

Reflection by Monsignor James D. Watkins, Pastor

### *Unworthiness vs. Lowliness*

How close do you really want to be to God? Be careful what you pray for; you might actually get it! “As close as I possibly can,” you might say. In the natural order of things, the closest we can ever get to any person is, of course, body to body and blood to blood. If that is true, then it makes intelligent sense that the closest possible encounter with God would also be body to body and blood to blood. For us as Catholics, of course, this is the supernatural truth of our faith is revealed by our divine Lord in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, His Body and Blood. With that powerful truth which should attract us all to commune with the God-Man, Jesus Christ, in the closest possible manner spiritually at Mass. Yet, most of us, I believe, suffer from a real or even unreal sense of unworthiness. You say, “I feel so unworthy to approach the altar with all of my sins.” I want to talk about the distinction between unworthiness, on the one hand, and lowliness, on the other.

There is a general sense in which all of us are sinners. For this reason, mankind cannot conquer the problem of sin in the world, so it makes sense that God would accomplish that feat for us. That’s why He sent His only Son, to be the perfect act of sacrifice on a cross to atone for Original Sin and all sins and why the Sacrifice of the Mass continues as the perpetual memorial of that real act of salvation until the end of time. Yet, so many stay away from the Sacrament out of a false sense of unworthiness to receive Him at Holy Communion. Many, I think, do not really believe that God has forgiven them or will forgive them. They prefer, perhaps unconsciously, to remain convinced that no one will forgive them for what they’ve done in the past; they carry that heavy burden with them all through their lives and stay away from the Church and the Sacraments, especially the Mass and the Holy Eucharist, out of this false sense of unworthiness. They’ve convinced themselves that they are not worthy. Moreover, their inner sense of unworthiness is fueled by critics of the Church that those who do attend Mass and receive Holy Communion are hypocrites because they, too, are imperfect and sinners and masquerade themselves as saints. The secular culture enjoys bashing the Catholic Church, in particular, using scandals as a clear indication of our hypocrisy. “See, they’re all sinners and, therefore, all are unworthy, so tear down the Church and all that it professes because they’re all evil hypocrites.” Actually, what’s really at stake is the claim, “Remove Christianity and all religion from the human scene because anyone who believes in God is an unworthy sinner who masquerades as a saint and is a liar. The Church, therefore, is a liar and should be exposed as such and done away with.”

In a sense, we are all unworthy, if by that one means that no one has a right to claim one is a saint. Yes, we are all sinners, but that doesn’t mean that we are not worthy of His forgiveness, His divine mercy, His compassion and love. In fact, if this were not the case, then why would God condescend and take on a human nature to accomplish the marvelous act of salvation for us? God, therefore, finds us worthy of redemption, not self-destruction. One of the core truths of our faith is that God does find us worthy to save and to redeem through the sacrifice of His divine Son. So, we are, in a real sense, worthy, not unworthy.

On the other hand, to counter a false sense of pride in our worthiness of His divine mercy and love, we adhere to lowliness. Lowliness is the antidote to unworthiness. Lowliness allows us to accept our imperfect and sinful state of being with the recognition of our profound need of God in our lives. Grace

is not something we presume or grasp at; that would be pride. Rather, we stand before the Almighty with an open mind and heart to do His Will and not ours. To do this takes grace, and grace is a gift which God desires to shed upon us, especially by means of the Word and the Sacraments.

The model for lowliness through obedience, of course, is the Blessed Virgin Mary. God found her worthy; she accepted that grace in her lowliness. If God deemed us all unworthy, then there would never have been the Incarnation through Mary. She doesn't say, "No, I'm unworthy," even though she asks the question of the angel, "How can this be?" Rather, she submits to God's plan for her and accepts the invitation in lowliness, acknowledging that she is, by God's grace and not her own efforts, most worthy, not less worthy. Moreover, Mary grows in obedience to God's Will by clinging to her lowliness, not unworthiness. If she had convinced herself that she was unworthy, she could never have advanced in her holiness. If we are so convinced that we are unworthy, then we can never advance by God's grace to become holy; yet, that is exactly what God wills --- for us to become holy.

So, unworthiness is not counter to the Gospel and a spiritually dangerous foe to God's Will for each of us. The humble, lowly disposition of mind and heart before God allows our Lord to afford us His grace to advance in holiness, rather than to retreat in the despair of our sins. May we all dispose our minds and hearts to His Will by listening carefully to the Word made Flesh who comes desires to commune with us, as we with Him, in the closest possible encounter of love this side of heaven. There at Mass, each of us finds our lowliness in Him who humbles Himself under lowly forms of bread and wine and thereby grow in holiness. Each of us is worthy of that gift; that's why He wants us to receive His Body and Blood.