

Catholics United Around the Altar

I am writing to all women, men, women and men religious, deacons, and priests of the Diocese of Orange—my sisters and brothers in the sacrament of baptism—this brief letter to you inviting and encouraging the whole Church of Orange to deepen our personal and shared experience of the Eucharist, especially Sunday Eucharist, during this Year of the Eucharist.

“We Cannot Live Without Sunday Mass!”

In North Africa in the year 304, magistrates with a troop of soldiers broke into the home of Saint Emeritus, a wealthy Christian, and seized him and forty-eight others. Their crime? Celebrating Sunday Mass together. When Saint Emeritus was asked why he had defied the emperor’s ban, he proclaimed: “*Sine dominica non possumus*: Without Sunday we cannot be.”¹ When questioned, the others also confessed their faith so resolutely that the very judges applauded their courage. They were shackled and sent to Carthage, the residence of the proconsul, and during their journey they sang hymns and psalms to God, praising His name and rendering Him thanks.

The proconsul first examined the senator Dativus, asking him who and what he was and whether he had attended the assembly of the Christians. He replied that he was a Christian and worshipped with Christians. The proconsul asked who presided at these meetings and in whose house the assemblies took place. Emeritus boldly acknowledged that the assemblies took place in his house, and in reference to the Holy Scriptures said to be kept there replied that he kept them in his heart. In spite of torture they one and all made profession that they were Christians and that they had been present on Sundays at the “collects,” that is to say, the celebration of the liturgy.

St. Saturninus and his children all made a noble confession of faith, including Hilarion, who was little more than a baby. “I am a Christian”, he said, “I have been at the ‘collects’. I went of my own accord; nobody made me go.” The judge, who was sorry for him, tried to frighten him by threatening him with childish punishments, but the little boy only laughed. Then the governor said, “I will cut off your nose and ears”. Hilarion answered, “You may do it, but anyhow I am a Christian.” When the proconsul ordered them back to prison Hilarion cried out with the others, “Thanks be to God.” It appears that they all died in prison, either from the length of their confinement or from torture and the hardships they had undergone.²

These saints turned even their persecution into a liturgy, praying and singing on their way to court and to prison; they answered, “Thanks be to God,” when their sentences were pronounced. Our Mexican, Korean and Vietnamese sisters and brothers can tell of their own modern martyrs of Sunday. May we all have their passion for being at Sunday Mass.

Join me, then, in invoking the intercession of these martyrs in this Year of the Eucharist: Martyrs of Sunday, pray for the people, deacons, priests, and bishops of the Diocese of Orange! Saints Hilarion and Mary, pray for the children and youth of our diocese: Give them your passion for being at Sunday Mass! Saints Emeritus, Ampelius, Felix and Saturninus, junior: Help all readers and other ministers prepare thoughtfully for their ministries! Saint Saturninus and all of your companions, pray for the deacons, priests, and bishops of our diocese: Renew in them your spirit of devotion to Sunday Mass!

Let us reflect together on the five vital themes outlined by our Holy Father for this Year of the Eucharist. Let's think about them on our own, in our families and religious houses, our prayer groups, parish organizations, and liturgy committees.

How can we renew our participation with the community of believers in the Eucharist each Sunday?

How can our parish communities improve our Sunday liturgies in ways that are likely to more profoundly touch people's minds and hearts?

How can preachers "treat the homily as a part of the liturgy, aimed at explaining the word of God and drawing out its meaning for the Christian life."

How can our parish communities adore the reserved Eucharist in such a way that it is experienced as a contemplative encounter of great value and worth?

How can each of us who takes part in the Eucharist learn to become a promoter of communion, peace and solidarity?

How can we renew our participation with the community of believers in the Eucharist each Sunday?

A contemporary comedian says, "Ninety percent of life is just showing up." So does a third-century document: "Exhort the people to meet together faithfully. Let no one diminish the Church by his/her absence, so as not to diminish the body of Christ by one member."³

Let us hold unwaveringly to our confession that gives us hope, for he who made the promise is trustworthy. We must consider how to rouse one another to love and good works. We should not stay away from our assembly, as is the custom of some, but encourage one another, and this all the more as you see the day drawing near.
Letter to the Hebrews, 10:19-25

Why? Because we need one another: We need the encouragement from others, and to be encouragers for others. What older Catholic is not heartened by the presence of young parents struggling to bring their children up in the faith? Or by the attendance and participation (singing even!) of teenagers there on their own, because they want to be? What middle-aged Catholic doesn't draw strength from the faithful elderly who are so regular, in spite of creaking joints? What youngster isn't moved by the sight of someone, a peer or an elder, really praying? Such a sight inspired my vocation to the priesthood and continues to inspire me as your bishop. We need to be on the lookout for our friends and neighbors and ask after them if we do not see them. If the absent knew that we actually missed them, they might actually show up.

We also need God's encouragement, hearable in his Word and seeable, touchable, smellable, and tasteable in the Body and Blood of Jesus under the forms of bread and wine.

So the first step to renew our participation in Sunday Mass is to show up. And, if you don't mind me saying so, I think we could all make a stronger effort to do it on time!

As any good Buddhist will tell you, boredom happens when you want to be anywhere but where you are. We Catholics witness to the other side of that experience; when we are totally focused on the what we are doing, we call it "the sacrament of the present moment." This is the next step: choosing to really involve ourselves—to pray, to listen, to greet, to sing, and to be willing to be transformed when we are at Mass.

How can our parish communities improve our Sunday liturgies in ways that are likely to more profoundly touch people’s minds and hearts?

While each of us can choose to be present at Mass and to each part of the Mass, I am also inviting our parish communities to improve Sunday liturgies in the ways they think will be best. Here are a couple of ideas to get you started:

Improve the liturgical ministries: let the lectors work hard to more effectively proclaim the scriptures; let the servers practice so they can serve at the altar without distracting the congregation’s prayer; let the Eucharistic Ministers attend with greater respect to the wonder of the sacrament they hold in their hands and distribute to others without distracting postures or expressions of personal piety; let the musicians sing wholeheartedly in a way that inspires the congregation to join in; let the hospitality ministers and ushers be even more mindful to the wonder in each person they welcome and assist.

Put your effort on what we do as a whole congregation: praying, offering, and being in union with one another. Let us bring our lives to the Mass, offering up prayer for what we need and for those most in need; Let us be more attentive to readings we hear and the prayerful silences we share; Let us be aware that we pray the Eucharistic prayer together by the acclamations we sing and through the words and actions of the priestly celebrant; Let us be more devoted to the sacraments we receive and to the time after reception when we contemplate and offer thanksgiving in quiet prayer.

How can preachers “treat the homily as a part of the liturgy, aimed at explaining the word of God and drawing out its meaning for the Christian life”?

When Bishops Soto, Luong and myself made our Covenant with you, we also asked every Catholic to let us know how we can improve our local church. We received many, many responses with many good ideas but the topic that got the most comment was the preaching of our priests and deacons. Many of you are asking us to do a better job in our preaching, specifically asking that we make a better connection between the Word of God and the lives you lead. Just last Monday, at the Chrism Mass, I asked these preachers to make this their highest priority in this year of the Eucharist.

The purpose of a homily is to proclaim what God has promised, to show how God keeps his promise in the Body and Blood of Jesus and to send us to be that presence in our homes, schools, and work places. In New Testament Greek the verb ‘to (give a) homily’ is ‘to assure, promise, admit, concede, bear witness, to confess in faith.’ A preacher must find the words to admit that life is difficult, to concede that we all need help; to witness to the struggle for faith, hope and love; to assure us that help is both present and on the way; and to stir up our faith by confessing his own confidence that Jesus is with us in the breaking of the bread and that Jesus sends us back into our daily lives and weekly duties with the message: He has risen.

How can our parish communities adore the reserved Eucharist in such a way that it is experienced as a contemplative encounter of great value and worth?

Since the very beginning of our diocese, we have had days of monthly adoration in each of our parishes and ministry centers. The goals of this time of contemplative prayer have been, as outlined by our first bishop, William Johnson:

“To pray for the spiritual development of all the people of the diocese;

“To pray for those who have vocations to priesthood and religious life that they would accept them and take the necessary steps to follow their calling.”

By this arrangement, the Blessed Sacrament is contemplated every day and at almost every hour in our diocese. But Bishop Johnson meant it as something we understood as doing together, not as something done by a few or by those who find it accommodating to their way of praying. It should be exercised by all of us as our communal act of fidelity to the presence of Christ in Orange County.

There is room for improvement, of course, and each parish or ministry center might want to consider the following:

In places where attendance is modest, let others be called forth to share this form of prayer. There is also the opportunity for members to join in Eucharistic adoration groups, as some have already done in our Spanish-speaking community, to support one another in this activity. Particular attention could be given to an invitation to young adults to participate and to men willing to take up the call for the late night and early morning hours, hours at which, in some neighborhoods, others may be unwilling to go out.

There could be more opportunities during adoration for shared prayer: the Liturgy of the Hours, Benediction and other appropriate forms of reflective prayer.

In larger churches, with many activities taking place in them, perhaps a smaller chapel would be more suitable for adoration, a clean, quiet and beautiful space for prayer.

Materials could be offered for all so that newcomers would have some help in learning how to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. Care should be exercised to make prayer materials particularly available for children and young people.⁴

A parish or ministry center may decide to observe the coming Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ with greater care this May 29th, including Eucharistic processions.⁵ Where all-night adoration may be prudently conducted, after the last anticipated Mass of the solemnity⁶ (on Saturday, May 28th) exposition of the Blessed Sacrament could follow through the night,⁷ concluding with reposition before the first morning Mass of the 29th.

Families could make a special effort to come to exposition as a family, so that we may pass onto the next generation the faith, hope, and love kindled and sustained by devotion to the Blessed Sacrament.

Parishes and ministry centers may wish to celebrate a Votive Mass of the Holy Eucharist every appropriate Thursday between June 2nd and October 27th.⁸ The lectionary texts for this votive Mass are beautiful.

How can each of us who takes part in the Eucharist learn to become a promoter of communion, peace and solidarity?

In every Eucharistic Prayer, the priest prays two special prayers; they are called *epicleses* (plural). In each one the Church calls (the *clesis* part of the word) to the Father in the name of Jesus to send down (the *epi* part of the word) the Holy Spirit.

The first is called the consecratory epiclesis which takes place when the priest holds his hands over the bread and wine and asks: “And so, Father, we bring you these gifts. We ask you to make them holy by the power of your Spirit, that they may become the body and blood of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at whose command we celebrate this eucharist.”

The second one is called the *epiclesis* of communion: “May all of us who share in the body and blood of Christ be brought together in unity by the Holy Spirit.”⁹ This is the harder task of the Spirit: to make us one. Part of disobedient humanity, we are still too wrapped up in ourselves and attached to our own groups and opinions. We are divided by ethnicity, education, financial ability, politics, and theology. And nowadays many Catholics are divided even about the way the liturgy is celebrated! My hope is that there will be among us a willingness to surrender our personal preferences and inclinations. The new *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* expects this of each and every priest, deacon, lay minister, and member of the assembly:

*In the celebration of Mass the faithful form a holy people, a people whom God has made his own, a royal priesthood, so that they may give thanks to God and offer the spotless Victim not only through the hands of the priest but also together with him, and so that they may learn to offer themselves. **They should, moreover, endeavor to make this clear by their deep religious sense and their charity toward brothers and sisters who participate with them in the same celebration.***

Thus, they are to shun any appearance of individualism or division, keeping before their eyes that they have only one Father in heaven and accordingly are all brothers and sisters to each other.

*Indeed, they form one body, whether by hearing the word of God, or by joining in the prayers and the singing, or above all by the common offering of Sacrifice and by a common partaking at the Lord’s table. **This unity is beautifully apparent from the gestures and postures observed in common by the faithful.***

When we surrender ourselves to become the one Body of Christ during the sacred liturgy, we learn the deepest lesson of the paschal mystery: we learn to lay down our lives for one another in Christ and for Christ. This is what our Holy Father is doing at this very moment and what he has called us to do with greater effort during this Year of the Eucharist.

Conclusion

The oldest record outside the New Testament of what the earliest Sunday Eucharist looked like is preserved in first century *Didache*, ‘The Teaching.’ In a text that Christians have been saying and singing for nearly 2000 years, I find summarized what I have been trying to say in this letter and I commend it to your praying and singing throughout this Year of the Eucharist:

*Father, we thank thee who hast planted
Thy holy name within our hearts.
Knowledge and faith and life immortal
Jesus thy Son to us imparts.
Thou, Lord, didst make all for thy pleasure,
Didst give us food for all our days,
Giving in Christ the bread eternal;
Thine is the power, be thine the praise.*

*Watch o’er thy Church, O Lord, in mercy,
Save it from evil, guard it still,
Perfect it in thy love, unite it,
Cleansed and conformed unto thy will.
As grain, once scattered on the hillsides,
Was in this broken bread made one,
So from all lands thy Church be gathered*

Into thy kingdom by thy Son.¹⁰

*Father, we thank you for the vine,
Made known to us through Christ your Son.
Life and knowledge, gift divine,
Blood shed to make all mankind one.
Glory to you for ever!*

*Father, we thank you for the bread,
Body of Christ, eternal life.
Make us perfect in your love.
Save us from pain of war and strife.
Glory to you for ever!*

*As grain once scattered on the hills
Was in this blessed bread made one,
So from the four winds bring your Church*

Into the kingdom of your Son.
Glory to you for ever!

Grace come to all our hearts and minds.
Let sin, repented, pass away.

Hosanna to the living God
While we await his glorious day!
Maranatha! Lord Jesus, come!¹¹

The composer seems to have looked *through* the bread and the wine as through a lens. He or she saw the wheat and the grapes on the hillsides and heard the glad cries of the harvesters and bakers and the vintners as they labored to make, through human ingenuity, bread and wine. So many grains scattered are now ground together; so many grapes hanging from vines are now pressed into the service of human joy. Through the baking and fermenting of the Holy Spirit, the bread and wine have now become the very way God gives us life immortal and gathers us in unity into the kingdom.

May this be our song and our task for the Year of the Eucharist!
Martyrs of Sunday, pray for us!

Tod David Brown
Bishop of Orange
24 March 2005

This Holy Thursday, the evening during which we celebrate the Mass of the Lord's Supper and find ourselves at the epicenter of the special Year of the Eucharist proclaimed by Pope John Paul II.

¹ Our beloved Holy Father Pope John Paul II—for whose health we pray—reminded us of the powerful witness of Emeritus and his companions in his letter, “*Dies Domini: On Keeping the Lord’s Day Holy*,” a wonderful letter I invite you to read in connection with my own letter, especially Chapter Three, “Sunday: The Day of the Church,” available at <http://www.vatican.va> in English and Spanish, under Holy Father > John Paul II > Apostolic Letters > Dies Domini May 31, 1998:

English: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini_en.html

Spanish: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_05071998_dies-domini_sp.html

² You can find the more complete telling of this story in the old edition of Butler’s Lives of the Saints, corrected by the new edition (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1998)

³ *Didascalia Apostolorum*, XIII, as quoted in Jean Lebon, *How to Understand the Liturgy* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), Margaret Lydamore and John Bowden, translators, 31.

⁴ Only those materials should be available that follow the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (English at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_en.html; Spanish at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20020513_vers-direttorio_sp.html).

⁵ The liturgies for the procession, solemn exposition, and benediction are found in Chapter III of *Holy Communion and Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass*, available in *Rites, Volume One* (Collegeville: Pueblo, 1990) and on-line at <http://www.fargodiocese.org/EducationFormation/Evangelization/Eucharist/HolyCommunionAndEucharisticWorshipOutsideOfMass.pdf>. (Please note that this on-line version does not have Chapter IV, the lists of biblical readings, hymns, and prayers that may be used for the procession, solemn exposition, and benediction. These are a treasure house of healthy Eucharistic piety.) The Bishops of England and Wales have compiled a list of fine songs that may be sung at <http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/liturgy/Resources/YOE/HCWE-Music.pdf>.

⁶ At which you have my permission to proclaim the gospel of the Emmaus Road, Luke 24:13–35 (46A in the *Lectionary*), the theme of the Holy Father’s apostolic letter declaring the Year of the Eucharist (see the following note).

⁷ Please make available to worshippers the texts of the biblical readings, hymns, and prayers I just mentioned, as well as the Holy Father’s apostolic letter, “*Mane Vobiscum Domine, Stay with us, Lord, Quédate con nosotros, Señor*”:

English: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20041008_mane-nobiscum-domine_en.html

Spanish: http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20041008_mane-nobiscum-domine_sp.html

⁸ i.e. when there is not an obligatory memorial, feast, or solemnity.

⁹ Eucharistic Prayer II. In Eucharistic Prayer III the intention is expressed: “Grant that we, who are nourished by his body and blood, may be filled with his Holy Spirit, and become one body, one spirit in Christ. In Eucharistic Prayer IV “Lord, look upon this sacrifice which you have given to your Church; and by your Holy Spirit, gather all who share this one bread and one cup into the one body of Christ, a living sacrifice of praise. In Eucharistic Prayer I for Reconciliation: By the power of your Holy Spirit make them one body, healed of all division. Fill us with his Spirit through our sharing in this meal. In Eucharistic Prayer II for Reconciliation: “Fill us with his Spirit through our sharing in this meal. May he take away all that divides us.” This prayer powerfully continues: “May this Spirit keep us always in communion with John Paul, our Pope, N., our bishop, with all the bishops and all your people. Father, make your Church throughout the world a sign of unity and an instrument of your peace.” In the Roman Canon, three prayers express this intention: (1) “We offer [these gifts] for your holy catholic Church, watch over it, Lord, and guide it; grant it peace and unity throughout the world”; (2) “In union with the whole Church we honor . . .”; and (3) “For ourselves, too, we ask some share in the fellowship of your apostles and martyrs . . .” In Eucharistic Prayer I for Masses with Children: “Fill us with the joy of the Holy Spirit as we receive the Body and Blood of your Son” (this doesn’t adequately translate the Latin: “*Mitte nobis Spiritum Sanctum ut, Filii tui Corpus et Sanguinem sumamus, et simus cor unum et animam unam.*”). In Eucharistic Prayer II for Masses with Children: “Send the Holy Spirit to all of us who share in this meal. May this Spirit bring us closer together in the family of your Church . . .” (this also doesn’t adequately translate the Latin: “*Exaudi nos, Domine Deus, et dona Spiritum tui amoris cunctis, qui de hoc participant convivio, ut in Ecclesia magis magisque sint unum . . .*”). In Eucharistic Prayer III for Masses with Children: “Father in heaven, you have called us . . . to be filled with the joy of your Holy Spirit” (this also doesn’t adequately translate the Latin: “*Pater sancte, qui nos vocasti, . . . per Communionem Spiritus Sancti unum corpus in caritate fiamus*”).

In the Eucharistic Prayers for Masses for Various Needs and Occasions: “Through the power of your Spirit of love include us now and for ever among the members of your Son, whose body and blood we share.” All of these prayers go on to ask God for unity in the Church in four different ways: (I) “Strengthen the bonds of unity between the faithful and their pastors, that together with John Paul, our pope, Todd our bishop, and the whole college of bishops, your people may stand forth in a world torn by strife and discord as a sign of oneness and peace”; (II) “Strengthen in unity those you have called to this table. Together with John Paul, our pope, Todd our bishop, with all bishops, priests, and deacons, and all your holy people, may we follow your paths in faith and hope and radiate our joy and trust to all the world”; (III) “Strengthen the bonds of our communion with John Paul, our pope, Todd our bishop, with all bishops, priests, and deacons, and all your holy people”; and (IV) “Lord, perfect your Church in faith and love together with John Paul, our pope, Todd our bishop, with all bishops, priests, and deacons, and all those your Son has gained for you.”

The unity of the Church is the special concern of our Holy Father. He tells us this in Sections Three and Four of his letter, “Stay with Us, Lord.”

¹⁰ F. Bland Tucker, *The Hymnal 1940*.

¹¹ Sung to the tune of the French carol, “A la venue de Noel.”