you please and it will be done for you.**

*Relates with the Risen Jesus by keeping his Commandments*

Keeping his commandments is a proof of a personal relationship with Jesus because we need his power to do so. This power grows in us only as we relate with him.

His commandments include the Ten Commandments as he taught them – which includes not just by external behaviour, but living them from the heart. <sup>13</sup>

When they are not living as he taught, Jesus calls his followers to <sup>14</sup>

**... repent and believe the good news.**

*Relates with Jesus by carrying the cross*

The climax of Jesus' life was his death and resurrection. He foretold this three times. <sup>15</sup>

In this way, Jesus was fulfilling the will of God the Father, for he was witnessing to God's love even to the cost of his life. Indeed, fulfilling the will of God was the motive for every moment of his life <sup>16</sup>

**I have come down from heaven to do not my own will but the will of him who sent me.**

The cross on which he died was the ultimate symbol of his obedience to God's will. Jesus then taught that <sup>17</sup>

**Anyone who wants to be a follower of mine must renounce self and take up the cross every day and follow me.**

**Anyone who does not take up his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me.**

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<sup>12</sup> John 15; 4, 5, 7

<sup>13</sup> Matthew 5:20-48

<sup>14</sup> Mark 1:15

<sup>15</sup> Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33

<sup>16</sup> John 6:38

<sup>17</sup> Mark 8:34; 10:28

Yet the true Christian will not try to struggle alone when crosses seem too difficult, for they will respond to Jesus' invitation to <sup>18</sup>

**Come to me, all you who labour and are over burdened, and I will give you rest.**

***The Christian relates with the Risen Jesus like a brother***

We share human life because we share human nature. Through Baptism, the Risen Jesus shares with us his divine nature so that we can share his divine life <sup>19</sup>

**His divine power has given us all the things we need for life ... so that through them you should share the divine nature ...**

The Christian shares God's own nature, though by adoption. This is by God's design for, <sup>20</sup>

**... God sent his Son ... so that we might receive adoption as sons. And as you are sons, God has sent into our hearts the Spirit of his Son crying out 'Abba, Father ...**

In the culture of the time, 'son' here meant the one who inherited all that is the father's. So baptised sons and daughters of God share all that the Risen Jesus receives from God the Father.

With Jesus, they can pray 'Our Father'. <sup>21</sup> And since all the baptised have the same Father as the Risen Jesus <sup>22</sup>

**... he is not afraid to call them brothers and sisters ...**

Jesus' vision of the Christian, therefore, is of someone who is a brother or sister. In the culture of the time, family relationships were the closest possible.

***The Eucharist needed to nourish the divine life within***

When we recall this brief outline of the Christian as Jesus taught, we can understand why he taught that the Eucharist is essential for the Christian life – as we heard in today's Gospel.

In the First Reading, we heard how God provided food for the Hebrews on their journey to the Promised Land. It is the Eucharist which nourishes us on the journey of Christian faith, 'feeding' the growth of God's life within us.

And so, Jesus insisted, in the absolutist language of his culture to emphasise what is critical <sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew 11:28-30

<sup>19</sup> 2 Peter 1:3-4

<sup>20</sup> Galatians 4:5

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 6:9

<sup>22</sup> Hebrews 2:11

**... if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you.**

**Anyone who does eat my flesh and drink my blood has eternal life ...**

**For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink.**

Jesus taught too that, while it is through their personal relationship with himself that the divine life grows within the believer, the Eucharist is needed to deepen this relationship <sup>24</sup>

**Whosoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood dwells in me and I dwell in that person.**

**As ... I live through the Father, so whoever eats me will live through me.**

### ***The Eucharist is needed to nourish gifts of the other sacraments***

God's life is experienced also through the spiritual gifts the Christian receives through the other sacraments. But it is the Eucharist which is needed to nourish these gifts.

### *Confirmation*

The Gifts of the Holy Spirit, received through Confirmation, are examples:

- the spirit of Wisdom, which is to empower us increasingly to see ourselves, others and the world as God sees, grows through the nourishment of the Eucharist so that, for example,
  - any low self-esteem is overcome by greater self awareness of love and goodness in us
  - we can see through others' race, religion, social status, sexual orientation or objectionable characteristics to recognise their God-given dignity;
- the Spirit of Counsel, which is to guide us increasingly through life, grows through the Eucharist so that, for example
  - young people can see what they should do when they leave school
  - couples in love can see whether or not they should marry
  - the elderly can see if it is time to stop living on their own
- the Spirit of Fear of the Lord, <sup>25</sup> which is to deepen our awareness of the presence of our loving God, grows through the Eucharist so that believers
  - never feel totally alone
  - feel loved in every situation, and that nothing can 'separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. <sup>26</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> John 6:53-55

<sup>24</sup> John 6:56-57

<sup>25</sup> 'Fear' in the sense of 'aware'

Without the Eucharist, these Gifts of the Spirit remain malnourished. As a result, they would not be able to provide the blessings God intends for those who have been confirmed.

The gifts received through the other sacraments are all experiences of divine life. All need the Eucharist, therefore, for these gifts to bear fruit.

### *Marriage*

Through the Sacrament of Marriage, the Risen Jesus seeks to purify the love of married couples and to strengthen the bond between them. As this happens, the Risen Jesus strengthens them, for example, <sup>27</sup>

- to take up the crosses and difficulties of daily married life
- to rise again if they fall or fail to live their marriage vows
- to forgive one another, no matter how deep the hurt
- to bear one another's burdens.

Again, however, the degree to which a married couple's love is purified and strengthened is affected by whether or not this love is nourished by the Eucharist.

### *The Eucharist needed to build Christian community*

As the responsive believer is drawn closer to Jesus, who 'dwells' in them as they 'dwell' in him, believers are drawn closer spiritually together. The Eucharist nourishes the love of God 'poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit'.

But believers must be responsive to the Risen Jesus whom they receive: that is, as St Paul taught the Corinthian Christians <sup>28</sup>

**... we must *prepare ourselves* for so great and so holy a moment.**

Our Second Reading reminded us of how the Risen Lord, through the Holy Spirit, draws together into loving Christian community all who receive him in Holy Communion. Parishes and families which are not united, but divided, need to reflect upon whether members need reminding of the importance of personal preparation before receiving the Risen Jesus in Holy Communion.

Preparation includes focussing consciously and prayerfully upon the One who is being received. It includes too bowing before receiving the Body and Blood of the Lord.

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<sup>26</sup> Romans 8:39

<sup>27</sup> see Catechism of the Catholic Church 1642

<sup>28</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church 1385

### ***Adoration of the Risen Jesus***

Jesus is present to his followers in different ways for different purposes. For example, he is present

- in their hearts
- when the scriptures are being proclaimed or mediated on
- in the celebrants of Confirmation, the Eucharist, and the sacraments of Penance and Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick and Holy orders, and
- in the poor, the sick and those in need.

Jesus remains in the Blessed Sacrament in our churches, calling us, waiting for us and welcoming us in love every time we spend time talking with him in conversation as with a friend, about our lives.

In the Eucharist, however, Jesus is present, not simply spiritually, but in his ‘body and blood, soul and divinity’.<sup>29</sup> We speak of his presence in the Eucharist as *the real presence*, not suggesting he is not present to his followers in the other ways, but in the sense that he is fully present – not simply spiritually – in the Eucharist.

We can therefore approach the Risen Jesus, present in the tabernacle in our churches, as people approached him in the gospels. They did so with their needs, problems and questions – and he waits for us humbly today to do the same.

We speak of his Eucharistic presence in the tabernacle as ‘the Blessed Sacrament’. We speak of ‘altar breads’ before the Consecration in every Mass, and ‘hosts’ (from the Latin word for sacrificial victim) after the Consecration.

### ***Conversation with Christ***

When people suggest that they can be a Christian without the Eucharist, they are revealing that their vision of the Christian is radically different from the vision of Jesus. They are not recognising the Christian as someone who

- shares the divine life and divine nature of Jesus, the Son of God
- is empowered by Christ
- is deepening in personal relationship with the Risen Jesus as their life continues.

Let us pause and pray to our Risen Lord for an ever deepening faith in him, present in the Eucharist, so that we always prepare ourselves to receive him in Holy Communion.

### **Bishop Gerard Holohan**

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<sup>29</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church 1374