

THE SHEPHERDS WALKING STICK

My dear parishioners,

Happy feast day of the Corpus Christi to all of you! I remember last year's celebration wherein we were compelled to forego the outdoor procession because of the restrictions. We instead have had a short procession through the aisle of our church and through the foyer. This year, even that is taken away from us.

All the lockdowns have been difficult for me, but this latest one has been the worst. No, it is not about the languor or the loneliness. These I can handle very well. I'm used to be away from home since I left for the seminary at the age of 12, and the seminary formation has trained me to organize my day so as to keep the demon of boredom at bay. The struggle is something else.

You see, I left home with the conviction that God has called me to do something important. And indeed, this vocation has made demands of me in small and big ways. As a priest, I was assigned to subsequent challenging tasks some of which I thought were beyond my abilities – pastor of a parish, rector of our local seminary, judicial vicar of the diocese, member of several boards and councils advising the diocesan Bishop, co-author of our local catechism. Yes, there were times I felt big time, but the demands in the ministry reinforce in me that the priesthood is worth all risks and sacrifices. Besides, I felt needed all the time, and the esteem and appreciation I get from the faithful after the performance of these services further bolstered the feeling of having done something of great import.

While looking forward to focus on parish ministry and, therefore, a less demanding ministry here in Canada, I am still in the mindset that my work – especially celebrating the sacraments, particularly leading the community in the celebration of the Holy Eucharist - is significant. Imagine, then, to my greatest disappointment that during these times of suffering and fear my work is classified as non-essential!

On one hand, this has been good in the sense that it led to a purification of my disposition. I realized my dire need for the virtue of humility; I have to let go of the feeling of self-importance. It is not about me but about God, about the people whom I serve and the work I do for them in Jesus' Name.

Moreover, this led me to pray and reflect hard: If my work is non-essential, then what is it? Are we right in totally closing our churches during this time of pandemic? We still go for walks; we still make it to the grocery and the pharmacy; we still cool off in the pool and park. Is the need for spiritual nourishment

not at par with the need for food, the need for leisure, the need for relief from the heat? Can there be something that is non-essential and yet necessary? Maybe the Eucharist can fall into that category! What does it mean to say: the Holy Eucharist is non-essential?

The revelation of Holy Scriptures enlightens us. In the phrase “daily bread” of the Our Father, the original Greek word used by the evangelists is “epiousios”. This word is a fairly unique term. When St. Jerome translated the Gospel of Luke he rendered it as “quotidianum”, meaning “quotidian” or “daily”. However, in his translation of the Gospel of St. Matthew, he used the more literal rendering of the word “epiousios” which is “supersubstantialem”, that is to say, super-substantial! The Eucharist is not essential; it is super-essential!

Both translations are, of course, valid. Thus the Catechism in paragraph 2837 informs us: “Taken in a temporal sense, [‘daily’] is a pedagogical repetition of ‘this day,’ to confirm us in trust ‘without reservation.’ Taken in the qualitative sense, it signifies what is necessary for life, and more broadly every good thing sufficient for subsistence. Taken literally (epi-ousios: ‘super-essential’), it refers directly to the Bread of Life, the Body of Christ, the “medicine of immortality,” without which we have no life within us. Finally in this connection, its heavenly meaning is evident: “this day” is the Day of the Lord, the day of the feast of the kingdom, anticipated in the Eucharist that is already the foretaste of the kingdom to come.”

So, you see, the Eucharist is not just one devotion among others. The Eucharist is the Real Presence of Jesus Christ continued throughout space and time. The Eucharist is the Way, the way our God-made-flesh keeps his promises of never leaving us orphans (Jn 14:18) and being with us until the end of the world (Mt 28:20). How sad it would be if Catholics are fast to agree that it is alright to cancel totally the public celebration of the Mass! How sad it is if you think that watching the celebration of the Eucharist on television equates with personally participating on it! How sad it is if you think that your personal prayers at home can substitute for the Holy Mass! On the other hand, I feel I owe you an apology. I should have been more creative to make the Holy Eucharist more accessible for you. I should have held Eucharistic Adoration in our parking lot. I should have added more celebrations of the Mass when attendance was limited to just 5 or 10 faithful....

The main point is: In this time of fear and disunity, of suffering and death, we need more of the Holy Eucharist rather than less. As Pope Benedict XVI said in his 2011 Corpus Christi homily: “[W]hereas food for the body is assimilated by our organism, and contributes to nourishing it, in the case of the Eucharist it is a different Bread: it is not we who assimilate it, but it assimilates us into itself, so that we become conformed to Jesus Christ, a member of his Body, one with him.... In fact, precisely because it is Christ

who, in Eucharistic communion, changes us into him, our individuality, in this encounter, is opened, liberated from its egocentrism, and inserted into the Person of Jesus who, in his turn, is immersed in Trinitarian communion. The Eucharist, therefore, while it unites us to Christ, also opens us to others, makes us members of one another: we are no longer divided, but one in him. Eucharistic communion not only unites me to the person I have beside me, and with whom I may not even be on good terms, but also to our distant brethren in every part of the world.” Wow, what a beautiful description of the Eucharist! If we truly believe this, dear parishioners, we will be free of any debilitating fear. No matter what, we will strive to be able to feed on this super-essential food served to us by the Lord Himself so as to live for eternity. For He promised: “Whoever eats this bread will live forever” (Jn 6:51).

May what we are experiencing now lead us to repentance as we recall how we wasted the graces of the Eucharist when it was easily available. May it enlarge our hunger for the Eucharist. And may you be kept safe and hopeful always. Be assured that I am praying daily for all your intentions as I trust that you are also praying for me.

Blessings,

Fr. Ramon