

Homily for the Mass Opening the Year of the Eucharist Solemnity of Corpus Christi

Bishop Robert D. Gruss
Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help
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What a beautiful to open this *Year of the Eucharist* on the Solemnity of Corpus Christi. We are today celebrating the very heart of our Catholic faith – its core element.

The meaning of the Eucharist throughout Christian history has always been a source of discussion in trying to come to grips with what this lasting ritual has meant. In the early church at Corinth, to whom St. Paul is writing, believers in Jesus continue to be divided in their understanding and appreciation of the precious gift of Jesus' Body and Blood. Because of factions in this Corinthian community, rather than the Eucharist being a sign of unity among the people, their Eucharistic gatherings became a countersign and a negative witness to a lack of love and harmony in the Church. So Paul was to remind them of what they were celebrating – that they are one body.

During the last supper, Jesus commanded the apostles to "*Do this in memory of Me.*" Therefore the early Christians were to see their communal Eucharistic gatherings as a communal remembering of Jesus' gift of himself both in the bread and wine and on the cross. But it did not mean that they were simply looking back to a past historical event, like one would to a birthday or anniversary. In their celebration of the Eucharist, these early Christians were opening themselves to the present saving reality of that event and so are we.

Each time we gather to celebrate what Jesus has commanded us, we are allowing the eternal truth and effectiveness of Christ's past event to become present for us today. In other words, through our celebration of the saving sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross here and now....we are being saved by it at this very moment. For those who open their hearts to it, they are experiencing salvation right now at this very moment. What a gift!

It isn't just a historical event of the past, but an encounter that transforms our lives, drawing us into a love relationship with Jesus, if we are actively,

consciously participating in this ritual we celebrate – if we are conscious of and desiring this encounter with Christ, thirsting for him as much as he is thirsting for us. And then, over time, we are changed and become more like him.

In the words of St. Thomas Aquinas: *“No other sacrament has greater healing power; through it sins are purged away, virtues are increased, and the soul is enriched with an abundance of every spiritual gift.”*

In other words, the Eucharist brings to us this abundant life in Christ Jesus. He is made present here in this Eucharist, on this altar, under the simple appearances of bread and wine, blessed, broken and given to you. This Mass, this Eucharist is an intimate, personal, deep encounter with Love, Love Incarnate in Jesus – here given to you and to me.

“Once you understand the Eucharist, you can never leave the Church [nor choose another event of the Sunday Mass]. Not because the Church won’t let you but because your heart won’t let you.” You will fall in love with the Lord in ways not thought possible.

People fall in love through many encounters with another as they are present to the other, communication takes place in many ways, their hearts begin to change, they take on the characteristics of the other, and then they get to the point of giving their lives away the other. The dynamics of a human encounter!

So often the sacraments of the Church are seen as events that we attend. How many of you thought on the way to Mass this morning, – “I am going for a beautiful encounter of the Lord’s love.”? If we truly believe this – that Jesus is here, now in this Eucharist and wants to share His deep love with us, then we must be prepared for it. And it will change our lives forever! That is what love is about. Events don’t necessarily change us – personal, intimate encounters do! One is a passive participation, the other active.

The Church teaches that all seven sacraments are personal encounters with Jesus. Six of the sacraments we experience his presence through his power which comes from the Holy Spirit. The Eucharist is the only sacrament which we experience him personally, physically, intimately, as he gives himself to us completely – body, blood, soul and divinity.

Our communion in this Sacrament of Love is an encounter with the Crucified and Risen Jesus in a very intimate way. Through a personal faith, our communion is a “union with” Jesus himself. We take into our bodies, the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ.

There is no greater union in life than this! No greater love than this! *“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him.”* Our attentiveness to the relationship with Jesus defines the impact the Eucharist will have in our lives.

In the Eucharist, Jesus is as close to us as he was to those people who walked with him on the dusty roads of Palestine. In fact, he is even closer. Those people received bread from his hands, but we receive the Lord himself. What more could Jesus have done to show us how passionately he wants to be near us, to guide us, to strengthen us?

Pope Benedict writes, *“Everything starts, you might say, from the heart of Christ, who at the Last Supper on the eve of his passion, thanked and praised God and, in doing so, with the power of his love transformed the meaning of death, which he was about to encounter.”*

The fact that the sacrament of the altar has taken on the name “Eucharist,” “thanksgiving,” expresses this: that the change in the substance of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ is the fruit of the gift that Christ made of himself, a gift of a love stronger than death, divine love that brought him to rise from the dead. That is why the Eucharist is the food of eternal life, the Bread of life.”

The Church Fathers from the Second Vatican Council clearly defined why we have gathered here this morning for the Eucharist when they wrote: *The Church’s mission, our mission, flows from the mission of Christ: “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (Jn 20:21). From the Eucharist, the Church draws her spiritual power and then is sent on mission to “go therefore and make disciples” (Matt 28-19). The Eucharist comes to be “both the source and the summit of all evangelization, since its goal is the communion of mankind with Christ and in him with the Father and the Holy Spirit.”*

As we begin this Year of the Eucharist, it is my greatest hope and prayer that

it will be a year where your love, my love, and understanding of the Eucharist will deepen.

My prayer is that each of you fully engage this year and allow Jesus to draw you deeper into this great mystery of His love in ways never experienced before – whereby you are transformed by this union with Him.

And in doing so, He [Jesus] will teach you to go out and share this with all the people you know who have left the Church or do not participate any longer. He seeks to call them back through you. Again, *“Once you understand the Eucharist, you can never leave the Church. Not because the Church won’t let you but because your heart won’t let you.”*

Our union with Christ in the Eucharist, both a gift and grace, makes it possible for us, in him, to embrace fully his mission of love and mercy. When we come to understand this great mystery celebrated in the Eucharist and participate fully each time we gather, our lives will never be the same.

We come to understand more deeply the Father’s love for us in Christ Jesus. Our desire for spiritual union with the Lord deepens. Our own sacrificial love intensifies and expands. Our aspiration to serve the Lord grows. We seek to live his mission more faithfully as his missionary disciples. These are the very fruits of our Holy Communion.

May this Year be for each of you one filled with every grace and blessing. Know that I will be living this Year of the Eucharist with you from afar as I seek to lead the people of Saginaw into this very life as well. May God bless you.