

FR JUSTIN FORD, HOMILY, HOLY THURSDAY, 9TH APRIL 2020

‘Until the Lord comes, every time you eat this bread and drink this cup, you are proclaiming his death.’ The words of St Paul in our Second Reading, explaining to the first Christians why their Eucharistic celebrations were so central. His words are reflected in two of our Memorial Acclamations straight after the priest consecrates the bread and wine. ‘When we eat this Bread and drink this Cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again.’ ‘We proclaim your death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again.’

The Mass is proclaiming the saving death of the Lord. And because the Death and Resurrection of the Son of God are at the centre of history, and the centre of the human race, that means that the ongoing celebration of the Mass reflects that same centrality. The Eucharistic celebration, in those words of St John Paul II, the Eucharist *is* the sacrifice of the Cross, perpetuated down the ages. This was the parting gift of Jesus to his disciples, to all of us.

So what we see with the eyes of faith is that the Mass is the secret centre of human affairs. Now, that might sound a bit incredible. But there’s a famous quote from the poet Tennyson, ‘More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.’

We’ll only discover in heaven the use that God made of all our different prayers to guide the course of this world. All the good things that wouldn’t have happened if someone, somewhere, hadn’t been praying. And if that’s true of prayer in general, above all it’s true of the ultimate prayer, the Mass. So we can say, more things are wrought by *the Mass* than this world dreams of. All this helps us understand why the Second Vatican Council said that the Eucharistic Sacrifice was ‘the source and summit of the whole Christian life’.

At this difficult time, when so many Catholics around the world can’t attend Mass, in particular these Masses of the Sacred Paschal Triduum, realising the importance of the Mass can make its absence the more painful. But maybe it also increases the hunger for the Eucharist, which sometimes we might be tempted to take for granted.

When Cardinal Pell was set free on Tuesday, with such a resounding verdict from the seven judges, the first thing he wanted to do was to celebrate the Mass. Because he hadn’t been able to do that during the whole time of his imprisonment. So he had this great hunger.

But we remember as well how in these things, when we’re doing the best we can in the circumstances, to a great extent God accepts our desire for the reality. So I’ve spoken about Spiritual Communion, how when it’s impossible for us to actually receive Communion, we can express to God our desire of receiving if it were possible. And that brings us so many of the graces we would have had from actually receiving.

It also applies to the forgiveness of sins. When someone has what’s called perfect contrition, sorrow for their sins motivated by their love of God above all things; and with that they have the desire and intention of accessing God’s forgiveness sacramentally as soon as possible, whether in Baptism or Reconciliation as the case may be – well, that perfect contrition, along with the desire for the Sacrament, brings God’s forgiveness and grace even before they actually get baptised, or before they actually confess their sins in Reconciliation. They still have to go and receive Baptism or confess their sins when they get the chance – otherwise they didn’t really have the desire in the first place. But in the meantime, God takes our desire for the reality.

So, I suppose something similar can be said about our participation in the Mass. When, as in the present circumstances, we couldn't possibly physically attend Mass no matter how we tried, but we desire to be present. When we unite ourselves in spirit to those Masses which *are* being offered, when we take part as best we can, online, or by TV, then God is surely going to give us so many of the graces we would have received by actually being present. I'm talking about more than Communion here. I've already spoken about Spiritual Communion. But I'm also referring to our spiritual sharing in the Sacrifice of the Mass that takes place, even if for some reason we don't receive Communion.

Because in union with the priest, especially during the Eucharistic Prayer, the Second Vatican Council tells us that the faithful who are present 'offer the divine victim to God and offer themselves along with it.' We give ourselves to God, in union with the self-offering Christ made on the Cross. And, for those who have no way of being physically present, that can be done in a spiritual way.

Again, it's only with the eyes of faith that we see the benefits. The supreme praise and thanksgiving, the perfect worship, offered by Christ to the Father, that we're enabled to share in. And then, all the spiritual blessings that flow out from that, and even material blessings, upon ourselves, upon the Church, upon the whole world. Winning graces, atoning for sins, releasing souls into heaven.

Last Sunday I quoted the famous motto of the Carthusian Order of monks, 'The Cross is steady while the world is turning.' Meaning, amidst all the upheavals in our world, the Cross stands firm. But we might also say, on this Holy Thursday, because the Mass *is* the Sacrifice of the Cross made present, we can also say, 'The *Mass* is steady while the world is turning.' The fixed centre in the midst of all the changes. May we all keep that love and desire for the Mass burning in our hearts, until the joyful day comes in these months ahead, when we can gather together again, and praise and worship God in the Most Holy Sacrifice.