

1. Centrality of Eucharist: From East to West a Perfect Offering

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In the history of the Church, changing situations and conditions often compel the community of faith to reflect deeply on the way in which it lives and celebrates the mystery of Christ and to discern how best it can remain faithful to the gospel. Such a time of discernment has arrived for the local churches in our country and around the world. This is because of both the opportunities presented by changing patterns of ministry in the Church and the challenges presented as fewer priests are available to our growing parishes.

During this past year, primarily through the Priests' Council, the Priests' Convocation and our diocesan Spring Ministry Day, but also among many parish staffs, parish councils and liturgy committees, the Church of Rochester has begun to reflect on what it means to say the Eucharist is central to our lives as Catholic Christians. The question concerns both how we celebrate the Eucharist and what it means to be a eucharistic people living a eucharistic life.

THEOLOGY OF THE EUCHARIST

The Eucharist is the central event and action of reconciliation for a community of faith. God's people gather to hear the word, to offer themselves with the gifts of bread and wine, to remember the mighty acts of God in Jesus Christ and, in so doing, to join themselves to Jesus Christ who is the Perfect Offering. We gather at the table, and then go forth to live what has been said and done. This action of sacrifice and worship is the way we celebrate and keep as our focal point the event of the Paschal Mystery of Jesus' life, death and resurrection.

Week after week, year after year, since the time of the earliest Christian communities, Catholic Christians have come together to celebrate Eucharist on the Lord's Day. This Sunday gathering of the community for the purpose of celebrating Eucharist has been and still is a hallmark of the Church.

The Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is crucial to our understanding of our Christian identity. It is the centerpiece of the Church's Liturgy, which the Second Vatican Council refers to as the "summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the fount from which all the Church's power flows." (Constitution On The Sacred Liturgy, #10)

The **Catechism of the Catholic Church** speaks of the place of the Eucharist in the life of the community in this way: "It was above all on 'the first day of the week,' Sunday, the day of Jesus' resurrection, that the Christians met 'to break bread.' From that time on down to our own day the celebration of the Eucharist has been continued so that today we encounter it everywhere in the Church with the same fundamental structure. It remains the center of the Church's life." (CCC#1343)

This understanding of the Eucharist as the action of the whole community gathered at prayer is a defining characteristic of our Catholic faith. In this action of praise and proclamation, offering and receiving, we know Jesus present in the midst of the assembly, in the proclamation of the Word and in the bread and wine, now the Body and Blood of Christ. In this eucharistic action we are fed and nourished so as to go out into the world to be the presence of Christ, to live Christ's dying and rising in our worlds of family and friends, work and play, neighbor and stranger.

Call for dialogue

The increased awareness of this focus of our lives, coupled with the reality of a diminishing number of priests, occasions the current discussion. Because this discussion affects the entire diocesan church, I call upon all the people of the Church of Rochester to enter into this dialogue so that we may make decisions about our future that will be informed by the rich streams of our ancient faith, as well as the diversity, talent and imagination that God has given to us.

I ask that we enter into an open, prayerful and honest conversation in the same manner and with the same

spirit that marked our recent Synodal discussions. Then, as the Holy Spirit works among us, we may arrive at answers that will carry us into the new millennium eager and ready to meet the challenge of living out the Gospel mandate to gather the People - to tell the Stories - and to break the Bread.

FIVE VALUES

I make the request in the context of five basic values of which I have already spoken at the Priests' Convocation and the Spring Ministry Day.

We are all participants in the risen life of Christ through the grace of baptism and our participation in the sacraments. The pattern of dying and rising, in each of our lives as well as in the life of the community, is incorporated into the dying and rising of Jesus Christ especially through the Eucharist. It inspires us to bring a sense of hope and life to all we meet in the course of our daily living.

We are joined to one another in Christ. We are called to be alive to the reality that we are not just individuals standing before God, but rather a community of people brought together as the Body of Christ. Our Diocesan Mission Statement and our statement of Synod values represent the deepest, most systematic expressions of the hopes of the people of our local church. We need to embrace them joyfully, for they give us direction on how we are called to preach, worship, build up community, and serve those in need. Any discussion of future planning needs to continue to be informed by the values of collaboration, lay leadership, rich diversity, open, trusting and respectful dialogue and ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and cooperation which we have already laid out for ourselves.

We must be aware that for the immediate future the presbyterate will be fewer in number and older. How do we place our energies so as to provide the best pastoral and sacramental life for the Church of Rochester?

The basis for all our dialogue and guide for our pastoral practice must be the documents of the Church which provide the basic norms for our liturgical and sacramental life. These documents, beginning with the **Constitution On The Sacred Liturgy** and continuing through to the most recent **Sunday Worship In The Absence of a Priest**, inform and free us. The decisions we make need to be drawn from, and not contradict, these documents that represent the best of our Tradition.

DIVERSE ISSUES

The issues that face us are many and diverse. They include, but are not necessarily limited to, the following:

- Our need to understand that the reception of Communion can never replace the action of celebrating the Eucharist, especially our understanding that the Sunday Eucharistic liturgy is at the core of our life and nothing can equal it;
- The quality of our Sunday celebration of the Eucharist and the expectations of the Church in this matter, as Church documents set forth;
- The number of Masses within an area and the impact those numbers may have on the quality of Eucharistic celebration;
- The appropriate place of communion services and the development of alternative celebrations when a priest is not available for the celebration of the Eucharist;
- The development of leadership for alternative celebrations;
- The recognition of the value of the local community gathered in prayer, and the question of when, or if, it might become advisable to ask particular, local communities to join with others for the celebration of the Eucharist;
- The appropriate use of the marriage and funeral rites outside of the Eucharist;
- The recognition of what can be expected from the individual priest that balances the norms of the church with real, human needs, i.e., vacation, retreat, study, day off;
- The development of appropriate Eucharistic devotions.

RESOURCES FOR STUDY AND DIALOGUE

I call upon all pastors, pastoral administrators, parish staffs and parish councils to engage the Church of Rochester in this dialogue through homilies, bulletin and group discussions within the parish, the region and other natural groupings. Some materials, particularly the Liturgy Documents, are already at our disposal for this purpose. Study guides, homily curricula and other materials will be forthcoming to assist in this dialogue. Informed by the discussion, we will be able to make the decisions necessary for the future life of the diocesan Church.

A plan for each community

We will continue to give the highest priority to the Sunday celebration of Eucharist in all our parish communities. This is the norm for the church except in a situation of emergency. Prudent planning must take place so that each community will have direction in the event of such an emergency. These issues and discussions call us to renewed ways to be the Church of Christ, and new and better ways to be a parish. May we continue to be open to the Holy Spirit who walks with us and leads us as we search for the best response to the opportunities and challenges before us.