

6/14/2020
Corpus Christi

CORPUS CHRISTI IN A TIME OF PANDEMIC

Some people are born with a silver spoon in their mouths. Hers was a golden one. Other people came from families that were comfortable or well off. Her family was rich, rich, rich in the gilded age of the late nineteenth century. But all that money couldn't keep her mother alive. Eventually, her father remarried to a very good woman who taught her and her sister to care about the less fortunate. At the age of eighteen she was presented as a debutante in the high society of Philadelphia. It didn't seem to make much of an impression on her. Not long after that, both her father and step-mother died and she was left a very rich woman. How rich? By today's standards, it would be about 400 million dollars.

She had become concerned about the plight of Native Americans, and like our own St. Therese, was received in an audience by Pope Leo XIII. She said that there needed to be a community of religious women to serve them. He said that she should start that community. That was not the answer she was looking for but she returned to the United States and after prayer and discernment with a spiritual director, she founded the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament to serve Native Americans and African Americans and spent her fortune on this cause.

But she gave more than just money. She may have had the equivalent of 400 million dollars but she only had one life. She said, *Ours is the spirit of the Eucharist—the total gift of self*. Her name was Katharine Drexel, now St. Katharine Drexel. She didn't just give what she had, she gave who she was and here in the Eucharist, Jesus doesn't just give what he has to us. He gives who he is, literally.

In the first reading Moses reminds the Israelites of their journey in the desert where they were nourished with the manna the bread from heaven. The Eucharist is our food for the journey through this life, and it's a very happy coincidence that as we celebrate the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ it is for a number of us, our first time back for a live Mass in three months.

A pandemic is like a desert. You don't have access to many things you would otherwise have. You face limitations that you don't necessarily like and that can go

on for much longer than you want. Despite not going out, we have been journeying through a desert of stress, anxiety and isolation. To make it worse, we have journeyed through this desert without the Eucharist. And, our journey through this desert isn't over. In fact, in some ways, it has gotten more intense. It may be far from over. Many others can't come out right now and normal is a long way off.

And this pain, like any suffering, can do two things: It can close us in ourselves or it can make us more compassionate. It can make us think of our brothers and sisters around the world who can't come to Mass because of persecution, lack of priests, sickness or for any other reason.

And although Father Andrew and I have been celebrating Mass everyday for you, our vocation isn't to be hermits but to be parish priests. That means we are also called to celebrate Mass with you, and celebrating Mass in this big empty church has been lonely. I spend my life trying to get people to come to Mass and to not be able to offer that is hard.

But despite our sorrows, today we rejoice in the gift of the Eucharist with a greater joy because we have been away and apart for so long. It's not back to business as usual and won't be for sometime, but it's good to be together and not only to celebrate Mass for you, but *with* you.

Jesus describes himself as the living bread. He comes to give us life, eternal life where he really and truly gives himself to us under the form of bread and wine. This marvelous gift is so wonderful, that some people struggle to accept it. But St. Paul in the second reading reminds us of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Around A.D. 105, St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote, *There are those who hold strange doctrines....They abstain from Eucharist and prayer, because they allow not that the Eucharist is the flesh of our savior Jesus Christ.* The testimony of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist stretches back to the early Church and to the Bible.

Many years ago about the time I was in high school, my brother and I went to a vigil Mass at a neighboring parish. The priest recounted how when he was in college he had a roommate who was not Catholic and asked about what the Eucharist was. This future priest told him about it and his non-Catholic friend said that if that was what he believed that he would be crawling on his knees to receive it. His friend was taken with the idea of the Eucharist. We not do ask people to crawl on their

knees but to do something more important here in the Eucharist: to open their hearts to God's truth and love, to God's comfort and challenge in our daily lives.

Jesus calls us to remain in him and elsewhere he says, remain in my love. We do that throughout our lives in many ways and we do it in a very special way here in the Eucharist. We remain in him by staying close to him in his word and in prayer. We remain in him by accepting and embracing the moral demands that the gospel makes of us. And there are challenges to be sure in so many different areas of our lives, but those challenges aren't to make us miserable but to make us better and ultimately to make us happy—forever. We do this in ordinary acts of daily life that we carry out with great love. Jesus calls us to union, to communion with him.

This union with Christ however doesn't close us in on ourselves but rather draws us out of ourselves. Jesus was led out of himself on the Cross and God's love leads us out of ourselves into a deeper love with others. Seeing Jesus in the Eucharist must lead us to seeing Jesus in others, especially the poor and needy. The same Jesus who said, *this is my body*, is the same Jesus who said, *I was hungry and you gave me to eat; I was a stranger and you welcomed me*. The Eucharist isn't just a ritual we share in, it's entering into the moment of Jesus' death and resurrection, it's a way of life, a way of thanksgiving, a way of receiving the gift of himself that Jesus lovingly makes of himself and then of lovingly making a gift of ourselves in return.

Pandemic or not, may we always grow in that gift of the Eucharist and like Jesus, like St. Katharine Drexel, like so many others, may we not just give what we have but who we are.