

From the Pastor's Desk

I think I can speak for most of us that we are not fond of the arctic chill that has been imposed upon us from the North. While I could spend time accurately bemoaning the primary causes for such a radical shift in the weather that has even brought snow to the deep south, and the clarion call that rings theologically to respond justly to such causes, I will not use **this forum** to do so. Rather, it is better to give thanks that all who read this message have the opportunity to be rescued from nature's audacious, bitter, and callous fury by going home to a warm home marked by love and hope. It's also better to pray for all life, human and non-human, that must brave the harsh fury of jaded "mother nature" and bear the burden of exposure to the cold often without much protection. And, if it is anywhere within the limits of our power, to do anything that we can to assist our fellow creatures who suffer from the excessive effects of the "cold and chill."

As I was giving thanks for being comforted by the warmth of my home, my relationships and my faith, I was thinking about the Eucharist. I was thinking about the Eucharist because Eucharist literally means "thanksgiving." And in the same spirit that inspired me last weekend to pose the question to you, my brothers and sisters, and to myself, "Why do we come to Church?", I thought I might pose the question: "What do we actually believe about the Eucharist?" And as I ask my probing questions in the first person plural, i.e. "we," I want to assure you that I do include myself for my belief in the Eucharist can always be deepened, can always be refined.

And so, what do we believe about the Eucharist. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that it is the source and summit of our salvation (cf. CCC, nos. 1324, 1327) but what does that mean? Is the Eucharist for us a wafer of bread that we receive that symbolizes the gift of Christ's body and blood? Or do we believe that we receive the body broken and the blood outpoured of our Lord Jesus Christ? I hope it is the latter, for when Christ proclaimed: "this is my body" and "this is my blood," as we pray in all its varied and multiple forms of the Eucharistic prayer at Mass, HE MEANT IT. There is nothing in scripture to suggest that Jesus was speaking symbolically or metaphorically. He made these statements literally. And when you come forward to receive communion at Mass you say "Amen!" which literally means "I believe." If we do not believe with our whole hearts, minds, souls and with all our strength that we are receiving Christ's body and blood we should pray as the great patristic theologian Saint Augustine did: "Lord, I believe, help my unbelief." This is of no little consequence: Our belief that we receive Christ's actual body and blood in the Eucharist is the absolute minimum in terms of our beliefs held as we celebrate the Eucharist!!! In our heart do we believe this?

Eucharist is also the name of the sacrament that we celebrate Sunday after Sunday as we come together for the breaking open of God's Word and the breaking open and pouring out of Christ himself. It is not a passive activity. And at the risk of being considered mundane but for the sake of accuracy, I must insist that the celebration of Mass, the Sunday Eucharist, is not a spectator sport. It calls for full, active, conscious

participation on the part of all. As such, the following questions may be asked: Have I met my "obligation" (and I hate that concept of imposed duty to be honest) to participate in Mass: if we do not pray all of the prayers along with the assembly gathered; if we do not sing (i.e., the mass parts, the responsorial psalms, the songs and hymns); if we do not pay attention to the proclamation of the readings and the preaching of the homily; if we do not pay attention devoutly to the Eucharistic prayer; if we do not mindfully come forward filled with belief in the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist when we come forward to receive communion; if we do not join the assembly in the nave of the Church for the celebration of Mass;¹ if we do not know why we are present and we are not committed to joining more deeply into the mystery of personal and communal conversion because of what has transpired at Mass. MANY MEMBERS OF THE CLERGY, AT ALL LEVELS, AS WELL AS THEOLOGIANS, WOULD SAY THAT THE OBLIGATION HAS NOT BEEN MET IF WE ANSWER NEGATIVELY TO ANY AND ALL OF THE AFORMETNIONED QUESTIONS. I WILL SAY THAT IT IS A MATTER OF CONSCIENCE – A CONSCIENCE THAT MUST BE WELL FORMED – AND ACCORDINGLY ALL OF THESE QUESTIONS MUST BE TAKEN SERIOUSLY. ***Again, this is no small matter. It is matter of eternal consequence and IT IS NOT ONE THAT SHOULD BE TAKEN UP OUT OF FEAR, BUT RATHER OUT OF A DESIRE TO LOVE OUR GOD, OUR NEIGHBORS, OURSELVES, AND OUR WORLD MORE INTIMATELY.***

We also have the opportunity to worship our Eucharistic Lord in the act of Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament. Here at Visitation Parish, we are afforded that opportunity to do so every Wednesday evening and every first Friday of the Month. While we are certainly not required to participate in such devotions, have we ever considered making them? Could we imagine how wonderful, how beautiful it would be to spend a quiet hour or half an hour with the Lord – either listening quietly to our hearts or pouring out our deepest needs and desires to His Most Sacred Heart. I can attest, although it is not required, it transcends the ordinary limits of aesthetics – that is it goes far beyond whatever we could imagine to be beautiful to capture our hearts and liberate our souls.

And so, without being "preachy," I ask you to ask yourself, as I always am asking myself, "What do you believe about the Eucharist?" The good news is that none of us will ever regress. With the help of God's Grace, ***we can only fall ever more deeply in love with Jesus Christ who wants to be our most intimate friend and who is forever our Eucharistic Lord and Savior who has come in the most precious sacrament of the altar to give us life and to give it abundantly.***

¹ AND THE ANSWER IS NO: WE HAVE NOT MET OUR SUNDAY OBLIGATION IF WE MERELY TAKE UP SPACE IN THE MAIN VESTIBULE OF THE CHURCH WHEN MASS IS BEING CELEBRATED (unless there is absolutely no room in the nave).