May 10, 2020: Fifth Sunday of Easter

I just got an email from a former parishioner. She let me know about some things that she found helpful during this time. One thing she said that I found really profound was, “But one thing that surprised me was how much I miss the Eucharist. I will never take it for granted.” The interesting thing is how often I am hearing this from people these days. It, of course, goes along with the old saying, “Absence makes the heart grow stronger.” And also, “You don’t appreciate what you’ve got until its gone.”

For Catholics the Eucharist is not something we do or something we get. The Eucharist is a person—Jesus himself. As Catholics, we must definitively believe that the Eucharist is really, truly, and substantially the Body and Blood of Christ. We must realize that, even though to our senses the bread and wine appear unchanged, to the eyes of faith, the very substance—the true reality of the sacramental elements through the consecration—have been transformed into something new. Of course I could go on and on where the Eucharist is concerned. I could spend the rest of my life literally unpacking the meaning and reality of the Eucharist, but I do not believe that is what people are missing.

Of course we can have, and must have, a relationship with Christ where we encounter him every day. Christ is in our lives. Christ is a part of who we are through our baptism. We are temples of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us, and through that indwelling Spirit we are united in a direct and concrete way with Christ. Christ is our Lord and Savior. Christ is our God. Our encounter with Him in our lives can be an overwhelming and powerful event. We simply need to look at the conversion story of Saint Paul. But, no matter what our encounters with Christ might be, they do not and cannot equate with the Jesus we encounter in the Eucharist. As Catholics we know that the only difference between Jesus in Eucharist and Jesus in the New Testament is appearance. He is the same Jesus who was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontus Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried, rose again, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. It is the exact same Jesus. There is no encounter with Christ that can equal or surpass the Jesus we encounter when we celebrate Mass.

People are missing that encounter of receiving the Lord in the Eucharist. As Jesus told us in the Gospel of John, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.”

Jesus has promised to feed us, and we hunger for Christ. We hunger for his physical presence. We hunger for his presence that we feel within us when we receive his sacred Body and Blood. When we receive the Eucharist, we truly become one with Christ. We share in his very life. His very nature comes to dwell within us. We are missing that which gives us true life. It is a powerful reminder to us that life without Christ has a real emptiness to it. As we heard last week, Jesus told us, “I came so that they might have life and have it more abundantly.” It is this abundance of life that hearts desire and we cannot truly have it without Christ.

We are learning through this pandemic an important lesson and one that hopefully we will not forget. The Eucharist finds its deepest meaning in the connection it makes for us with Christ. Jesus wants to give himself wholly and completely to us so that we might have that abundance of life, but also, so that we can share what we have received with others. As Christians, I believe part of the loss of the Eucharist is our inability to share Christ as Christ desires us to share Him.

We are social beings in nature. We are intended to be in community and communion in the same way God is in community and communion. And our inability to be united as one with Christ through the Eucharist
leaves a hole in our hearts; we cannot express fully our humanity in Christ. The Eucharist is the primary and fundamental way in which we Catholics both experience our humanity and learn how to live and express our humanity in and with Christ.

We are simply waiting for that time when once again we will know the life Christ desires to share abundantly with us. Until that time our hearts will simply grow stronger in love with Him, who is absent in our life in that powerful way.

If you have any questions about anything, please do not hesitate to ask me directly, or send your questions to me at fr.brian@chelmsfordcatholic.org.

Please keep me in your prayers.

In Christ,

Fr. Brian