

I offer a heartfelt invitation to all the faithful to return to Mass and the Eucharist as soon as reasonably possible. As we all know, there is no substitute for being in the same room with the one we love. –Bishop John Folda

Returning to the Eucharist

St. Mother Teresa of Calcutta expressed so well our need for the Eucharist: “We cannot separate our lives from the Eucharist; the moment we do, something breaks... Our lives must be woven around the Eucharist.” And why is this? Mother Teresa knew, as the Church has always known, that the Eucharist is Christ, and when we distance ourselves from the Eucharist, we ultimately drift away from Jesus himself.

Last spring, when public celebrations of Mass were suspended for several weeks because of the COVID-19 outbreak in our country, it was necessary to worship our Lord from a distance. Huge numbers of people took advantage of live-streamed and televised Masses when they couldn’t attend Mass in person, and these virtual Masses became a spiritual lifeline for them. We learned how to make a spiritual communion when we couldn’t receive Holy Communion in person. And even now, there are large numbers of people who refrain from attending Mass for reasons of personal health and safety. Some who are vulnerable to infection are refraining from coming to Mass, and still depend on the Masses that they can view on television or on their computers. Communications technology has been enormously helpful to us in these uncertain times, and has made it possible for us to stay connected and participate remotely in the Church’s worship.

But we should never conclude that “watching Mass at home” is just as good as attending Mass in person. As Cardinal Robert Sarah from the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship recently said, “No broadcast (of the Mass) is comparable to personal participation or can replace it.” When we are separated by distance from a loved one, it is wonderful to be able to converse by phone, or even better by a video connection like Zoom or Skype. But no one would settle for a Zoom call to their beloved when it is possible to be in the same room, to embrace and to speak face to face. In a similar way, we come to Mass to be in the presence of our Eucharistic Lord, to participate personally in his sacrifice, to adore him, and to receive him in Holy Communion. That personal encounter with Christ in the holy place where we gather as a parish family matters, because the incarnate Son of God came among us in our humanity and called us to personal communion with him. He invites us to come close, and not to remain at a distance.

For those who have no other option, the broadcast of Mass is a great blessing and is deeply appreciated by many. But relying on these broadcasts alone could distance us from the personal encounter with Christ, who comes to us in an intimate way through the celebration of the Eucharist. We also risk isolating ourselves from the community of all the faithful, from the Church. When Jesus began his public ministry, he called companions to himself, who became the first members of the infant Church that he founded on the apostles. From the very beginning and all through our history, the faithful have gathered together for the celebration of the Eucharist, “the breaking of the bread,” as it is called in Acts 2. Even in times of persecution and disaster, the faithful have instinctively come together in prayer and adoration, and especially for the celebration of the Mass. We should not lightly separate ourselves from the living community of the Church, which is the mystical Body of Christ on earth. Nor should we deprive ourselves from celebrating and receiving the Eucharist. As Jesus told his followers, “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” (John 6).

Are we lifting the dispensation from the obligation to attend Mass? Not yet, or at least not as I write this column. The health crisis in our state and in our diocese is still unfolding, and I do not feel it is the right time to reinstate the obligation while many are still at an elevated risk of infection. But with appropriate safeguards and precautions, it is possible to attend Mass with very little risk. Infectious disease specialists in our own diocese tell me that with the common practices of social distancing and wearing masks, we can attend Mass with little risk to ourselves or to those around us. Fortunately, there have so far been no outbreaks of the coronavirus that are traced back to church events since we reopened to the public, and most of us can reasonably attend Mass without great fear of infection. In fact, I am

hopeful that our normal participation in Mass can be restored in the very near future, and I encourage those of you who can attend Mass to do so. Just as we would rush to be with a loved one after a long separation, so we should rush to rejoin our Lord in the celebration of Mass.

Allow me to thank all of you who have done so much to support our parishes during these last several months. Your generosity has made it possible for us to keep going, even within the limits of our present situation. Certainly our pastors will continue to reach out to those who are still at risk and unable to attend Mass in person. Our parishes will continue to include all members in prayer, especially those who are ill or homebound, or those who must be in quarantine. We will bring the sacraments to those who cannot come to church to receive them. But I also offer a heartfelt invitation to all the faithful to return to Mass and the Eucharist as soon as reasonably possible. As we all know, there is no substitute for being in the same room with the one we love.