

**“Seeing Beyond Appearances to the Sacred:
Defending Human Life and Reverencing the Holy Eucharist”
Memorial of St. Joseph the Worker
May 1, 2021
St. Mary’s Cathedral
Readings from Saturday of the Fourth Week of Easter
*On the occasion of the
Promulgation of the Pastoral Letter,
“Before I Formed You in the Womb I Knew You”***

Introduction

On April 17th, Pope Francis beatified Blessed Siméon Cardon and five other Cistercian monks, who heroically gave their lives to defend the sanctity of the Eucharist. The year was 1799. French soldiers in Italy during the Napoleonic wars were sacking churches and abbeys. Soon, soldiers invaded the Cistercian Abbey in Casamari – this is in Italy – where Friar Simeon Cardon and his brothers lived and worshiped God. In an act of deliberate violation, the soldiers took consecrated hosts and scattered them on the abbey floor. In that awful moment, Simeón and his brothers knew what the most important thing in life was: to protect and defend the sacred. Because they knew in their hearts, as well as their minds, that the consecrated host was the real Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because they knew that, they acted. With one mind, they rushed forward to gather and protect the Eucharist. The soldiers opened fire, murdering them all.

On the occasion of the beatification, Pope Francis asked all of us to be inspired by their sacrifice. He said, “These meek disciples of Christ resisted with heroic courage unto death to defend the Eucharist from desecration. May their examples spur us to a greater commitment of fidelity to God capable of transforming society and making it more just and fraternal.”

Loss of the Sense of the Sacred

This is a good example of the deep connection between faith and action. If we don’t act in accordance with what we say we believe is true, we begin to think that it must not really be true, and then we begin to act accordingly. Our faith weakens, and we become distant from God. The bishops here in the United States are focusing at this time on what we call “Eucharistic revival,” trying to address the distressing phenomenon of fewer and fewer Catholics believing in the Real Presence of Christ. Again, that begins to be reflected in action: how the Blessed Sacrament is treated, how it is received when people come up to communicate, how people are prepared – or not – for receiving this precious gift.

It is alarming, but it gets to something deeper. It is really a loss of the sense of the sacred, and we can see that manifesting itself all over the place in our society nowadays and how it affects everyone. The dismantling of marriage and family life, the dismantling of the call of fatherhood, disrespect for other people’s property and even the property of communities of faith, of what they hold sacred, even that being violated, amid manifestations of great glee and celebration, the discrediting of the heroes of our history, and in so many other ways.

This I believe is the situation we are now in with regard to the great and horrendous evil of abortion. There is no sense of the sacredness of even innocent human life, of the littlest among us. There are even those who try to persuade us that choosing to kill the innocent is somehow a human right. They literally have a license to kill in order to indulge in what they desire.

It is that sense of the sacred that underlies everything. In a few moments here at our Mass, Jesus Christ will become really and truly present once again on the altar, Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity under the appearances of bread and wine. To take this precious Body and Blood worthily means that we have renounced and confessed grave sins and sought His forgiveness in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. And by consuming the Eucharist, we are telling the world that we believe that what the Church teaches is true. If we don't mean it when we say it, if we don't show it in how we treat and approach this most precious Gift, that lack of sense of the sacred will spill over into all the other areas of our life.

Sacredness of Human Life Connected to Sacredness of the Eucharist

The two are intimately interconnected: reverence for the Sacred Eucharist and reverence for human life, especially where it is most vulnerable and defenseless. That is why in a little while this morning, at nine o'clock, I will release a pastoral letter on this very topic, entitled, "Before I Formed You in the Womb, I Knew You: a Pastoral Letter on the Human Dignity of the Unborn, Holy Communion, and Catholics in Public Life."

This is why I, as your pastor must speak; it is overdue. We need to put an end to this barbarity, and we also need to make corrections to the irreverence with which the Blessed Sacrament is treated. That sense of the sacred is really what we know from our Catholic tradition as the "sacramental sense," seeing beyond the physical to the spiritual, to the greater realities that transcend the physical and lie beyond. When we think of life in the womb, or for that matter any person in need, do we see beyond the physical person to Jesus Christ, recognizing Him in the poor, the defenseless as He taught? When we see the appearance of bread and wine on the altar, do we see beyond the appearance to the substance?

I always recall what a very devout priest once told me about looking at the consecrated host while praying the Lord's Prayer at Mass. It's an old devotion of priests. And I asked him why. His response was what we heard in today's Gospel, where Jesus says, "Whoever has seen Me has seen the Father." We look at the Son, His Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity on the altar and see the Father.

St. Joseph the Worker

The Father. This brings us to contemplate St. Joseph, whose other feast day we celebrate today. He beheld his foster Son every day. Our Lord Jesus' Father had to provide an earthly father for Him, so He could grow up in a family. Joseph taught Jesus – Jesus in his human nature – the carpenter's trade. And so we know from our Catholic insights that even work itself has this sacramental sense; it's more than just something functional, an activity one does in order to earn an income and support oneself and one's family.

Through work, we contribute to society. We contribute to family life. We use all the gifts God has given us: our talents, our energies, health, our time, in order to provide and care for others, to be other-focused so that God might open up our hearts to receive His love, and we can

then become the people God created us to be. We learn all of this from St. Joseph: the sanctity of work, of family, of obedience to God, of seeing beyond, to seeing the presence of God.

“White Martyrdom”

You are gathered here today to pray to God to end the horrendous evil of the killing of innocent life. After this Mass, you will gather and give witness to the equal dignity of every human being and for our need to surround mothers in crisis with love and care. You speak for those who cannot speak for themselves. I regret that I cannot join you for the gathering and the witness in front of the Planned Parenthood clinic today, as I do have another commitment for Mass right after this one, but you know that I am processing with you in spirit. I thank you for your commitment to reclaiming the sacred.

Our challenge today in our time and in our place is not the call to be martyrs for the Eucharist. I don't think we'll experience what Blessed Simeón and his brothers did. Actually, the problem is the opposite – it's the challenge of having too casual an attitude and forgetting in whose Presence we truly are. Rather, I think the kind of martyrdom for us is that of enduring harassment, vitriol, social exclusion, all this as a way of laying down our lives, what we call “white martyrdom” for the sacred in another way, the sacredness of human life at its very beginning. But every life saved is worth it, to see beyond the physical life to the presence of Christ is worth it.

Conclusion

While we live and work for justice and goodness in this world, ultimately it is not this world that matters most. The only thing that truly matters is eternity. It is not politics that matters most. It is souls. It is not outrage that matters most. It is courage to speak the truth and defend what is most important: the sacredness of the Holy Eucharist and the sacredness of each and every human life for whom our Lord Jesus Christ died.