

St. Ann's Church – Washington, DC

Holy Thursday 2020 -- Homily by Msgr. Watkins

My dear Parishioners and Friends of St. Ann's Church,

As we are tested by this difficult ordeal of the contagion of the coronavirus which reaches almost every country in the world, I want to greet each one of you and to assure you of my prayers, especially for those who are afflicted with the virus, for those who have died because of the virus, for those who care for the sick and dying. We are all in this together.

A few weeks ago, none of us could have imagined the situation we are experiencing now. The current circumstances have prevented us from gathering for Mass, and especially during these holiest of days. And on this Holy Thursday, in particular, when our divine Lord instituted the Holy Eucharist at that first "Mass" with his beloved Apostles the night before His Death, the absence of the public celebration of that perpetual Mass is so very different, so very strange, just plain weird spiritually for all of us who love the Mass and the graces afforded by this beautiful Sacrament of His divine love; and it is very strange for me, personally, since it was at the Last Supper when our Lord instituted the Sacrament of Holy Orders upon his first priests, the Apostles.

Without the public offering of Mass, though, we are still united by bonds of faith, hope, and love and through our personal prayer and sacrifices can mature spiritually. So, I thought I could offer you some reflections as we attempt to celebrate in some relatively dignified manner the liturgy of Holy Thursday.

So, we know through natural experience that there is no real substitute for being present to someone we love so much than to be actually and truly in their presence, body to body and blood to blood. Any other way of relating to the one we love just doesn't "cut it" the same way: emails, Facebook, Zoom chats, cards and letters, even the telephone can't really compare to being physically present to that person.

Some say that they can commune with Him in private prayer and scripture reading; and that is a good thing. However, to be in the real presence of Jesus, body to body and blood to blood, once again as we have said, is the closest

experience any one of us can enjoy this side of heaven. Perhaps that why we as Catholics miss Jesus so much, because He loves us more than we could ever love Him. From His perspective, perhaps, Jesus misses being with you, too. He always longed to remain with his beloved friends. And while He understood that He would have to return to His heavenly Father, He at the same time left us with the gift of His very self through the Mass in that perpetual offering of His Body and Blood for our salvation. He says, "I am with you always until the end of time." This is why the Mass makes such incredible intelligence, because it grounds each of us perfectly in that natural desire to be so close to God, so present to God, and God so present to you and me that all other means of knowing and loving the other can't compare. He is here with you. You are here with Him. You can't get closer than that. This is why Catholics adore the Mass, rather, adore Jesus. And we don't simply adore Him; we commune with Him. He feeds us with His life-giving Body and Blood. He is in us; we are in Him. We become one with God through Jesus in this intimate HOLY communion, where words cease, where I simply gaze upon the other with tender love and gratitude. Words cease when you're in love with the other so much. Just being present to each other, as heart speaks to heart in silence.

So, this is why the Mass, is so important for each of our souls. Each of us longs to be as close to God as possible this side of heaven. The Mass makes this happen. Jesus makes this happen once again. In fact, He's been offering the Mass through his priests everywhere in the world for 2000 years and will continue to do so until the end of time. Why? Because that's the way He designed it when He said, "This is my Body for you ... This is my Blood for you ... Take and eat ... Take and drink ... He who eats my Flesh and drinks my Blood will live forever." So, we not only are most satisfied by His presence in the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, but we are given the pledge and promise of eternal life. Wow! No other religion guarantees that, not because the Church believes that, but because Jesus gave His priests that mandate: "Do this in memory of me." He said, "Do this ..." So, we do it; rather, He does it, for the Mass is not my offering as a priest alone, but it is the priesthood of Jesus Christ which makes the Mass not my personal thing but His act by which bread and wine become His Body and Blood given for my salvation.

So, we miss the one we love so much. We miss Jesus today and during these months away from the Mass. We long for Jesus – perhaps even more than

before. This spiritual longing can be a positive indication of our intense desire to be even closer to Jesus. In a certain way, the denial of the Sacrament is not a bad thing entirely; in fact, it can be essential to spiritual growth as each of us contemplates just what we don't have in order to desire more the satisfaction of knowing that when we receive our Lord again one day at Mass that our joy will be all the more complete. We delay the present gratification of reception of the Holy Eucharist in favor of future reward; for we know that we will be with Him again at Mass one day when the crisis is over and we can rejoice together.

As we have said before, this moment should also prompt all of us to reflect seriously on the precious gift of our Faith and never to take for granted the graces which come through the Church, especially through the Sacrifice of the Mass which momentarily we are unable to experience. What would it look like if we could never attend Mass again? How would it feel if our church doors were closed forever? What would it mean if there were no more priests to offer the Mass? Would it matter? For us who already know the answer, these questions should encourage us to appreciate the gift that is our Catholic Faith, the gift that is our parish church, the gift that is Jesus Christ our divine Lord in the holiest of Sacraments. What difference does it make? All the difference in the world.

In the meantime, remember our Lord's famous words, "Do not be afraid," and, "Peace be with you." Be assured of my prayers for you and your families and loved ones during our extended stay in the "desert" of Lent. Special prayers for the sick and dying, as well as for our doctors and nurses and all health-care providers. We long for returning to church. We miss each other, and we miss our Lord. One day we shall be together with Him again in the public celebration of the Life, Death, and Resurrection of our divine Savior.