



ON BEING MISSIONARY PARISHES WHAT IS THE HEART OF A PARISH?

QUOTATIONS

Scripture

I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes (*1 Corinthians 11:22-26*).

All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brethren... And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (*Acts 1:14; 2:42*).

Let us hold fast... not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another (*Hebrews 10:25*).

Catechism of the Catholic Church

A parish is the place where all the faithful can be gathered together for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. The parish initiates the Christian people into the ordinary expression of the liturgical life... (2179).

COMMENTARY

Saint Paul tells us what he himself had received, ***I also delivered to you***. Thanks to this text, probably written before the Gospels, we know what the very earliest Christians believed about the Mass: ***This is my body... This cup is the new covenant in my blood*** meant just that.

Belief in Christ's real presence is the reason the Apostles and early disciples met ***for the breaking of the bread***, the expression used in the early Church to describe the Eucharistic celebration. Even then, as the **Letter to the Hebrews** suggests, there were some members who ***neglected to come*** to the weekly meeting; the others were to ***encourage one another***.

In the quote from the Catechism, we have a brief but rich definition of what a parish is. We will continue to reflect on the rest of this text in the next Chapter. It begins by telling us that, first and foremost, ***a parish is the place where all the faithful can be gathered together for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist***. The **Second Vatican Council** reminded us that the Eucharist is the both the source and the summit of the Christian life. In other words, at the heart of our personal life as a disciple of Jesus -- and therefore at the heart of every parish -- is the celebration of the Eucharist.

All ministries of the Church and works of the apostolate draw their power and vitality from the Eucharist. Without it, the Church would have no life for, as the French theologian, Henri de Lubac, wrote: *the Eucharist makes the Church*.

The **Second Vatican Council** quotes St Thomas Aquinas in teaching that in the Holy Eucharist is contained the whole spiritual good of the Church, namely Christ himself. Whenever the Eucharist is celebrated the Risen Christ draws each one of us into his sacrifice offered to his Father once and for all on the Cross. By this same sacrifice, Christ now pours out the graces of salvation upon his Body, the Church, and through her upon each one of us.

WHAT IS THE HEART OF A PARISH?

Part one of four Parish Reflections and Discussions

In the Eucharist, the bread and wine are changed - truly, really and substantially - by the power of the Holy Spirit and the words of the priest, into Christ's Body and Blood. Christ feeds each one of us with his Body and Blood, and we are called to become what we receive: the Body of Christ, delivered up to his Father for the salvation of the whole world. As the Curé of Ars told his parishioners, *If you understood this clearly, you would die of joy!*

While the Mass is often celebrated on each day of the week, the Sunday Mass holds a unique place in the life of our parishes. Sunday is the day on which the Lord rose from the dead; it is the first day of the new creation, and is rightly called the 'Lord's Day'. We instinctively know that each Sunday is a weekly Easter as we celebrate Jesus' Resurrection; we do so in union with the whole Church throughout time and space.

As we have seen from Scripture, Christians have gathered to celebrate the Lord's Resurrection by celebrating the Holy Eucharist from the time of the Apostles. In the **Letter to the Hebrews**, we read this moving encouragement to the early Christians and now to all of us: **Do not to neglect to meet together... to encourage one another** (Hebrews 10:25).

This tells us that the fact some no longer come to Mass is not a new problem! And yet, coming together is vital. Quoting a Greek Father of the Church from the 4th Century, the Archbishop of Constantinople, St John Chrysostom, the **Catechism** (2179) goes on to say: *You cannot pray at home as at church... where there is something more: the union of minds, the accord of souls, the bond of charity, and the prayers of the priests.*

This is a bold statement. It tells us that, in our relationship with God, there is 'something more' when we come together in church, something which can truly be said to be lacking in our Christian life if we do not come.

Participation in the Sunday Eucharist is the foundation for the whole of our lives. The early Christian martyrs gave their lives for the Eucharist, as did many Martyrs in our own lands. They proclaimed by their death that they could not live without coming together as a community for Sunday Mass.

In our own Diocese of Shrewsbury, there were many priests, laity and religious who during the Reformation gave their lives in witness to the truth of the Eucharist, the most well-known being Saint Margaret Ward and Saint John Plessington who were two of the 40 Martyrs of England and Wales canonised by Pope Paul VI in 1970.

DISCUSSIONS AND ACTIONS

- Would a stranger visiting your parish recognise that the Eucharist is the heart of your community?
- In what ways is the Eucharist the heart and centre of your parish life?
- How can we better prepare for this encounter with Christ in the Sunday Mass?
- How do you see the celebration of the Mass as the foundation of 'the mission' renewed each Sunday?
- How can we better appreciate this mission entrusted to us?

In a time of silence, take a moment to ponder all of these things, then make a personal decision:

- In what way could the Eucharist be made more the 'heart and centre' of your parish life?
- What can I do, personally, to live what I have discovered in these reflections?
- What can we do together as members of a parish to live this vision more deeply?

*Pray together the prayer **Our Mission Together.***