

## **Opening Mass for Diocesan Eucharistic Congress: “*Ignite the Faith*”**

*(Acts 2:1-11; 1 Cor. 11:23-26; Lk. 24: 13-35)*

October 19, 2019 9:00 a.m.

Radisson Hotel

My brother priests (here in such great numbers), my brother deacons, dear Sisters, my brothers and sisters in Christ---This is SO Cool! Just look around. Look at us, a microcosm of the Church which makes up the Diocese of Kalamazoo, gathered together, here in a major Hotel Ballroom, temporarily converted into a beautiful Chapel, representing just about every one of our 59 parishes/27 Collaboratives, on an early Saturday morning in mid-October, 1,000 strong (give or take a few)---celebrating our Faith and singing the Praises of our Saving Lord, Jesus!

When we started very early discussions of planning this first-ever Eucharistic Congress more than a year ago, this was only a dream---a possibility---a “wouldn’t it be great if” kind of discussion. And yet, here we are. This is real, the result of a lot of planning, promoting, and praying. All of you heard the invitation; you shared the dream; you sacrificed what you might otherwise be doing on a Saturday morning so you could be here. That’s what made this dream a reality. And that’s what makes this so Cool! Thank you for coming, and sharing the dream.

This Eucharistic Congress is probably a brand new experience for many of you. Even the term is unusual. It’s like a convention, or a convocation, but with the specific goal of bringing us, as People of Faith, together, and focusing on this most central Mystery of our Faith as Catholics: the Holy Eucharist.

As we come together in these kinds of unusual circumstances, and celebrate our Faith in the Eucharist in this special way, my hope and prayer, as the theme of our Congress puts it,

is that the Holy Spirit will “Ignite the Faith”/”*Encender la Fe*” in new ways, in ways that will renew our Faith, and deepen our Love for Jesus in the Precious Gift of the Holy Eucharist.

These have been challenging times for our Church, here in our Diocese, and throughout the United States, especially over these last two years. So challenging that there are those who have decided to stop practicing their Faith. How tragic!

But even before that, the growing impact of secularism throughout our culture has had a devastating impact on people’s sense of Faith. The aggressive efforts to remove God from the public forum, and the trends to relativize Truth into whatever anyone chooses it to be, has led to a loss of a sense of the Divine/ the Transcendent, in our society.

In fact, in yesterday’s *Wall Street Journal*, there was an article entitled “Church Attendance Falls Sharply”, and reported on statistics from a new Pew Research Center Study, which concludes that overall, in the last decade, (in the words of the article) “Religiosity in the U.S. is in sharp decline”. Among the more concerning statistics that this study revealed, there has been a decline in the percentage of Christians in this country which, in 2009 was at 77%, but which today is at 65%; and at the same time, an increase in those who profess no religious affiliation (the “nones”) from 17% in 2009 to 25 % today. (Here in our Diocese, that percentage of “nones” is a staggering 50%.) Sadly, among Millenials, “nones”, those who are unaffiliated to any religion, is at 40%.

So, in addition to the impact of the recent crisis in the Church, there is an even greater cultural impact on People of Faith in general. In our so-called “advanced” 21<sup>st</sup> century mentality, we are definitely losing a sense of the Sacred---an appreciation for the Presence of God in our world.

We sometimes hear people give as their excuse for not coming to Mass that “I don’t get anything out of the Mass”. If we really understood what takes place at every Mass, that our

Lord and Savior Jesus Christ Gives Himself to us in His Word, and most especially in the Holy Eucharist----How could we possibly say: I don't get anything out of that?!

We desperately need a "new Pentecost". We definitely need to "*Ignite our Faith*" "Encender la Fe".

This morning's First Reading reminded us of the original Pentecost, and how 12 fearful, uneducated, simple men, were truly "set on fire" thru the Gift of the Holy Spirit, and began to transform the world with the Love of Jesus.

They went from passively detached to fully engaged; from timid to dynamic; from fearful to fiercely courageous. It wasn't just them; it was the Holy Spirit working thru them. But, they were willing agents of the Holy Spirit; they allowed the Holy Spirit to work thru them, and they cooperated with the Holy Spirit in His direction and inspiration.

That's what WE need as well. We need to renew our Faith. And we need to realize the powerful Gift that Jesus gives to us in the Eucharist. And that, I hope, is why we are here for this very important day.

In this morning's Second Reading, St. Paul, the greatest of all "missionary disciples", reminded the Corinthians why the Eucharist is so vitally important, and that this most precious Gift is not just FROM Jesus; it IS Jesus. This Bread---this Wine---when we gather in Faith---will become Jesus' Body and Jesus' Blood, given for us. Jesus tells us: "*Do this in remembrance of Me.*" How can we NOT do so?!

The Pew Research Center that I quoted about declining Church attendance across the board for Americans, also did a study recently focused on the understanding of the Eucharist by Catholics. What was very disturbing is the statistic that only 30% of Catholics

believe that Jesus is really and truly Present in the Eucharist; and among the other 70%, there are a large number who believe that Jesus' Presence is merely symbolic.

But as St. Paul told us in today's Second Reading, and as Jesus Himself told us in the Gospels, He IS the Bread of Life, and if we do not eat His Flesh and drink His Blood, we have no life in us. He didn't change His mind when a number of disciples began to walk away, saying: "This teaching is too difficult to understand".(Jn.6)

Jesus IS really and truly Present.

When we celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday, or at any weekday Mass, we are witnessing the miracle of Jesus Himself becoming really and truly Present among us.

When we receive the Eucharist, we receive Jesus.

When we are in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, we are in prayer with Jesus.

And that's why we are here for this amazing opportunity---for this Eucharistic Congress.

Jesus will become Present in the Holy Eucharist in just a few moments; He will be carried in procession to another special room here in the Hotel to BE with us throughout the day, for YOU to go and spend time with Him in prayer during, or between sessions; and He will accompany us on our procession at the end of the day, symbolic of how Jesus accompanies us throughout our life journey, if we allow Him to do so.

That's what we heard taking place in our beautiful Gospel Reading as the 2 discouraged and hope-less disciples were leaving Jerusalem, returning to Emmaus, returning to their former lives, since Jesus was, in their minds, dead and gone. Even though the Glorified and Risen Jesus joined them for their journey, their grief and sadness kept them from recognizing Him. It was only when He went in to share a meal with them, when "*He took*

*bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them”, that, St. Luke tells us, “their eyes were opened and they recognized Him, but He vanished from their sight.”*

Jesus may have vanished from their sight, but He was truly Present in the Bread He had just consecrated. They didn't need to see Him with their eyes; they saw Him in the Bread, blessed and broken and given for them.

That's when they realized why *“their hearts were burning within them”*, because Jesus was truly with them.

My dear Friends, Jesus wants our “hearts to burn within us” as well, but He can't set us “on fire” with His Love if we are like those disciples who walked away saying this teaching is too hard, or if we allow our fears, or the reasons why life may cause us to be despondent, discouraged or to lose hope, to blind us from seeing with the eyes of Faith.

That's my hope and special prayer for this Eucharistic Congress. That this day will be a special “moment” in the life of our Diocese, when we will allow the Holy Spirit to renew our Faith, and deepen our Love for the Eucharist, to the point that we are “ignited” in our Faith; to the point that “our hearts are burning within us”; to the point that we want to go forth and share this Good News of Jesus' Love to all the world.

Yesterday, as you probably know, was the Feast of St. Luke, one of the 4 Gospel Writers, as well as the Author of the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospel reading for his Feast was taken from the 10<sup>th</sup> chapter of his Gospel, when Jesus sends out the 72 disciples with these words: *“The harvest is abundant, but the laborers are few; so ask the master of the harvest to send out laborers for his harvest.”*

Look at us gathered here. We're 1,000 strong, from every part of our Diocese. We're clergy and lay faithful; we're young and old (some of us older than others!); we're of diverse ethnic

backgrounds. But, we are ONE in our Baptism, and we are ALL united in Christ.// Pero somos uno en nuestro Bautismo; y, estamos todos unidos en Cristo! WE ARE the “laborers” to go forth and bring in the harvest.

If there are fewer people coming to Church, and more people who claim no religious affiliation, then that just means that all of us have that many more opportunities to help bring in the Harvest---to be joyful witnesses to our Faith, to be “living sermons” of the Good News of Jesus to those who don’t know Him, but who desperately need Him.

Is that an easy, or comfortable, or pleasant thing to do? No, not really. But, it’s part of what we, as Jesus’ Disciples, are called to do.

THAT’s why Jesus gives us the Gift of the Eucharist. Not only to be our spiritual Food and Drink to keep us strong and nourished; but so that He can also be our Strength for the challenging work that He calls us to do of witnessing to our Faith.

Right after Jesus prays for more laborers to go work for the Harvest, Jesus says: “*Behold, I am sending you like lambs among wolves*”. Jesus knows it’s not easy. Was it easy for Him? No. He could not have done what He did without being totally in union with His Heavenly Father.

That’s how we can do what we are called to do; by being in union with Jesus, our Lord, and being united with one another, sisters and brothers in the Body of Christ.

We’re 1,000 strong from every corner of our Diocese. That means that just about 1% of the total Catholic population of approximately 100,000 in our Diocese, are right here. And since our Catholic population is only 10% of the total population in our 9 counties, that means that we are .1% of that approximately 1 million people.

That’s part of what it means to be “sent out like lambs among wolves”.

Jesus Himself assured us that He will be with us, to be our Food, our Strength, our Hope, until the end of the ages. We are not alone.

What we celebrate here---this most precious Gift of the Eucharist---is Real. The Eucharist is the miracle of Jesus Present with us. He gives Himself to us, not just for ourselves; He gives Himself to us, so that we, in turn, can give Him---share Him----proclaim Him to others, beginning with those in our own families, in our neighborhoods, at our workplaces, in our card clubs, at the gym, while we cheer on our football teams, and especially when we reach out in Christ-like loving service to those in our world who need our acts of charity, and who need us to right the wrongs of injustice.

Why should we do this? Because Jesus IS Alive. And, just like the Apostles on the Road to Emmaus did when they ran back to Jerusalem, we too must “*recount*” to others what happened to us “*along the way of our lives*” and how Jesus “*is made known to us in the breaking of the Bread.*”

God bless you, now and always!//*Dios te bendiga, ahora y siempre!*