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CATHOLIC RETREATS

FOOD FOR THE JOURNEY
A RETREAT GUIDE ON THE SACRAMENT OF THE EUCHARIST

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INTRODUCTION

Retreat Overview

God's plan for the human family was disrupted by eating. When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they betrayed their friendship with God, losing the only source of lasting happiness, and put the whole world under the influence of evil.

Eating the forbidden fruit also introduced death into the human family, because original sin also cut us off from God's gift of the Tree of Life. So there you have it: God's plan for us was messed up by eating. But God drew up a plan to restore that lost friendship and renew the lost promise of eternal life. And, in a wonderful stroke of divine wisdom, this plan of restoration also involves eating.

Since the original Tree of Life was off limits after original sin, God came up with a brilliant alternative: he planted a new Tree of Life in the midst of our fallen world. That was the mission of Jesus Christ, who suffered for our sins and reversed Adam's disobedience by lovingly dying on the cross.

That cross became the new Tree of Life, and its fruit is the Eucharist, the body and blood of our Lord, his real presence among us mysteriously veiled under the appearance of bread and wine.

This supernatural fruit, which we receive in Holy Communion, is the antidote to the ancient poison of the forbidden fruit.

In this Retreat Guide, *Food for the Journey*, we will reflect on this amazing gift.

- The two meditations will highlight some of its wonders and refresh our appreciation for it.
- And the conference will offer some practical advice for getting more out of Mass, the quintessential celebration of the Eucharist.

Let's begin by renewing our faith in God's presence — he is with us now, eager to send us his grace. Let's savor that, and thank him for it, and humbly, confidently ask him for all the blessings that we need.

FIRST MEDITATION

Supernatural Food for Supernatural Life

The Eucharist is central to our Christian lives. Jesus himself made this unambiguously clear. During his famous discourse in the Synagogue of Capernaum, he explained that receiving the Eucharist in Holy Communion was absolutely essential in order to share in his life, in the divine life of heaven, the eternal life that we all long for. Here are his words:



I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.

— John 6:51

When his listeners heard that, they were confused and perplexed. St. John describes their reaction:



The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?"

— John 6:52

If Jesus had only been speaking poetically, or symbolically, this would have been the perfect time for him to say so. But he didn't.

Responding to their confusion, he made his point more explicitly — even solemnly, as indicated by the first phrase, which was a formula used at the time for official and solemn statements:



Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me.

— John 6:53-57

Jesus' Apostles had to accept this on pure faith when Jesus first announced it. And it was so hard to accept that many of his followers actually abandoned him after that discourse in the Synagogue of Capernaum. But for those who stayed, everything became clear during the Last Supper, the very first celebration of the Eucharist.

FIRST MEDITATION

The Last Supper: The First Eucharistic Celebration

During that solemn meal, on the eve of his Passion, Jesus altered the ancient rite of the Passover, a ritual meal that had been instituted by Moses himself as a central act of worship for the Israelites.

During that Passover ceremony, Jesus took bread in his hands, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying:



This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me.

– Luke 22:19

Then he took a chalice of wine, gave thanks, and gave it to his disciples, saying,



Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins”

– Matthew 26:27-28

How did the twelve Apostles react to those words, so familiar to us because they have been preserved in the Mass, but so new to them on that evening of the Last Supper?

FIRST MEDITATION

Shock and Awe

In the first place, they must have experienced a certain shock. After all, the rituals and prayers of the Passover ceremony hadn't changed for 1500 years, and the Apostles knew them well.

When Jesus changed them, he was making a powerful statement — he was transitioning from the Old Covenant to the New and eternal Covenant, fulfilling all the prophecies and images of the Old Testament that had pointed towards him, the Messiah.

Part of the shock would have also come from Jesus' command that they drink the chalice of his blood. From very ancient times, Israelites were forbidden from consuming any blood at all. According to Jewish theology, all blood belonged to God, because in the blood was the life of every living creature. In many of their rituals, they used the blood of sacrificial offerings to sprinkle the altar.

This was an expression of worship, a way to acknowledge God's sovereignty and power. But unlike adherents of many other ancient religions, they never consumed the blood of the sacrificial victims.

Now Jesus was giving them his blood, under the appearance of wine, as a way for them to participate in his own divine life, in his own divine sacrifice. It must have shocked them.

But shock would have been only one of their reactions. They would also have reacted with joy — the joy of understanding a mystery and receiving a gift.

The words spoken in the Synagogue of Capernaum had never made much sense to them. What exactly had Jesus meant when he told them that in order to experience the fullness of eternal life they would have to eat his flesh and drink his blood?

Certainly, when Jesus held that bread and that chalice in his hands and pronounced those words of consecration, “This is my body, given for you... this is my blood of the covenant, drink from it,” they would have remembered the speech in Capernaum and made the connection — This is what he meant!

The gift of everlasting life, the gift of true reconciliation with God, the gift of communion with God himself — this is what they would have begun to see and rejoice in at that first celebration of the Eucharist.

FIRST MEDITATION

The Supper and the Cross

Even so, their understanding of the mystery would not yet have been complete. After all, during the Last Supper Jesus spoke of his body being “given” for them, and his blood being “shed” for them (Luke 19:22). What he meant by those mysterious words would only come clear the next day, when Jesus was scourged, and crowned with thorns, and crucified.

Only then would they begin to understand the price that Jesus paid in order to restore the gift of divine communion that had been lost through original sin.

And that gift is given to us anew in every Mass, because every Mass is a fulfillment of the command that Jesus gave his Apostles during the Last Supper to keep on celebrating the Eucharist, the new Passover, the definitive act of worship: “Do this in memory of me,” he told them (Luke 22:19).

FIRST MEDITATION

Conclusion: Valuing the Gift

The very life of Jesus Christ, true God and true man, present in the sacrament of the Eucharist, given to us in Holy Communion — this truly is an amazing gift, a gift we sometimes take for granted.

In April, 2004, Pope St. John Paul II beatified Blessed Alejandrina Maria da Costa, a Portuguese peasant woman who had received a special grace that helped her avoid taking this amazing gift for granted.

Paralyzed at age 14, Alejandrina spent her life offering her sufferings and prayers to God for the conversion of sinners. She died in 1955, at age 51. For the last 13 years of her life, she ate and drank nothing except her daily Holy Communion.

Since she lived in the age of modern science, she was subjected to countless medical studies, none of which found a natural explanation.

Alejandrina told her spiritual director what Jesus had said to her about this extraordinary gift: Jesus told her, “You will live only on the Eucharist because I want to show the entire world the power of the Eucharist and the power of my life in souls.”

Certainly, we’re not all called to live on the Eucharist alone for physical nourishment — as she was called to do — but the truth and the power of the Eucharist for spiritual nourishment are essential. Let’s take a few minutes now, in the silence of our hearts, to reflect on that powerful gift, and on how we tend to receive it. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1 Reflect on my experience of First Communion. What do I remember? What did it mean for me? What did it mean for Jesus?
- 2 The Cross is the new Tree of Life; the Eucharist is its fruit. This was a favorite image in past ages of Christianity. How would I explain the meaning of that comparison to someone preparing for First Communion? To someone who was just beginning to ask questions about Catholicism?

- 3 One of the Old Testament events that pointed towards the Eucharist was the manna that God gave his people as food during their Exodus through the desert towards the Promised Land. Reflect on the meaning of the manna for the Israelites’ journey through the wilderness. How does it help me understand God’s purpose behind giving the gift of the Eucharist? (You may want to refer to the biblical passage about the manna in Exodus 16.)

Quotations to Help Your Meditation



“Amen, amen, I say to you, whoever believes has eternal life. I am the bread of life. Your ancestors ate the manna in the desert, but they died; this is the bread that comes down from heaven so that one may eat it and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world.” The Jews quarreled among themselves, saying, “How can this man give us [his] flesh to eat?” Jesus said to them, “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him. Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever.” These things he said while teaching in the synagogue in Capernaum.

– John 6:47-59, NABRE



For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes. Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord.

...

A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself.

– I Corinthians 11:23-29, NABRE



The sacrament of charity, the Holy Eucharist is the gift that Jesus Christ makes of himself, thus revealing to us God's infinite love for every man and woman. This wondrous sacrament makes manifest that "greater" love which led him to "lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Jesus did indeed love them "to the end" (John 13:1). In those words the Evangelist introduces Christ's act of immense humility: before dying for us on the Cross, he tied a towel around himself and washed the feet of his disciples. In the same way, Jesus continues, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, to love us "to the end," even to offering us his body and his blood. What amazement must the Apostles have felt in witnessing what the Lord did and said during that Supper! What wonder must the eucharistic mystery also awaken in our own hearts! In the sacrament of the altar, the Lord meets us, men and women created in God's image and likeness (cf. Genesis 1:27), and becomes our companion along the way. In this sacrament, the Lord truly becomes food for us, to satisfy our hunger for truth and freedom.

– Pope Benedict XVI
Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation
Sacramentum Caritatis 1-2

SECOND MEDITATION

Stay with Us, Lord!

Before Jesus performed his miracles of multiplying the loaves and the fish, the Gospel writers give us a glimpse into what was going on in his heart. St. Mark, for example describes the situation like this:



In those days when there again was a great crowd without anything to eat, Jesus summoned the disciples and said, "My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, because they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. If I send them away hungry to their homes, they will collapse on the way, and some of them have come a great distance"

– Mark 8:1-3

Jesus didn't want his followers to "collapse on the way," to lose strength and not be able to finish their long journey.

And that's why he performed the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves, a foreshadowing of the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Through giving us the Eucharist in Holy Communion, Jesus strengthens us for our long spiritual journey to Christian maturity.

SECOND MEDITATION

A Powerful Presence

But the sacrament of the Eucharist is also a sacrament of Christ's presence. Through the Eucharist, Jesus has come up with a way to stay with us, to be present in our lives, to accompany us at every moment of our earthly pilgrimage.

Every Catholic Church has a tabernacle, where some of the hosts consecrated during Mass are reserved. In these tabernacles, Jesus stays with us, truly present in the Eucharist — body, blood, soul, and divinity.

For centuries, Christians have come in front of these tabernacles to pour out their hearts, to exercise their faith, to console their Lord, to spend time with the one they know loves them.

We receive Jesus in Holy Communion, and he becomes the nourishment of our Christian lives. But in the tabernacle, in our adoration of his presence in the Blessed Sacrament, he becomes our constant companion, so we never have to walk alone.

SECOND MEDITATION

A Loving Presence

In the Old Testament, when God appeared to his people, it was often with thunder and fire and massive expressions of power. But in the New Testament, in the Eucharist, Jesus has chosen to remain with us in the small, silent, fragile, little host. Is there a lesson in this?

Jesus is the full revelation of God; God made man. By staying with us in the Blessed Sacrament, he is revealing to us, and reminding us, what God is like: God is not a distant dictator or an indifferent cosmic force — God is a person: loving, gentle, welcoming, patient...

This is our God: he doesn't want to devour us or intimidate us or crush us; rather, he wants to be close to us, to become one with us, to strengthen us, to be a part of our daily trials and triumphs.

The Holy Eucharist reminds us of this, and this is the reason behind the ancient tradition of spending time in a church or chapel simply in adoration of the Sacrament of the Eucharist — there the God of the universe shows that he is truly interested even in our tiny corner of that universe.

God wants to meet us there, even more than we may desire to meet Him. That is why He has made such a meeting possible.

SECOND MEDITATION

A Miraculous Communion

A little known saint from the late middle ages had a particularly powerful experience of this love of God expressed in the Eucharist. St. Juliana Falconieri lived in Florence, Italy, in the fourteenth century.

When she was 14, her mother began arranging a marriage for her. As soon as she found out, she objected, explaining that she wanted to consecrate her life completely to Christ. At first her mother resisted, but Juliana's special calling was undeniable, and eventually she became the foundress of a new Order of Servite nuns, dedicated to prayer and serving the sick.

Throughout the long, hard years of foundation, she received Holy Communion three times a week — much more often than was normal for those times. But in her later years, chronic sickness made her unable to digest any solid food. Even while on her deathbed, frequent fits of vomiting made it impossible for her to receive Communion.

But when she knew her last hour had come, she was inflamed with a desire to receive Holy Communion one last time. So she asked the priest to lay a corporal (the white cloth put on top of the altar for the liturgy of the Eucharist) on her chest and place the consecrated host on top of it.

No sooner had the Eucharist been laid over her heart than it disappeared, being miraculously consumed directly into her body, to the great astonishment of the priest and the other nuns who were there.

She died soon after, and as they were preparing the body for burial, they found the sign of the cross that had been on the host emblazoned on the skin of her chest, right where the Eucharist had been absorbed into her heart.

Ever since, the Servites have kept an image of a shining host on the left front side of their habits.

This extraordinary miracle may seem far removed from our ordinary experiences of Holy Communion at Sunday Mass. But, just like the miracles in the New Testament, it (along with many other Eucharistic miracles through the centuries) was given to the Church, to all of us, as a sign: By staying with us through this sacrament, Jesus shows us that he really cares about our lives, that he wants to be with us, to accompany us through our life's journey.

SECOND MEDITATION

Corpus Christi Processions

This is one reason for the ancient Catholic tradition — still alive and well in many places — of organizing public processions on the feast of Corpus Christi, the annual liturgical celebration dedicated to honoring the real presence of our Lord in the Eucharist.

In these processions, the sacred host is placed in a monstrance and carried through the local streets and squares, accompanied by songs and prayers of the faithful.

It's a powerful expression of our Lord's desire to be present, through the Eucharist, in the normal realities of our daily lives.

Here is how Pope Benedict XVI explained it in a homily [Corpus Christi, 2005]:



We bring Christ, present under the sign of bread, onto the streets of our city. We entrust these streets, these homes, our daily life, to his goodness. May our streets be streets of Jesus! May our houses be homes for him and with him! May our life of every day be penetrated by his presence...

SECOND MEDITATION

Conclusion: He Loves; He Hopes; He Waits

The next time we see a flickering sanctuary lamp reminding us that Jesus, through the sacrament of the Eucharist, is truly present in the tabernacle, wanting to be our companion, let's thank him for that, and let's ask him to deepen awareness of his loving presence in every moment and circumstance of life.

St. Peter Julian Eymund, who lived in France in the 1800s, beautifully explained how Christ's constant presence in the Eucharist shows, without a doubt, that Jesus' love for us, even for the most hardened sinner, has no limits.

Speaking of this presence, St. Peter wrote:



He loves, He hopes, He waits. If He came down on our altars on certain days only, some sinner, on being moved to repentance, might have to look for Him, and not finding Him, might have to wait. Our Lord prefers to wait Himself for the sinner for years, rather than keep him waiting one instant.

Only a God who truly longs to stay with us could have invented the Eucharist as one way to do it. Let's take some time now to prayerfully reflect on that longing of God, and to let ourselves be convinced by it. The following questions and quotations may help your meditation.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

- 1 How often do I have contact with the Eucharist outside of Holy Communion? How important is it for me to spend time with Jesus in the tabernacle? How important is it for him?
- 2 In light of what has been explained in these two meditations, how clearly do I understand why the Church forbids non-Catholics and Catholics who are in a state of mortal sin from receiving Holy Communion? How would I explain this often controversial teaching to someone who asked me about it?

3

One of Pope John Paul II's coworkers once found him in his private chapel embracing the tabernacle. Later, when asked why he was doing that, the pope explained with a smile: "I console him." By this, the pope showed his awareness that Jesus takes pleasure in our wanting to spend time with him by praying before the Eucharist. Have I ever considered that before? Take some time to consider it now...

Biblical Passages to Help Your Meditation



Jesus summoned his disciples and said, "My heart is moved with pity for the crowd, for they have been with me now for three days and have nothing to eat. I do not want to send them away hungry, for fear they may collapse on the way." The disciples said to him, "Where could we ever get enough bread in this deserted place to satisfy such a crowd?" Jesus said to them, "How many loaves do you have?" "Seven," they replied, "and a few fish." He ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground. Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, gave thanks, broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, who in turn gave them to the crowds. They all ate and were satisfied. They picked up the fragments left over — seven baskets full. Those who ate were four thousand men, not counting women and children.

— Matthew 15:32-38, NABRE



The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear? The LORD is my life's refuge; of whom should I be afraid? ...One thing I ask of the LORD; this I seek: To dwell in the LORD's house all the days of my life, to gaze on the LORD's beauty, to visit his temple... Hear my voice, LORD, when I call; have mercy on me and answer me. "Come," says my heart, "seek his face"; your face, LORD, do I seek! Do not hide your face from me; do not repel your servant in anger. You are my salvation; do not cast me off; do not forsake me, God my savior! Even if my father and mother forsake me, the LORD will take me in. LORD, show me your way; lead me on a level path because of my enemies. Do not abandon me to the desire of my foes; malicious and lying witnesses have risen against me. I believe I shall see the LORD's goodness in the land of the living. Wait for the LORD, take courage; be stouthearted, wait for the LORD!

— Psalm 27, excerpts, NABRE

CONFERENCE

Getting More Out of Mass

Everyone who went to a Mass celebrated by Pope John Paul II was deeply moved by his spirit of prayer and reverence. His manner and voice and body language all reflected a profound, humble sense of God's presence.

In his Encyclical on the Eucharist, Pope John Paul II gave a glimpse into what was going on in his heart whenever he celebrated Mass. He wrote:



I have been able to celebrate Holy Mass in chapels built along mountain paths, on lakeshores and seacoasts; I have celebrated it on altars built in stadiums and in city squares... This varied scenario of celebrations of the Eucharist has given me a powerful experience of its universal and, so to speak, cosmic character. Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world. It unites heaven and earth. It embraces and permeates all creation.

— *Ecclesia de Eucaristia*, 8

The Mass, in its essence, is cosmic and marvelous, but our experience of Mass is often cold and mundane. To overcome that disconnect, we need to remind ourselves of what's really happening at Mass, and that's what this conference will try to do.

CONFERENCE

An Objective Anchor

First, it's important to remember that the Mass is an objective way of approaching God, an objective way of having contact with God — and we need contact with God to find fulfillment in life.

In the Mass we can find him no matter how we're feeling or what we're experiencing in our lives. It is dependable, a constant, like his love for us; it is a spiritual anchor, a vital touch-point to keep us steady in our Christian journey.

We meet him there just as we are, so that he can meet us, to draw us closer to Him, to transform us. And because it's centered around Jesus — and not us — at Mass we can let go of our need to perform or pretend or do anything other than worship him.

Other ways of encountering God are helpful too, and even necessary, but cut off from the Mass they lose their objectivity. Often they depend on feelings or other external factors. If we go to a praise and worship gathering and feel good, we think we had contact with God, but if we feel bad, we wonder. If we make time for personal prayer, we often get distracted, or fall asleep, or run out of things to say, and we don't know if we are really praying as we should.

This doesn't mean that we shouldn't participate in these kinds of activities; it just emphasizes our need for an objective way of approaching God, a way that doesn't depend primarily on our own ideas or feelings. And the Mass doesn't.

The Mass is the perfect act of worship, the perfect prayer — objectively perfect, because the Mass is Jesus Christ's own prayer, it's his own sacrifice, his own act of worship, really made present for us — no matter how we feel. Let's look at some of the elements that give the Mass this unique objectivity.

CONFERENCE

God's Guarantee

The priest who celebrates the Mass guarantees the objective quality: he has been configured to Christ in the very depth of his being through the sacrament of holy orders.

Through his ordination to the priesthood, God has set him aside to act in Christ's place, just so we can be sure that this act of worship is truly Christ's own. And the prayers, readings, and rubrics of the Mass as promulgated by the Church are equally objective: they accurately express the truths of the faith and the sentiments of Christ himself, and so they are objectively pleasing to God, they hit the nail right on the head every time.

So even if the priest is careless and sloppy, and even if the church building is ugly, and even if the music is horrid, and even if the congregation is motley — even so, when we participate in Mass, our weak and imperfect efforts to serve God are swept right up into Christ's perfect service.

The Mass is like a wrinkle in time. In the Mass, Jesus opens a corridor through history, and even through the entire time-space continuum, linking three things:

- the here-and-now of our normal, everyday lives,
- the historical sacrifice of Christ's own body and blood on the cross at Calvary,
- and Christ's everlasting self-offering as it continues now in heaven.

At Mass we plug in to eternity. Now let's take a bird's-eye look at the two major parts of every Mass, to see how all of that unfolds

CONFERENCE

Double-Barreled

For more than 2000 years, the Mass has consisted of two basic parts: the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

In the Liturgy of the Word the sacred ministers proclaim and explain the deeds and words of God as recorded in the inspired text of the Bible. We take our places beside the Apostles who spent three years living with Jesus, observing his actions and listening to his teaching in order to fill their souls with his truth. We tune our minds back into God's wavelength, to remind us of his plans for the world and for our own lives, to stir up our appreciation for his mercy and goodness.

In the Liturgy of the Word we listen to God's Word, and then, in the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we respond to that Word.

The word "Eucharist" means "thanksgiving." And thanksgiving is the most proper response to God's mercy and goodness. But on our own, fallen human beings that we are, we cannot thank God properly; he deserves much more than we can ever offer him. So Christ comes to our aid: He is our priest, our mediator, exercising this mediation through his ordained minister. And so, through the words and actions of the priest, Christ himself sacramentally makes present the perfect offering that he made once for all on Calvary.

The sentiments of Christ's heart are made present through the words of the Eucharistic prayer; the sacrifice of his obedience is made present through the offering of the bread and wine, which the Holy Spirit transubstantiates at the words of consecration, turning them into Christ's very own body and blood.

The more attentively we unite our own hearts and minds to this Liturgy of the Eucharist, the more fully our lives are joined to Christ's and offered in thanksgiving to God.

That in itself — hearing God's own words in the Liturgy of the Word and participating directly in Christ's own loving sacrifice through the Liturgy of the Eucharist — is a miracle beyond description.

CONFERENCE

Real Close

But it doesn't stop there. God wants to come even closer to us. He knows how difficult it is for us to participate with due reverence and attention in the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, especially when the music is bad or the congregation is noisy and distracted or the priest is in a rush.

And so, to make sure this encounter with him is as intimate, as "real" as possible, he offers himself to us completely, body, blood, soul, and divinity, in Holy Communion. This, then, is the Mass: an objective, supernatural encounter with God.

CONFERENCE

Thanks, Mom

We need God; our souls yearn for him. But in this fallen world it is often hard to find him. In this fallen world it's even hard to remember to look for him. And so the Church, like a good mother, commands us to attend Mass every Sunday and holy day of obligation. In fact, it is a grave sin to miss Sunday Mass except for a serious reason.

As we grow out of spiritual infancy, however, we don't need to be commanded; we want to go — we even start going during the week, when we can. As we mature spiritually, things that we grudgingly did out of a dry sense of duty become expressions of heartfelt devotion.

We yearn to receive God's grace and to plug every aspect of our lives into God, and we know that there's no better way to do so than by participating in Mass.

And if there is ever a period in our life when we start skipping Sunday Mass because we don't have time or we don't feel like going, it is a sure sign that something's wrong, that our soul is sick, that our anchor is coming loose.

Our Mass attendance — its frequency and its quality — is the most objective vital sign of our spiritual life, and our spiritual life is the key to the rest of our life.

CONFERENCE

The Nuclear Power of the Mass

What we think about Mass will affect how we live Mass. In this conference, we have reflected on some of the reasons why Pope John Paul II thought about and lived the Mass in such a profound, transforming way — a “cosmic” way, as he put it.

Yet, we have only scratched the surface. There is much more to discover. Here, for example, is a reflection made by Pope Benedict XVI, comparing what happens at Mass to a kind of spiritual “nuclear fission” that transforms all of creation:



The Eucharist draws us into Jesus' act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate Logos, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving. Jesus draws us into himself. The substantial conversion of bread and wine into [Jesus'] body and blood introduces within creation the principle of a radical change, a sort of 'nuclear fission,' to use an image familiar to us today, which penetrates to the heart of all being, a change meant to set off a process which transforms reality, a process leading ultimately to the transfiguration of the entire world, to the point where God will be all in all.

Pope Benedict XVI,
Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation
Sacramentum Caritatis, 11

Take some time now to prayerfully go over the personal questionnaire, which is designed to help you find ways to live the Mass more deeply.

Personal Questionnaire

- 1 In general, what are my attitudes towards going to Mass? Am I more dutiful, or more loving? Do I go more out of fear, or routine, or an eager desire to receive God's grace?
- 2 The Mass is a wonderfully objective prayer, since it is the prayer of Christ. What does that concept mean for me?
- 3 How often do I go to Mass? Can I realistically go more often? At this point in my spiritual journey, would that help me grow?
- 4 What are some practical ways that I personally can improve my concentration and spirit of prayer at Mass? Perhaps it could help to arrive early, or to get a small missal to help myself follow along with the readings and prayers, or to stay five minutes afterwards for a more fervent and focused thanksgiving...
- 5 Have I ever found myself complaining about “not getting anything out of Mass”? If so, why? What am I expecting from Mass that God is not giving me? How should my expectations be adjusted in order to get back in tune with God?
- 6 The Mass is the perfect prayer of Christ, and it is also the perfect worship of the family of God, of the Church as a whole. How aware am I of this communal dimension of Mass? How much do I value it and contribute to it?
- 7 During the offertory of the Mass, the congregation makes its offering and the priest accepts it and lifts it up to God through the initial prayers over the wine and bread. This is the moment when we place our lives, work, sufferings, and joys on the altar in order to unite them to Christ. How consciously do I do this? How could I make this part of the Mass more meaningful?

FURTHER READING

For Reflection & Prayer

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

- *Meditations Before Mass*
by Romano Guardini
- *The Lamb's Supper*
by Scott Hahn
- *A Biblical Walk Through the Mass*
by Edward Sri
- *Catholic Mass for Dummies*
by John Trigilio, Kenneth Brighenti and James Cafone
- *The Mass of the Roman Rite*
by Joseph Jungmann
- *Ecclesia de Eucaristia*
by Pope John Paul II
- *Sacramentum Caritatis*
by Pope Benedict XVI
- *Mysterium Fidei*
by Pope Paul VI
- *Mediator Dei*
by Pope Pius XII

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