



Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist  
to the Catholic Faithful of the Diocese of Worcester

by

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My dearly beloved in Christ,

The Holy Eucharist is the source and summit of the Christian life. This salient teaching of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council provides the theological and pastoral context for celebrating the Year of the Eucharist, promulgated by His Holiness, Pope John Paul II on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, 2004. As we, the People of God in the Diocese of Worcester, observe the Year of the Eucharist, I wish to write this pastoral letter to emphasize the centrality of the Most Holy Eucharist in the life and mission of the Catholic Church.

On the night before he suffered and died for the salvation of the world, the Lord Jesus gathered in the upper room with the Twelve apostles to celebrate the Passover meal for the last time. During that Jewish ritual, our Savior gave to his Church for all time, under the appearances of bread and wine, the gift of his Body and Blood that would be broken and poured out the next day on the cross on Calvary hill. When Christ instituted the Eucharist, he also instituted the gift and mystery of the priesthood <sup>[1]</sup> so that the Eucharist, the true and lasting memorial of his saving death and resurrection, would be renewed sacramentally for the salvation of the living and the dead.

### **Liturgical Renewal**

The first document that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council promulgated concerned the Sacred Liturgy and its central place in the life of the Catholic Church. At the center of the Church's liturgical life is the celebration the Eucharist. The Church and the Eucharist are inseparable realities. The Council Fathers gave priority to the renewal of the liturgy so as to emphasize that the Church's liturgy, especially the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist, is the pre-eminent source of vitality for the Body of Christ, the Church.

During the last forty years, much time and effort have been put into implementing the reform of the liturgy in our parishes and diocesan centers for pastoral ministry. The Year of the Eucharist provides us with an opportunity to step back and reflect on how faithfully and successfully we have made the celebration of the Eucharist in our diocesan parishes a genuine experience of appreciating the central mystery of faith. Every Sunday we Catholics have the occasion to meet their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ in the proclamation of the Word and the reception of his Body and Blood in Holy Communion. Through this sacramental encounter, we receive the grace necessary to help us grow in

personal holiness and to bring the presence of the Lord Jesus to those we encounter in our daily lives throughout the week.

### **Church Teaching on the Eucharist**

It is a perennially valid insight to claim that "you cannot love what you do not know." In this pastoral letter, I wish to restate what the Catholic Church holds and teaches about the Sacrament of the Eucharist. In recent years, various polls have been conducted concerning Catholics' belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. If the data from these polls are even somewhat accurate, they indicate that in the last generation, there has been a loss of understanding of what the Eucharist is and how and when Christ is really present in this Sacrament of the Altar. This is a cause of grave pastoral concern for me as your bishop since at the core of our Catholic identity is a proper understanding of the doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church is a highly valuable compendium of Catholic teaching that can serve as a certain reference for learning what the Catholic Church actually teaches about faith and morals. A copy of this Catechism should be in every Catholic home in the Diocese of Worcester. Recalling the teaching of former councils of the Catholic Church, the Catechism states concerning the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, "Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly his body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church...that by the consecration of bread and wine, there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. This change the holy Catholic Church has fittingly and properly called transubstantiation." <sup>[2]</sup>

The Catholic Church teaches that the Lord Jesus confided to his Church seven sacraments by means of which we, the Catholic faithful, can grow in holiness of life. The celebration of the sacraments necessarily involves natural symbols that are integral to the valid celebration of these sacred mysteries. In the sacrament of Baptism, the symbol of water has primary place among other symbols such as oil and a candle in its ritual performance. In the celebration of the Eucharist, unleavened bread and wine are the symbols that the faithful present to the priest for the reenactment of the memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord. While the elements of bread and wine symbolize the Body and Blood of Christ given to us to eat and drink, the presence of Christ,

Body and Blood, soul and divinity, is not symbolic. His sacramental presence is real and demands from us the response of thanksgiving and adoration of the Lord Jesus who has promised to remain with his Church until the end of time in this great gift of the Eucharist.

The Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, as well as St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, witness to the historical foundation of Christ's institution of the Eucharist. Christ chose to bequeath to his Church the gift of the Eucharist on the night before he suffered and died for the redemption of all people. Moreover, he chose to perform this central act of his public ministry within the context of the Jewish Passover meal. This setting for the institution of the Eucharist is of profound importance. Faithful Jews yearly celebrate Passover to recall Israel's Exodus from Egypt. This divinely inaugurated act of liberation from slavery and oppression has singularly shaped the consciousness and identity of the Jewish people throughout history. When the youngest Jewish male asks the oldest gathered at the Passover meal why "this night" is different from all others, the response is that on "this night", Yahweh is leading his chosen people to freedom as really as he did their ancestors thousands of years ago.

The celebration of the Eucharist makes real in a sacramental way the supreme act of liberation for all people, the sacrifice of Christ on the cross on Good Friday. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass makes present, in and through the sacramental signs of bread and wine, the one, unique, unrepeatable and all-sufficient act of our redemption: the passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In the present, we do not simply look back to some distant historical event that has no real or efficacious effect on our present condition. When the Catholic community celebrates the memorial of our redemption in the Most Holy Eucharist, the past invades the present in the power of the Holy Spirit and points us toward that heavenly Jerusalem where the heavenly banquet, of which the Church's Eucharist is a foretaste, will have no end. In the Sacred Banquet that is the Mass, we pierce the veil of the Kingdom that is to come and in receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, we receive the pledge of future glory. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church so eloquently states, "Whenever the Church celebrates the Eucharist, she remembers this promise and turns her gaze 'to him who is to come'. In her prayer, she calls for his coming: 'Marana tha! Come, Lord Jesus. May your grace come and this world pass away.'" [3]

## The Eucharist for the Life of the World

The celebration of the Eucharist in the present points us to that approaching future when God will be "all in all". However, the sacrament of the Eucharist also commits us to engaging ourselves in the work of evangelizing our society and transforming of our culture. At the beginning of my ministry as the Fifth Bishop of Worcester, I suggested that as a diocese, we must all together pursue the path of the "new evangelization". Our participation in promoting the new evangelization is a sacred task and mission of proclaiming to all who will listen that Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The Eucharist is that sacrament that calls and enables us to be about the work of bringing Christ to others.

In the traditional theological language of the Church, Catholic theologians have spoken about "the fruits of Holy Communion". The first and preeminent fruit of the reception of the Body and Blood of Christ is union with Christ himself. In Holy Communion, we receive him who is the hope of the world, the Savior of all people. Immediately after the consecration of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, the faithful proclaim the mystery of faith at the invitation of the priest: "Christ has died, Christ has risen, Christ will come again". This christological statement points to the meaning of the new evangelization. To evangelize is to proclaim by what we say and by how we live that Jesus Christ wishes to be introduced into the hearts and minds of all people of all times and places. When we eat the Body of Christ and drink his Blood, we are personally united to Christ whom we are committed to bring to others by virtue of our Baptism and Confirmation.

The Gospel of John is the only Gospel that does not contain the story of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. In its place, the Fourth Evangelist narrates the Lord's washing the feet of the Twelve. This substitution of narratives is of monumental theological and pastoral importance for comprehending an essential dimension of the Eucharist in the life of the Christian believer. In washing the feet of his disciples, Jesus anticipated his supreme act of service to others by his death on the cross. In performing this dramatic expression of selfless and sacrificial love, Jesus gave to his Church the new commandment of love. What he has done for us, we must do for others. In imitation of him, we, his followers, are to serve one another in selfless service and love, even to the point of self-sacrifice. The Eucharist is the sign of unity and the bond of charity. [4] Hence, the celebration and reception of the Eucharist demand that we serve our brothers and

sisters in the Church and in the world, especially those who are poor and in greatest need.

### **The Eucharist: Life in Christ**

“Where charity and love prevail, there God is ever found. Brought here together by Christ’s love, by love are we thus bound.” So states a hymn that is frequently sung in many of our parishes during the Communion rite of the Sacred Liturgy. Receiving Christ worthily in Holy Communion helps us grow in grace, that supernatural gift that joins us more closely to the person of Christ and his body and helps us progress in holiness of life. The Christian moral life is, in fact, life in Christ.<sup>[5]</sup> The demands of living the Christian moral life in today’s American society are significant and challenging. One of the disturbing pastoral facts of life in the Church today is the precipitous decline in weekly attendance at Sunday Mass. Some surveys indicate that only one-third (1/3) of American Catholics attend Mass every Sunday or Saturday evening. This statistic causes me great concern as the pastor and shepherd of the Diocese of Worcester.

St. Luke, the author of the Acts of the Apostles, tells us in his first chapter that the first Christians in Jerusalem, “...devoted themselves to the apostles’ instruction and the community life, to the breaking of bread and the communal prayers.”<sup>[6]</sup> Like our forbears in the faith, we must find our roots and identity as Catholics in the celebration of the Eucharist. We must take part in the life of the community of faith and live according to the authentic teachings of the Church presented to us by the Holy Father and the bishops of the Church in union with him. In the Liturgy of the Word, we hear proclaimed the marvelous works of God in the history of Israel, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and in the early Christian communities founded by the Apostles. In the homily, the priest or deacon applies the Word of God to our daily lives so that we may gain insight into how to live out our individual vocations and thereby become “the salt of the earth and the light of the world.”<sup>[7]</sup> In receiving the Body and Blood of Christ, we fortify our communion with our brothers and sisters in the Church and pledge to make our lives in Christ more apparent and effective.

The temptation to be like everyone else is very real in today’s world. Yet by virtue of our faith and Baptism, we have, as St. Paul instructs us, put on Christ and have become a new creation in him.<sup>[8]</sup> As a result of our intimate union with Christ through the reception of the Eucharist, we are more closely configured to him and should therefore grow into a

greater likeness to him. St. Paul told the first Christians living in the Greek town of Philippi that, “Your attitude must be that of Christ.”<sup>[9]</sup> Social and cultural observers claim that on the pressing social, moral and cultural questions of the day, Roman Catholics differ very little from other Americans. What do such observations imply for us as a Catholic community? There are over three hundred and fifty thousand Roman Catholics in the Diocese of Worcester and sixty million Roman Catholics throughout the United States of America. What an extraordinary influence for transforming our society into a civilization of love we American Catholics could have here in Central Massachusetts and beyond! Imagine how different our families, our neighborhoods, our professions, our politics, our society would be if we all lived according to the heart and mind of Christ whose Body and Blood we receive in the Eucharist. This thought should lead us all to a serious examination of conscience and with God’s grace, to conversion of life, particularly during the Year of the Eucharist here in the Diocese of Worcester.

The obligation to attend Mass every Sunday under pain of serious sin still exists.<sup>[10]</sup> However, weekly attendance at Mass should not be viewed primarily as fulfilling a legal obligation but as a grateful response to having been invited to share in the greatest act of love ever demonstrated in human history. What person who loves his or her family would regularly and without a sense of remorse refuse an invitation to partake of a family meal? What person who is concerned about his or her physical health would refrain from eating what is best for her or him? The Holy Eucharist is the Catholic community’s weekly, and even daily, family meal. It is a blatant contradiction for a Catholic to claim that he or she is a Catholic and not partake of the weekly family meal. The Body and Blood of Christ received in Holy Communion is that privileged spiritual food without which our spiritual lives and our relationship to Christ and the Church will wither up and die. During this year of the Eucharist, I implore those Catholics here in the Diocese of Worcester who have abandoned the practice of weekly Sunday Mass attendance to come home. I would ask them to receive the sacrament of Penance and return to a worthy reception of Holy Communion at weekly Mass.

### **The Eucharist and the Ordained Priesthood**

The Year of the Eucharist provides us in the Diocese of Worcester a wonderful opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the Eucharist and

the ordained priesthood. Christ instituted the Sacrament of the Eucharist in the Upper Room on the night before he died. At that same moment, the Lord Jesus, the Eternal High Priest who offered himself to God the Father for the redemption of the world, instituted the Sacrament of Holy Orders to perpetuate the memorial of his redemption until the end of time. The sacred realities of the priesthood and the Eucharist are so theologically and pastorally intertwined that the Catholic faithful must remember that without the priest, there is no valid Eucharist, and without the Eucharist, there is no Church. Our Holy Father, in his most recent encyclical, The Church and the Eucharist, has pointedly noted that, “The Church lives from the Eucharist.”<sup>[11]</sup>

At the present moment, we have a hundred and twenty-six parishes in the Diocese of Worcester. Like most dioceses in the United States, the number of ordinations to the priesthood has dropped significantly in the last twenty-five years. As a result, the median age of our diocesan priests is rising. It is incumbent upon all Catholics in our diocese to pray daily for an increase in vocations to the ordained priesthood. I have made the promotion of priestly vocations an overriding priority of my pastoral ministry as your bishop. The Lord Jesus has commanded us to pray for vocations to the priesthood. “The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few. So pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers workers into his harvest.”<sup>[12]</sup> Christ is always faithful to his promises. I am confident that at this moment, many young men in the Diocese of Worcester are being called to the priesthood. As we celebrate the Year of the Eucharist, let us all together, especially parents, grandparents, parish priests, Catholic school teachers, catechists, college chaplains and campus ministers, triple our efforts at the promotion of priestly vocations. Thereby the Catholic community will not be lacking in good and holy priests to celebrate daily the inestimable gift of the Most Holy Eucharist in our parishes.

### **The Parish and the Year of the Eucharist**

It is my fervent hope and expectation that every parish will readily engage itself in the celebration of the Year of the Eucharist in various ways during the coming months. Our diocesan Office for Worship and the Diocesan Planning Committee for the Year of the Eucharist can serve as helpful resources to our parishes and diocesan institutions for formulating liturgical, catechetical and spiritual ways of doing so.

The celebration of the Eucharist is the true foundation and origin for the Church’s venerable

pastoral practice of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Eucharistic adoration extends that personal encounter that we experience in the worthy reception of Holy Communion and prepares us for a more enlightened and active participation in subsequent celebrations of the Mass. Moreover, Eucharistic adoration provides us with the opportunity within our busy daily schedules to enter into spiritual communion with Him whom we receive sacramentally at Holy Mass.<sup>[13]</sup> For this reason, I strongly urge all our parishes to observe regularly periods of adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. During such intense periods of personal prayer and devotion, you and I can make reparation for our own sins and the sins of the world. We can pray for peace in our violent world and for vocations to the priesthood, diaconate and consecrated life.

For over a year, we have been implementing here in the Diocese of Worcester the norms of the General Instruction of the Roman Missal. In this way, we can be assured that the Holy Eucharist is being celebrated reverently and with proper decorum according to the liturgical law of the universal Church. Before the end of the Year of the Eucharist that will be observed solemnly at the end of October, 2005, I will publish another briefer document on the proper celebration of the Eucharist. Our Holy Father has recently observed, “...there are shadows within the Church”<sup>[14]</sup> concerning the proper understanding of the Church’s doctrine on the Eucharist that is sometimes manifested in improper ways of celebrating the Eucharist. The Eucharist is the sacrament of unity and can never become a place for personal liturgical idiosyncrasies or a reason for discord in a parish or place of public worship.

### **The Eucharist: Sent out on mission**

We have chosen the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus as the biblical and theological context for our diocesan observance of the Year of the Eucharist. Every parish Church has received an icon of this scriptural scene. In our celebration of the Eucharist, we take the place of those two disciples on the road with Jesus. When we hear the Word of God proclaimed at Mass, our hearts should burn with love and profound thanksgiving for the wonders that God has done for each of us. When we receive the very Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion, we recognize the awesome gift of his abiding presence in our souls, our most welcomed guest. As we prayerfully make our private thanksgiving for the reception of Christ in the Eucharist, we echo the words of the disciples, “Remain with us, Lord” as our faithful companion on our way to the Kingdom of

God that lies ahead of us. As we are dismissed from the liturgical assembly, we, like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, go out on mission to others to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ, ever confident that Christ is the way to peace and reconciliation for a world that is in dire need of his healing presence.

Imploring the intercession of Mary, the woman of the Eucharist,<sup>[15]</sup> for an increase in love and devotion to the gift and mystery of the Eucharist among all members of the Diocese of Worcester, I conclude this pastoral letter on the Eucharist with the poetic words of St. Thomas Aquinas, the great theologian of this Sacrament of Sacraments.

*Devoutly I adore You, hidden Deity  
Under these appearances concealed.  
To You my heart surrenders self  
For, seeing You, all else must yield.*

*Sight and touch and taste here fail;  
Hearing only can be believed.  
I trust what God's own Son has said.  
Truth from Truth is best received.*

*I see no wounds, as Thomas did,  
But I profess You, God above.  
Draw me deeply into faith,  
Into Your hope, into Your love.*

*Amen.*



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Memorial of St. Thomas Aquinas  
Year of the Eucharist

## Endnotes

1. Pope John Paul II. Dominicae Cena. (February 24, 1980), Par. 2.
2. The Catechism of the Catholic Church. # 1376.
3. Ibid. #1403
4. St. Augustine. In Johannis Evangelium. Tract 26, n.17.
5. Catechism. Part Three: Life in Christ.
6. Acts 2:42
7. Mt. 5:13-14
8. 2 Cor. 5:17
9. Phil. 2:5
10. Catechism. #1389
11. Pope John Paul II. Ecclesia de Eucharistia. (April 17, 2003), Par 1.
12. Mt. 9:37
13. The Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy. Thirty-One Questions on Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: Washington, DC, 2004). #2, p.2
14. Pope John Paul II, op. cit. Par 10.
15. Ibid., Par.53.