



DIocese of Youngstown

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

As your bishop, there is something very important that I need to speak with you about. Given the current political climate, I realize that some may welcome my words. And yet, I know that there will be others who will find fault with them. In spite of any perceived differences or disagreements, my prayer every day remains, “That all may be one.”

Before I invite you into this reflection, I need to share some prefatory remarks that are foundational. First, I have always been and will always be Pro-Life. Life is the most precious and sacred gift. From conception until natural death, life is always to be revered and honored. The sanctity of human life and the dignity of every human person is paramount in our Christian tradition. I believe we all have an obligation to promote and protect human life.

Second, this reflection in no way is to be construed as “political.” My words have nothing to do with an endorsement of any political ideology, party or person. If anything, my words are meant to be formational and informational as they relate to the living out of our faith and the continued development of our consciences.

Finally, I confess to you that what I write is not in any way meant to be self-righteous or even self-serving. I simply write as a sinner who happens to be by God’s mysterious providence your bishop. My intent is to build up the Body of Christ, to behold the sacred gift of Eucharist and to help us to grow in our faith always with the fervent hope, “That all may be one.” In my own unworthiness, I take heart in the words we utter together at every Mass before receiving Holy Communion, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

Over the last few months I have, like so many of my brother bishops, been receiving passionate letters and emails on the topic of the Holy Eucharist. The recent decision by the United States Bishops to write a document on the Meaning of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church engendered even more responses. Incidentally, I was one of the bishops who voted for the document, for this is a teachable moment.

A 2019 Pew Survey revealed that among those who identified themselves as Catholic, only 31% believe in the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Needless to say, a majority of Catholics see the bread and wine as merely symbolic. Added to this narrative is the reality of the pandemic, during which we had been without the Sunday Obligation for an extended amount of time. For a portion of this time, the Eucharist was not available as there were no public gatherings. Concomitant with all of this is the reality that some Catholics clearly are presenting themselves for the Eucharist while, at the same time, publicly espousing beliefs contrary to the faith. I think most will agree that in recent years there has been on many fronts a lack of reverence for the Eucharist.

It is out of this context that the theme for the Bishops' strategic plan for 2021-2024 is "Created Anew by the Body and Blood of Christ: Source of Our Healing and Hope." It is because of these same disturbing realities relative to the Eucharist that I believe an overwhelming majority of bishops voted to write a document on the Holy Eucharist which will be foundational for the upcoming multi-year Eucharistic Revival Project, a major national effort to jumpstart Eucharistic faith and reverence in our country. Archbishop Gomez, President of the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, articulated so well the purpose behind the document on the Eucharist in a June 21, 2021 Statement when he said, "As bishops, our desire is to deepen our people's awareness of this great mystery of faith, and to awaken their amazement at this divine gift, in which we have communion with the living God. That is our pastoral purpose in writing this document."

Thus, the proposed document is designed to be pastoral and educational but not judgmental or condemning of any person or persons. Furthermore, it should be noted that contrary to some media reports, the document will not contain a national policy on withholding the Eucharist from politicians.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis writes, "The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak." (#47). By God's divine grace and mercy, we are offered the Holy Eucharist. We are not entitled and we certainly, given our fallen nature, do not deserve it. We are all unworthy due to sin.

Nevertheless, it is important that when we approach the altar to receive our Lord, we are not only properly disposed but striving every day to live a life of communion with the Church. You see, when we receive the Eucharist, we believe that we are not only receiving Jesus but also all that the Church teaches and professes. If we oppose a significant Church teaching, then we are not living the life of communion we are called to live. In some cases, we can be committing scandal. It is not just in these moments but in everyday life we as Catholics must embrace ongoing conversion. None of us can ever underestimate the power of God's saving grace especially in the presence of sin. Saint Paul acknowledges this when he says, "Where sin abounds, grace abounds all the more." (Romans 5:20)

Also in *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis notes, "The process of secularization tends to reduce the faith and the Church to the sphere of the private and personal." (#64) As a result, there is an increasing relativism in our world that more and more favors individual rights and freedoms to the detriment of all that it means to be a true member of the community of the Church.

I realize that in the case of those who take matters of the faith into their own hands and rationalize and relativize their situation or right to receive Holy Communion there is an outcry by some to dismiss these individuals and deprive them of the Holy Eucharist. I understand that there is a real disconnect here and I appreciate the need to bring the disconnect to a person's attention for the good of that person and the integrity of the Sacrament.

As I have prayed about this matter and looked at it pastorally, I cannot get out of my mind the gospel story of the woman caught in adultery. The scribes and the Pharisees brought her to Jesus and asked him to make a judgment. Jesus responded by saying, "Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to cast a stone at her." (John 8:7) Based upon what they heard, we are told that one by one they departed the scene. When Jesus asked the adulterous woman if anyone condemned her, she responds with a resounding "no." In response, Jesus says, "Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again." (John 8:11) While Jesus does not condemn her, he does admonish her to stop sinning. As we prepare to receive our Lord, we must always seek to leave behind our sinful ways which alienate us from God and divide us as a community. Obviously, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a strong and compelling way for us to prepare ourselves to receive our Lord. It is also very helpful to engage in a daily examination of conscience.

We live in a fractured world riddled with discord and divisiveness. This is not how Jesus intends us to live. Recall before he died, Jesus prayed his greatly priestly prayer, “That all may be one” as he and the Father are one. (John 17:21) Every day we need to support each other in the work of conversion be it our own or that of our neighbor. In our own lives, we need to be attentive to the teachings of the Church and adhere to them accordingly. In our accompaniment with one another, we may need to practice fraternal correction always done in charity.

My dear brothers and sisters, this is not a time for stones but mirrors. Each and every one of us must look at ourselves. We need to examine our conscience and insure to the best of our ability even in our unworthiness our readiness to receive our Lord in the Eucharist. It seems to me that we need to spend less time worrying about who else should not receive Communion, and more about preparing our own souls for its reception.

This is not a time for judgment but mercy. Saint James reminds us, “Mercy triumphs over judgment.” (2:13) Each and every one of us is in need of that mercy because we are all sinners. In *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis references Saint Thomas Aquinas and his belief that “mercy is the greatest of all virtues.” (#37)

As we anticipate receiving our Lord at Holy Mass it is fitting that we all say or sing together, “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us.” We truly need that mercy. And how appropriate we together say, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” May we never take for granted the Real Presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist and on the altar at Adoration, which is food for our journey, medicine for our soul, strength for our weakness and hope for our despair. It is also in this same Eucharist that the prayer of Jesus is realized, “That all may be one.”

In the meantime, as we move forward in these challenging times, let us not discount the power of prayer. Prayer can move mountains, open eyes and change hearts. Please pray for a greater respect and reverence for the Holy Eucharist and a firmer resolve to be in the right state of grace to receive this most precious gift. I wish to close my reflection and encourage your own self-reflection by echoing the words of Archbishop Gomez in his address, “I invite everyone in the Church to pray for the bishops as we continue our dialogues and reflections. I pray that this will be a time for all of us in the Church to reflect on our own faith and readiness to receive our Lord in the Holy Eucharist.”