

20th Sunday (B)

18th August 2024

'Practical attitudes to the Eucharist'

Prov 9: Wisdom feeds her people Ps 33: *Taste and see that the Lord is good*

Eph 5: *always and everywhere give thanks to God the Father through Jesus*

Jn 6: 51–58: *He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me*

In my 25 years as a priest, I've celebrated Mass in all sorts of places: sometimes with hundreds of thousands, perhaps even a million or two, at World Youth Days with the Pope (Rome, Madrid, Kraków, Lisbon); occasionally just on my own in a hotel room if I had no other opportunity when on a long journey. Once, years ago, returning from Rome with a youth pilgrimage, we had Mass in an empty luggage van as the train trundled slowly across Europe.

Wherever, and whenever, we celebrate the holy Mass — whether it's in great splendour and ceremony, or in the most humble of circumstances — *the essence of the Mass remains*: that the Lord gives Himself to us in all His hidden glory. Though we do not *see* His radiant splendour as the Son of God, yet we know in faith that He is present: *For my flesh is real food and my blood is real drink. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood lives in me and I live in him.* Jesus's teaching on the Eucharist, which has

been building over the past few Sundays' Gospel readings from Jn6, is very strong and clear. There is no doubt about His intention: He fully meant, at the Last Supper, to give us this Sacrifice and Sacrament in His very Body & Blood: the Body that was given up, the Blood that was poured out, on the Cross. Whatever the context — whether in a grand cathedral with thousands of others and powerful choral and organ music, or in a simple quiet setting with two or three — when we offer the Mass we are truly in the presence of the divine Lord: in this precious Sacrament, this most *Blessed* Sacrament, He is present on the altar; He is offering His sacrifice; He is inviting us to receive the food of eternal life. From the life-giving and life-changing significance of the Mass — this generous, personal breaking-in on our little lives of the loving Son of God — various *practical matters* flow, because of Catholic belief in the Eucharist. *I tell you most solemnly, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you will not have life in you!* These are serious words from God to us; we must pay heed and be in accordance with them:

1. **Getting here to Mass.** We really must get to Sunday Mass (and holydays) as a bare minimum, unless we are *genuinely* prevented! It's a mere 1hr/week, less than 1% of the waking week! When working weekends or when on holiday, then *plan ahead*, to make sure of getting to Mass. If staying with non-Catholic or non-practising family/friends, then you have a great opportunity without ostentation to give a clear witness to your need to be with Jesus at Mass. Maybe you'd feel awkward about this — I think you just need to *get over* that awkwardness! You may find that the response is more positive than you think, and more accommodating. The long and the short of it is that it remains a *grave sin* to miss a Sunday or holyday Mass deliberately and without sufficient reason.
2. **Weekday Mass.** A real *growth point* for any young Catholic is the move from 'having to go to Mass on Sundays' to 'choosing to attend Mass also on weekdays.' This is a big and bold step, as it necessitates altering one's world view from 'fitting Jesus into one's life routine,' to 'fitting the rest of life around one's daily encounter with Jesus.' It's a move that indeed many Catholics do make at around your time of life. I certainly

did. Encouraged by my university chaplain, c. 1988, I chose to try and make it to Mass on some weekdays, and gradually move towards daily Mass. As a priest, of course, offering the daily Mass is the heart of one's day — but this is not the privilege only of the clergy: the Mass is the treasure of all the Church, and daily Mass can be, and should be, the ultimate aim of any Catholic. The practicality of getting to daily Mass, of course, is another matter; yet having that intention of attending weekday Mass whenever possible is a good attitude — a personal gift from your heart to Jesus — that we should foster.

3. **Language.** The words we use to refer to the Blessed Sacrament are very important, aren't they? We must always speak of the "*body and blood of Christ*," and never of the 'bread' and 'wine,' after the *consecration* (Eucharistic Prayer) of the Mass. We must say what we believe! I still sometimes hear talk of 'bread' and 'wine,' when the speaker is referring to Holy Communion, which is already consecrated, and it's just *wrong* to say that; it's a denial of our faith! Are we embarrassed about the words we use for the Holy Eucharist? We should not be! We should say with full conviction what Jesus has

taught us to say in passages like Jn 6. When some of His hearers complained about His clear teaching about His being present in the ‘Bread of Life’ — “*My flesh is real food!*” — Jesus did not backtrack, fudge, or deny the reality of what He was saying; just the opposite, He repeated, clarified, and ‘doubled down’ on the full meaning of His words. We should not be embarrassed at using the language of Christ Himself.

4. **Reverence.** It is important to afford the Holy Eucharist the dignity it deserves, as the real, living presence of Jesus our Saviour. We do this, e.g. by *genuflecting* to the Tabernacle when we enter the church; by *not talking unnecessarily* in church but keeping it a prayerful place at all times; by *concentrating* and praying at Mass; by *kneeling* in the Eucharistic Prayer, the most sacred part of the Mass. These important physical expressions of faith, our reverential postures and actions, say with our body what our beliefs say with our heart and mind. Also, it’s worth adding: *come on time* (early, preferably!) to Mass, rather than habitually late! Those minutes before Mass are a precious offering to Jesus to prepare your hearts lovingly for His coming into our midst.

5. **The Eucharistic Fast** is a discipline of the Church that maybe we need reminding of. It’s not onerous: it’s a mere *1hr before Holy Communion*, or just 15 mins if one is sick/infirm (and plain water never breaks the fast). In the past the Church has asked for a greater fast, including fasting from midnight ... but the current practice is just an hour before Holy Communion, which is not difficult on a Sunday when Mass is pretty much an hour long anyway; on a weekday one might need to be more attentive to keeping the fast.
6. **Refrain from Holy Communion if in serious sin.** This is important: one need not refrain from Holy Communion *unless one is conscious of serious sin*. One does *not* need to go to Confession prior to receiving Holy Communion, though I have heard it said to me even here a few times recently — but there may be times when one *does* need to go to Confession before receiving Holy Communion. I cannot give watertight guidelines here and now for every conceivable situation; but suffice is to say that if one is conscious of grave sin then, yes, one should approach Confession first, and not feel awkward about that. Better to be honest, if there’s something currently separating

you from a real communion with the Lord.

7. **Pray and give thanks after Mass** for Jesus's having come into your life. Be recollected and prayerful as you come up in the queue to Holy Communion, conscious of Whom you are about to receive. After returning to your place after Holy Communion, be very attentive to what you have just done, in receiving *the Body (and Blood) of Jesus* into yourself; give heartfelt thanks for that, and speak to the Lord heart-to-heart about what is closest to you at this time. If at all possible, stay after Mass has ended for a further time of quiet thanksgiving
8. **Richness of Scripture.** The readings at Mass are far richer than can be absorbed in one sitting, so to speak. It would be good to get a missal (once the new ESV translation is available!), or to subscribe to *Magnificat* or *Universalis* (or get it online from the web), because in this way you can read the Mass readings before you come to Mass, and/or re-read them later in the week, after you go home. Both would be really worthwhile spiritual exercises. You are *always free* to take away our Sunday Mass sheet with the readings on – honestly, I mean that, please do: we don't need to keep them! Better that you

can have them to hand for a prayer-time later, to revisit the Word of God that He has spoken to us in the Sunday Mass. They are a source of great spiritual riches for you.

9. **Finally — Pay a visit to the Blessed Sacrament.** This is a pious and enriching practice, that whenever you can, you pop in to church when passing for a few mins of prayer. Those *who live here at Newman House* have such a great privilege in this regard! Do not let it go for nothing! The Lord is here at the very heart of *your home, your Chaplaincy*, and awaiting your visits to speak to Him and show Him your love at any time of day.

All these practical things we can do out of love and reverence for Christ. He has left Himself to us in the Mass in a way which surpasses all other ways: it is His living body & blood, His divine life. Let us always live for Jesus in the Mass, and be devoted every day of our life to this Blessed Sacrament, Our Lord Jesus's real presence, that He may 'fire up' our lives in genuine and lifelong charity:

*For My flesh is real food and My blood is real drink.
He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood lives in
Me and I live in him.*