

PASTOR'S CORNER

Plague Journal

Spiritual Communion

One hears much now about “spiritual communion”. Just about everything you hear however is nonsense and tends to compare sacramental communion over and against spiritual communion as though they are two separate things. So it’s time to draw some fine distinctions. First, the purpose of each and every sacrament is to offer to recipients a spiritual encounter with Christ. It is the grace afforded by this encounter which both justifies and sanctifies. There is no such thing as sacramental communion without the possibility of spiritual communion. And whereas spiritual communion can take place outside of the Sacraments, its quality is typically significantly inferior due to our own spiritual immaturity.

Think of it this way. In my right hand I hold the Sacrament of the Eucharist. This Sacrament when validly celebrated makes objectively present the body and blood, soul and divinity of the Risen Lord Jesus Christ. Even absent anyone to receive it, it remains what it is. This is why consecrated hosts that are not consumed at Mass are reserved in the Tabernacle and afforded all due reverence and respect. Sacraments are what they are because they were instituted by Christ and entrusted to his Body, the Church, for proper administration. The utility of the Sacrament is only realized however when it is received by a Catholic Christian.

The recipient is to be envisioned as my left hand. Though the Sacrament is what it is, its efficacy is dependent upon the believer having the proper disposition to receive. The person needs to be first a baptized Catholic and they need to not have killed their soul through the commission of a mortal (deadly) sin that has not been absolved in sacramental confession. They need to be canonically able to receive Holy Communion within the believing community (e.g. not having committed the sin of abortion absent sacramental reconciliation or being in an illicit marriage (i.e. divorced and remarried outside of the Church)). These hurdles being cleared and more to the practical point, the communicant needs to be engaged of soul to the extent that they come forward to receive with an open heart and knowing mind. The absence of any of these things either prevents the grace of the Sacrament from affecting the soul or greatly or even partially reduces its efficacy thereon.

To not be able to receive Holy Communion during the pandemic is therefore to be rightly understood as a very great burden indeed; even one that asks the believer to suffer as Christ in its absence from their lives. For most people, what is lost is not just spiritual communion as also the greatest opportunity available to avail himself of the opportunity for such communion. Scripture reading and prayer or even watching a Mass via computer are not at all the same thing as receiving the Sacrament. Not even close. Without receiving the Sacrament in Mass, one simply cannot avail themselves of the fullness of what can be offered. This is the tragedy of the current situation.

In no way, at least for those of us who are not saints, can the quality of spiritual encounter be matched outside of sacramental participation. As I have noted before in this forum, even receiving communion outside of Mass (e.g. in a hospital setting or in one’s home) is not the same fullness as can be experienced within Mass. How much more so the current situation! To not receive communion is to not

receive the Sacrament and for most of us that which is substituted (a “live-stream” Mass or a Zoom prayer group meeting) is a pale imitation indeed. It most likely leaves us bereft of the type of spiritual communion that we have all grown comfortable with in happier times.

If we have begun to think that TV Masses and parking lot receptions of communion (which are not allowed, but do occur) are somehow a more convenient and just as efficacious substitute, then we need to think again. Nothing can replace the Eucharist this side of heaven save maybe the sanctity of sainthood. And yet how sobering to realize that all such earthbound saints made it their duty to receive the Risen Lord in the Sacrament as often as they could avail themselves thereof.

Fr. Steve