The Meaning of the Mass: Part Two
by Fr. Brian Mahoney

What happens at Mass? And I do not mean the ritual part. Even though we come each week, do we really think about what is happening at Mass? Sure, people might say, “Well, we hear something from the Bible. The priest or deacon preaches a homily. And, of course, we receive the Eucharist.” All of this is true, but such understandings stay at the surface of what is happening at Mass. The reality is that something very powerful is occurring each time we come to Mass, and if we are not really paying attention we can easily miss it.

Every time we enter into the Mass, we are guaranteed that four things will occur: 1) God will speak directly to us and will reveal something about Himself. He will share His very life with us. 2) We will experience the very presence of God. 3) We will remember how Jesus saved us, and 4) we will experience and participate directly in our salvation. These four things will happen whether or not we recognize them. At each celebration God wants to give us the opportunity to come into a deeper relationship with Him. He recognizes that it can only happen based on what He does. The foundation of our relationship with God is not about what we do, but how God calls us into relationship. One of the most powerful gifts that He gives us for growing in that relationship is the Mass itself.

The Mass reminds us of a simple truth: we cannot manage our lives without God. Hence, God makes it possible at every celebration for us to both know Him better and to experience what it takes to live our lives each day with Him. The whole point of Christian life is not to be a “good” person, but rather, to be a person saved in Jesus Christ. The good we seek to do is determined by one criterion alone—what God’s will is for us in any given situation. If we act in accord with God’s will, we do good. If we act contrary to God’s will, we do evil. It’s that simple. By doing God’s will, we live out the salvation Christ won for us. And what is salvation? It is living a life in union with God. It is about living a life in which we express our true nature—that of being made in the image and likeness of God. Mass helps us to do just that as we experience both the reality of God and our salvation.

As we seek to find Christ in our lives, we should be drawn to the story of Emmaus. Two disciples walk along the road in despair because they believe they have lost Christ. And in their deepest grief they discover a stranger. This stranger breaks open the word of God for them, and in the breaking of the bread, they discover who He truly is—the One they have been seeking. The story of Emmaus is the story of Christian life as it is lived daily. But, it is also the story of the celebration of Mass. Think about this story. Two are gathered in the name of Christ and as He promised He is in their midst. The word of God is then proclaimed and explained, as in the Mass, to help us break open God’s saving work in our own lives. Through this experience they are led into the celebration of a meal where bread is offered, blessed, broken, and given, and then Christ is recognized. The story of Emmaus is the story of how we celebrate the Eucharist.

The Mass is ultimately about finding the One we are seeking and desiring in the deepest level of our hearts.