

Holy Hour

Eucharistic Reflections

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Diocese of
Des Moines

CULTIVATING CONNECTIONS IN CHRIST

Reflection #1: Purified Hearts

*“As soon as is possible... we must return to the Eucharist with **a purified heart**, with a renewed amazement, with an increased desire to meet the Lord, to be with him, to receive him and to bring him to our brothers and sisters with the witness of a life full of faith, love and hope.” - Cardinal Robert Sarah, “Let Us Return to the Eucharist with Joy”*

Through the prophet Ezekiel, God promises that our stony hearts will be transformed into purified, natural hearts (see Ezekiel 36:26). This promise is fulfilled in Jesus, whose pierced heart is a furnace of molten Eucharistic love melting the clotted residue of sin within us. God knows us from our mother’s wombs (see Psalm 139:13). And God wants to reveal to us the paths and possibilities that will lead to peace, joy and happiness. Jesus is the one and only way who rings true, who pulses with Spirit life (John 14:6)

Much like the disciples on the Road to Emmaus, breaking bread with Jesus on our pilgrim way sparks the Spirit, setting our hearts afire within us (Luke 24:13-35). Contact with Jesus and the words he speaks restores the hope, trust, and peace stripped away by sin. The truth is that God delights in us, and never stops loving us. Jesus alone satisfies. When we commune with Jesus even once a spiritual hunger is awakened in us that cannot be pacified by anything that online marketplaces offer us.

Yet still there are moments when we forsake our spiritual destiny—including times when we try to find satisfaction in wealth and comfort, accolades from others, or in the futile attempt to control and understand all that transpires in life. Indifference to God’s invitation of friendship drains our spirit and ignores our own heart’s deepest desires. Our sometimes fickle faith diminishes light and intimate company with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Only God’s love, encoded in the Eucharist, will fulfill us.

Christ’s Death and Resurrection, anticipated in the Last Supper and re-presented each time we take up the bread and cup at Mass, doing “this” in memory of him, offers us mercy, the sip of compassion that softens our own harsh self-contempt. Our guilt and self-loathing are too readily spun outward and unleashed upon others through rash judgment, sarcasm and detraction, or by simply ignoring people we pass on the street. Our conscience readily convicts us of being unkind, impatient, proud and possessive. Despite our unworthiness, Jesus still longs to come and dwell “under our roof,” refreshing and renovating our hearts. Jesus’ meek and humble heart (Matthew 11:29) lightens the weighted yoke of self-loathing we have pulled down upon ourselves.

It takes honesty, self-knowledge, and courage to admit the nagging ache of our loneliness. Loneliness can be self-induced, or can be visited upon us by the pandemic or other experiences of loss or setback. Loneliness is not a result of God's turning his face from us, for Jesus is always turned toward us, as the Eucharist attests. In the midst of this predicament, conversion cannot be a self-help project, but must follow the promptings of grace--God's love tugging on our hearts and minds, helping us make peace with our own vulnerability.

Jesus stirs us to turn our faces to behold him, the beautiful Savior, through eyes of faith. He transforms us so we have eyes that see, ears that hear the same "follow me" call that roused Andrew and Peter, Matthew and Mary Magdalene, to look beyond themselves and their own banal sinfulness. Unlike the Pharisees, they were wise enough to recognize their need for healing and purification.

Trappist monk Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis observes that "disciples are made by their own need." The Eucharist is the remedy tailor-made for each person's needs for healing, for no one can save himself, herself. And this is good news! Jesus' very name indicates that he has come on a mission of mercy on behalf of his heavenly Father. The love of this prodigal Father moves him to send us his Son, knowing the price to be paid.

We love to give the best of ourselves, for then we can bask in the light of our own excellence. Jesus' self-offering on the cross testifies that he prefers our need, our spiritual poverty. His wide-ranging appetite includes even our contrition for sins, a sacrificial offering consumed in the crucible of his burning love for us. St. Ephrem of Syria, one of the great Eastern doctors of the Church, speaks often of the Eucharist as the Medicine of Life. This is the most affordable healthcare policy imaginable, for Jesus himself has paid the premium for us.

◆ Reflection Questions

- *How has my guilt and lack of self-love been unleashed upon others?*
- *Where do I meet Jesus "in my need"—my own vulnerability--seeking healing and peace? Do I need to ask Jesus to help me desire him above all else?*
- *Where do I most need to seek forgiveness? Whom do I need to forgive?*

◆ Petitionary Prayers

- *For a renewed purity in our Eucharistic devotion, that we might truly give the best of ourselves, repent of a self-absorbed inward vision, and recognize our need for communion with the Eucharistic Lord of Life, we pray...*
- *For reconciliation in our hearts, homes, communities, and Church, that the healing balm of the Spirit might draw together those once separated by judgment and contempt, we pray....*

Reflection #2: Renewed Amazement

*“As soon as is possible... we must return to the Eucharist with a purified heart, with **a renewed amazement**, with an increased desire to meet the Lord, to be with him, to receive him and to bring him to our brothers and sisters with the witness of a life full of faith, love and hope.” - Cardinal Robert Sarah, “Let Us Return to the Eucharist with Joy”*

Fireworks, parades and other spectacles astound and thrill us for however long they last--until we head home or click off our devices. We remain mere spectators, however, unless our life orientation, our capacity to behold, wonder, and perceive what lies below the surface is reshaped by what we have experienced. The crowds who witnessed Jesus' miraculous healings, mastery over nature, dominion over evil spirits, ability to turn water into wine and multiply loaves and fish did not automatically enter into a deeper relationship with God.

We are beckoned to abide, adore, and offer ourselves to God in return for the gift of his very person, his enduring presence as Emmanuel, God-with-us. The Eucharistic Jesus, reserved in tabernacles in churches and chapels around our Diocese and throughout the world, is the Son at the center of a spiritual solar system –an entire universe ordered by the axial coordinates of the Cross. All we are, all we say and do, is intended by the Creator to revolve around Jesus.

Pope Francis cautions us—citing the author of *The Imitation of Christ*, Thomas á Kempis—against the sort of spiritual voyeurism that flits from one thing to the next, superficially occupying our senses before passing on to the next stimulating bundle of impressions being supplied to us on the internet (see *Evangelii Gaudium* n. 91). How quickly we can become the “ugly Americans” touring cyberspace, pausing for a moment as we take a virtual snapshot, then checking off our list in a wearying “been there, done that” mentality. No wonder our hearts remain restless, missing the peace that only Christ's presence can bring! Our “spiritual attention deficit disorder,” aided and abetted by the digital explosion, must yield by choice to seek out Jesus and stay with him—for a brief visit. And for those who have cultivated the habit and desire, to spend an hour with Jesus in the garden, where suffering and consolation mingle as he shares with us our own personal portion and cup.

Moses, the Magi, the Samaritan woman at the well, even Nicodemus who first came to Jesus at night and then ministered to his sacred body as it was laid in the tomb: all were willing to bend their knees, their wills, and humble themselves before a God available to us in signs and senses. Yet God remains irreducible to our preconceptions or preferences. When Jesus tells his disciples in John 6 that unless they eat his flesh and drink his blood, they will not have life within them, many listeners grumble and go away. Jesus wonders if those who linger also wish to leave. Yet, with freedom of the Spirit, Simon Peter exclaims, “Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:66-68).

Adoration is the only fitting response to the immediate experience of the God who alone is adequate to satisfy our own hearts' desires. We harbor a longing that exceeds even our own awareness; God has instilled the capacity to transcend ourselves. God often initially provides us with an "ecstatic" slipping beyond self-consciousness or hesitation, in order to unite us with his Beauty and Mystery. We sense how Love Divine, joy of heaven has come down to earth. This pure and unlimited love is meant for beholding, consuming, and bearing life to others.

When we come before Christ's Eucharistic presence, it is not primarily our own consolation or stimulation that we should seek. Spiritual fireworks will yield to stillness, silence; sense absence guides ready souls to the presence beheld only by faith. The tabernacle of Eucharistic reservation unites and resonates with God's presence dwelling within our hearts. We are enfolded in love, raised beyond sin and death to freedom and true life. Jesus remains with us, in us. Amazement yields to enduring communion, transforming our prayer by God's generous initiative. Contemplation is God's anointed blessing for those who can stand the strain and allow God's grace to draw them beyond their own distractions.

St. Ignatius of Antioch counsels: "He who has the word of Jesus can truly listen also to his silence, in order to be perfect, that he may act through his speech and be known by his silence. Nothing is hidden from the Lord, but even our secrets are close to him. Let us then do everything in the knowledge that he is dwelling within us that we may be his temples, and he God within us" (Letter to the Ephesians).

As with Mary, Mother of our Eucharistic Lord, we take all things to heart, pondering a Mystery that continues to reveal himself, but only to those seeking more than self-gratification. How marvelously are the words of the Psalmist realized: "There is one thing I ask of the Lord, only this do I seek: to live in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the Lord, to inquire at his temple" (Psalm 27:4).

◆ Reflection Questions

- *How has a "spiritual attention deficit disorder" crept into my own spiritual life?*
- *When I seek to meet Jesus in the Eucharist, what ultimately am I seeking?*
- *How can I become more attentive to Jesus dwelling within me?*

◆ Petitionary Prayers

- *For the courage to focus, that dying to the distractions which overwhelm, refiling exhausted patience, and calming the soul which questions, we might behold the miracle of the Eucharist with renewed amazement, we pray...*
- *For the grace to be grounded, that our hearts may once again be firmly rooted in the Eucharistic fountain of life, we pray...*
- *For the grace to see Jesus, that our Eucharistic Lord might again stir our hearts to gaze on the beauty of God, we pray...*

Reflection #3: Increased Desire to Meet the Lord and Be with Him

*“As soon as is possible... we must return to the Eucharist with a purified heart, with a renewed amazement, with **an increased desire to meet the Lord, to be with him**, to receive him and to bring him to our brothers and sisters with the witness of a life full of faith, love and hope.” - Cardinal Robert Sarah, “Let Us Return to the Eucharist with Joy”*

The exodus of the Israelites through the desert found them wondering at various times if God was still with them. Would God be true to his covenant promise and lead them to a place where milk and honey flowed? Amidst murmurs and crying out, they were presented with “a food unknown,” manna—which literally means, “What is it?” “When they asked he sent them quails; he filled them with bread from heaven” (Psalm 105:40). This “bread from heaven” reassured them that God accompanies them on their pilgrim way and would never abandon them against their will. Manna fed their hunger, but it was an acquired appetite that had to be cultivated by deeper faith and trust in the God who stretches our stomachs, our senses, our hearts and minds.

God leads us into unknown territory in our lives, and asks us to offer our hunger, spiritual poverty and vulnerability to him. He has allowed us to enter a global pandemic that has left us feeling parched and exhausted. Like the Israelites, we are tempted to grumble and desire to go back to the way things were. God may meet us on our turf and terms, but does not let us remain locked into the familiar. Jesus calls us out of ourselves to the virtues of faith, hope, and charity for the sake of a communion that endures forever. This enduring relationship with the Triune God is itself the “promised land” sought by the Israelites. The pandemic is a most recent opportunity to be purified within, to recognize the presence of God, and to find comfort in our dependence on Christ.

Pope Francis speaks often of a “church of accompaniment,” a term derived from the words “cum pane,” meaning that we literally and spiritually “break bread” with each other. The privileged company of apostles at the Last Supper who heard their Beloved Master call them “friends,” not slaves, were initially scattered by the chaos of the crucifixion into their isolated cells of fear and shame. Yet as they made their way back to the Upper Room with Mary and others, the Risen Lord breaks into their midst, unlocking their hearts with peace that only the Spirit, and not the world, gives.

A new habit of being with one another, especially on the Lord’s Day, is formed. When breaking open Scriptures, then the bread before lifting up the cup of salvation, the bond between them is sealed, for they know Jesus is mysteriously present in their midst. Though they soon go forth to live Jesus and announce him to others, this spiritual bond remains a source of strength and consolation no matter where the pilgrim path leads.

While livestreaming liturgies may be a temporary solution for our inability to be

actually present to Jesus and one another, they are no substitute for the “presences” of Christ we encounter in Mass: first and foremost, in the Eucharistic species of Host and Precious Blood; in the Scriptures proclaimed and preached, in the priest who acts in the person of Christ as head of the Body; and in our sisters and brothers joining together with us in prayer.

Those who gather live out their baptismal priesthood by giving thanks, making sacrificial offerings of themselves before God, and blessing God and one another by building each other up in faith, hope and love. Jesus gives himself to us in the Eucharist--as Host and guest of our hearts. We respond: “What is it you ask of me, Jesus?” so that we may truly BE Christ’s Body to one another, to a hurting and hungry world.

Beyond the opportunity to bring the Eucharist to the sick and the homebound, the reservation of Jesus in the tabernacle refracts God’s tender love, a lamp shining in the quiet stillness of a sacred space that holds a magnetic attraction for those who keep company with Christ in their hearts. Even if we are the only person in the church praying before the Blessed Sacrament, our adoration is never a solitary act between Jesus and ourselves, but is always an act of the Church. The communion of saints and angels surround us, each reflecting a unique ray of light our way of what it means to be in Jesus. St. Caesarius of Arles counsels, “Just as you enter this church building, so God wishes to enter your soul, for he promised: ‘I shall live in them, and I shall walk the corridors of their hearts.’”

If we heed the Spirit’s promptings, eventually even holy devotions such as the rosary, novenas, chaplets and other ways we enlist words will often yield to sighs and groans, to cries and unspoken praise. “O sing to him, sing his praise; tell all his wonderful works! Glory in his name; let the hearts that seek the Lord rejoice. Turn to the Lord and his strength; constantly seek his face” (Psalm 105:2-4). St. Ephrem reminds us that our praise unites us to the silent praise of angels.

Even if the gravitational pull of our own humanity keeps us at ground level, we remain blessed by the Lord who draws close to us as we approach him. The immediacy of his presence accessed by faith is a constant source of grace and gratitude that we are never alone. Jesus accompanies us every step of the way to the Father.

◆ Reflection Questions

- *Where do I most easily recognize how God accompanies me and others? Where is it hardest to recognize?*
- *Where and how does Jesus want to meet me in my hunger, spiritual poverty, and vulnerability?*

◆ Petitionary Prayers

- *For a renewed desire to return to Sunday Mass, that hearts across our Diocese may burn with a longing to encounter Christ in the Eucharist, in the Word, and in the gathered Body of Christ, we pray...*
- *For those who hunger to receive our Lord in Holy Communion, that the homebound, the sick, those in institutions of care, those who shelter from disease, and all who hunger for our Lord may soon be able to satisfy that hunger with the bread from heaven, we pray...*

Reflection #4: To Receive Him & Bring Him to Our Brothers and Sisters

*“As soon as is possible... we must return to the Eucharist with a purified heart, with a renewed amazement, with an increased desire to meet the Lord, to be with him, **to receive him and to bring him to our brothers and sisters** with the witness of a life full of faith, love and hope.” - Cardinal Robert Sarah, “Let Us Return to the Eucharist with Joy”*

The abiding Eucharistic presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament is a tremendous act of loving kindness tendered by a God who is neither static nor inert. God is moved by compassion to help us come close to his seemingly blinding beauty, his utter simplicity. God's outpoured love is a light guiding us toward him. Our spoken and unspoken prayer and our efforts to live an upright life draw us ever closer to the Burning Mystery among us. God and humans abide in mutually self-disclosing, self-giving love. “O Lord, hear my voice when I call; have mercy and answer me. Of you my heart has spoken, ‘Seek his face’. It is your face, O Lord, that I seek; hide not your face from me” (Psalm 27:7-9). Even as we know that darkness and light still mingle within us, we delight in our hearts' fulfillment, beheld in radiant glory.

God the Father takes the initiative in Jesus to “friend” us. This friendship is the foundation of all friendships, human and divine. Our human relationships should reflect God's generosity that is beyond all merit on our part. If we seek the face of Jesus in the Eucharist, our graced next step is to seek him in the faces and lives of those whom God presents to us. The authenticity of our prayer is measured by the extent to which love for God flows from our laps into the lives of others around us. We truly image God when we are habitually moved to be good for our family members, in-laws, for persons with whom we cross paths in stores or on the road. Dorothy Day provides a challenging criterion of conscience for us when she remarks, “I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.”

The injunction of John's First Letter could not be clearer: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who loves is begotten by God and knows God. Whoever is without love does not know God, for God is love” (1 John 4:7-8). Love's opposite undermines any claim to truly know God: “If anyone says, ‘I love God, but hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. This is the commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother [and sister]” (1 John 4:20-21).

The wise spiritual guide Fr. Donald Haggerty cuts to the chase: “The most reliable mark of a genuine desire for God is the quick discovery outside prayer of sacrificial opportunities for the sake of others. To give ourselves to God in prayer is to find a door in our heart unlocking and opening to the hearts of other people...People we have not been accustomed to notice suddenly draw our sympathy and interest.” Fr. Haggerty concludes, “This phenomenon that people formerly ignored and avoided would suddenly occupy our attention and desire can only be due to the presence of God in them and in us.”

To know God and his Eucharistic presence dwelling within us confirms we are called and sent to love one another. This is the commission given to us at the end of every Mass, and the basis by which we will be judged as sheep of the Lord and not goats (Matthew 25:31-46). To make a sacrifice of self in prayer is organically connected with the sacrifice of ourselves in good works offered to any person who imposes himself, herself upon us. Both are acts of worship pleasing in God's sight. The convert and mystic Adrienne von Speyr links our mission in Christ with worship and joy: "The worship of those who believe is always the beginning and end of their mission."

At the same time, we should not be misled if we "hit the wall," confronting our own limits in either the ability to sustain prayerful attention, or to remain charitably oriented to others. Again, von Speyr: "The fact that one comes to a borderline where one feels overtaxed is actually the sign that the call is genuine." For then we are faced with the choice either to conceal or to manifest our need to God and to others, in a way that deepens our mutual dependence. We must be willing to be vulnerable before others, to entrust our needs to them, knowing that we cannot orchestrate their responses.

The saints may be unfailingly ready to be charitable; saints-in-the-making become more true, more simple, more trustworthy in the Church and our larger culture where mutual love is exchanged. Even our insufficiency and imperfections are "light" when not intentionally concealed under a bushel basket of pride, fragile egos or hypocritical conceit. Here, Jesus' repeated injunction, "Be not afraid," is relevant; as the late Francis Cardinal George reassures us: "Don't be afraid that your heart may not be able to embrace all those whom God loves—that is to say, everyone."

The Lord, who is not afraid to be "meek and humble of heart," and who commends this beatitude of meekness to us, constantly seeks us and finds us if we allow ourselves to be found. He pours his Spirit, himself into our hearts and minds so that we might do the same for our sisters and brothers. We bear wisdom, love, healing, hope, and new prospects of communion to a world where divisions are sorely real: political divisions, economic divisions, racial divisions, divisions within our Church and parish communities. We are freed from fear to simply love as God wills, for God's will and our own are made blessedly one. Our faces behold one another as we are, and our hearts are filled with the peace, presence, praise and joy that every human being desires.

◆ Reflection Questions

- *Where have I "hit the wall" and failed to love my neighbor?*
- *Where is God inviting me to sacrifice for others, allowing his love for me and my love for him to overflow?*
- *How can I grow in mutual dependence, both serving and being vulnerable with others?*

◆ Petitionary Prayers

- *For growth in charity and communion, that the Eucharist which unites us would confirm us in union with each other and in our common mission to bring others to Christ, we pray...*
- *For a healing of divisions, that political divisions, economic divisions, racial divisions, divisions within our Church and parish communities would find healing in the beauty and simplicity of our Eucharistic Lord, we pray...*