

PASTOR'S CORNER

Plague Journal

From week to week, as the Spirit moves me, I will share with you certain theological reflections concerning the liturgy and its relation to the times we're in.

The Great Re-opening: Effective this weekend May 9 & 10 Archbishop Sample, in consultation with officials of the State of Oregon, has reauthorized a very limited re-opening of Masses to the faithful. Many conditions are required, some of which I have mentioned in my recent Pastor's Corners. The catch is that only 25 people total can be present at any one of these Masses. I would like to mention a number of points concerning what this means and what it doesn't.

1. The celebration of the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist is called the Mass, a term derived from the Latin dismissal (*Ite missa est*). The Mass is that celebration whereat the faithful in attendance actively participate in the saving death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is a sacramental and communal prayer which effects an exchange between the faithful present and the Risen Lord, through the mediation of the Priest. As members of the priesthood of believers, the Christian offers himself, body and soul, to the Lord. In exchange, the Lord pours out the totality of Himself in love to the believer: Body and blood, soul and divinity. For those properly disposed and by virtue of their active participation, communion is made available whereby they receive Christ in his fullness thus facilitating their ongoing transformation into "other Christ's". The saving effects of the Sacrament occur through one's participation in the worship of the community and by receiving the fullness of the Lord therein.

To summarize, to achieve the fullness of this celebration requires three things:

- a. The gathering of the entire community in assembly,
- b. On the Lord's Day and
- c. Where those in attendance and properly disposed can receive Holy Communion.

In this limited re-opening it is not possible for all the faithful of St. Therese parish to gather together on the Lord's Day. Even before the shutdown this was only possible through the offering of three different Mass times each weekend. Nonetheless the potential existed for the entire community to gather in worship on Sunday (or on the Vigil thereof). This cannot happen now and for that reason in addition to the health risks which continue due to the pandemic, the weekly Mass obligation has continued to be dispensed by the Archbishop. At the appropriate time, when more of the faithful can avail themselves of the opportunity, we will offer these three Sunday Mass times again. But even then this will still not allow for the full participation of the community in worship on the Lord's Day.

2. Much has been said about spiritual communion. I dislike the phrase because it suggests a near equivalency between the Sacrament of the Eucharist and “spiritual communion”. In reality this term is best used only to describe the level of communion achieved by a Catholic who actively participates at Mass but who for one reason or another chooses not to receive Holy Communion.

Unfortunately for most of you in the past two months even this has not been possible. Watching a Mass remotely in a reverent manner is a form of personal prayer only. Though this is certainly better than not doing so, it is an individual act of devotion which avails the person of that level of personal grace commensurate with their level of engagement and personal holiness. By no means is it a form of worship comparable to the Eucharist, for it is neither communal nor sacramental.

It is therefore understandable that all of the faithful yearn for a return to the celebration of Mass. This is so even if the liturgy attended falls short of the optimal desired here at St. Therese. This will unfortunately be the case until the pandemic ends. Nonetheless the return of the opportunity to attend the Eucharist and to receive communion thereat is wondrous news indeed!!

We plan, if all goes well with our preparations, to begin with Masses being offered during the week days on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday at 10:00 am. If these Masses go well and I feel that no one’s health is placed at undo risk, then we will open up to further celebrations on Sunday. Ideally, this expansion will coincide with an allowed increase in the number of folks who can attend and safely be seated.

3. Finally, some of you may have heard of situations where certain parishes will allow for a remote Mass attendance (via live streaming on Facebook, or whatever) followed by a distribution of communion to those who pull up in their vehicles in the following half hour or so in the church parking lot. Is this allowed? Is it valid?

First, it is probably not allowed from the standpoint of the State limitation on religious attendance. If hundreds show up in the parking lot to receive communion at the conclusion of a Mass which had been celebrated with few or any in attendance in the neighboring church, it is near certain that the State of Oregon would consider this a violation of the limit of 25 imposed on religious observances. Yes, even if the cars are staggered in the parking lot! Remember that the 25-person limit assumes proper social distancing; just because you could distance 125 in our church building (and we could) does not mean that this is currently allowed. It’s not. A violation of this type resulting from an end run around the rules could cause the Governor to pull back on the re-opening with the result that all of us would be punished for the zealous excess of a few.

Second, and more important. Such a scheme is neither canonically allowed nor in compliance with the very spirit and essence of sacramental celebration. The consecrated host is not a magic pill to be distributed separate from the very liturgical celebration which gives rise to its existence. Remote viewing of this type is not efficacious for sacramental participation and splits off the person desiring communion from the very actions necessary to insure its valid reception. The risk here is, I hope, obvious in that it takes a saving action which is bound up with community worship and prayer and moves it in the direction of personal devotion. Watching a Mass at home or on a screen is simply not the same as being there in proximity to the liturgical action. For sure, the shutdown by its nature has already threatened us with this very temptation.

We are still some ways off from when things will return to normal. I am very happy that I will be able to offer the celebration of the Mass in just a few weeks. I have deeply missed praying the Eucharist with members of my parish present. Priests are allowed to do this only because of the nature of ministerial Priesthood. And each and every Mass I pray has been done for the community, *in absentia*. But just as this has not been enough to effectively bring you all into the sacrament itself, so too, though valid, the action performed by me in an empty church is a far cry from the fullness towards which all of us wish to return as rapidly as possible.

My brothers and sisters, patience is counseled for both the good of our fellow citizens and for the dignity of the Holy Eucharist as well as for the healing and restoration of souls.

Pax Christi