



DIOCESE OF  
OAKLAND

## HOW COULD ANYONE STAY AWAY? A RETURN TO THE EUCHARIST

BISHOP MICHAEL C. BARBER, S.J.

JUNE 29, 2021

*“How I have longed to celebrate this Passover with you”* (Luke 22:15). When people ask, “Why should we go to Mass?” I answer, “Because Jesus is waiting for you there in the Church, and He wants to be with you — right there — in the Holy Eucharist.” It is about a personal encounter with Jesus that we have as individuals AND as a community, in the celebration of the Mass. The celebration of the Eucharist is the time and place where we can allow Christ to love us, and we can return His love.

Knowing this, how could anyone stay away?

We are coming off a year and a half of “fasting” from full, personal, and active participation in the Eucharist because of the Covid pandemic precautions. Hence the Lord says again to us, as He did to the Apostles at the Last Supper, “How I have longed to be with you!” And how we priests have longed to be with you also to celebrate together the Lord’s passion, death and resurrection.

I cannot tell you how happy I was to see so many people coming back to Mass for Holy Week and Easter this year, and since the June 15 lifting of most COVID restrictions, for daily and Sunday Masses. I felt like St. Peter at the Transfiguration, when he said, “Lord, it is good for us to be here!”

By participating in the Mass, we can be with Jesus at the moment He lays down His life for His friends. You and I are those friends. Jesus loved His Apostles “to the end” (Jn 13:1), and He will love us “to the end.”

When Christ taught “Come to me all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest,” I believe He was encouraging us to come to Him where He is most intensely present, in His own Body and Blood on the altar of sacrifice at every Mass. Maybe that explains the sociologists’ study that found all socio-economic groups of people suffered more anxiety, more stress, and more depression during the pandemic, except one — those who attend church regularly.

When Christ said to the Apostles at the Last Supper, “Do this in memory of me,” He was not only giving a command to the Apostles to celebrate the Eucharist — He was also inviting all of us, Christian brothers and sisters, to come together at the altar, to listen to Him speaking to us in the Scriptures, and to receive Him inside our bodies and our hearts.

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council, we read that communion with the Body and Blood of Christ changes us into what we receive. We become divinized. St. Thomas Aquinas taught “The proper effect of the Eucharist is the transformation of human beings into God” (Aquinas, Sent. IV, dist. 12, q. 2, a. 1.). Do we realize this?

Our belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is scriptural. Jesus meant it when He said “This is my body; This is my blood” (Lk 22:19–20; Mt 26:26–28; Mk 14:22–24; 1 Cor. 11:23–25). The Church has always guarded and preserved this teaching faithfully from one generation to the next, despite heresies diluting or even denying the real presence of Christ in Holy Communion.

Jesus Himself taught how important it was to Him that we come to celebrate the Eucharist and receive Him in Holy Communion:

*“Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. . . . Just as the living Father sent me and I have life because of the Father, so also the one who feeds on me will have life because of me”* (Jn 6:53-57).

As Bishop Robert Barron recently wrote, “There is simply, this side of heaven, no more intimate communion possible with the risen Lord.”

So let us come back to Him at Mass in person, joining together as a worshipping community, to be fed with His word in Scripture, and His body and blood in Holy Communion.

**Since the Church always has our spiritual health as her primary consideration, I am reinstating the law which was dispensed because of the pandemic. Our solemn obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation will come back into force in the Diocese of Oakland on Sunday, August 15, 2021, the Solemnity of the Assumption of Our Lady into Heaven<sup>1</sup>.**

In the Divine Liturgy of the Eastern Catholic Churches, at the sign of peace, each person says to their neighbor, “Christ is among us.” And the response is, “He is and always will be.” Let us come back into His presence “singing for joy” (Psalm 95:2).

---

<sup>1</sup> While it is true that illness, infirmity or truly serious reasons may impede and therefore always dispense us of our obligation to come to church for Mass, any casual absence from Mass without serious reason carries the burden of a willful sin against God and neighbor and should be brought to Confession before receiving Holy Communion. Long before this pandemic, the Church has always recognized that there are “serious” or “grave” reasons that prevent Catholics from attending Mass. For example, if a person is sick or homebound, or living/visiting areas of the world where access to the Mass is limited, or a situation arises that prevents travel (snowstorm or flat tire), such persons would not be bound by the obligation. In the case of this pandemic, serious or grave reasons would include:

- Anyone who is sick, symptomatic, or has been recently exposed to the coronavirus. Protecting the health of others is an act of Christian charity and our moral duty to one another.
- Anyone with significant health risk factors that requires them to avoid public spaces, or if you care for someone with significant risk factors.
- Anyone who cannot attend Mass through no fault of their own, for example, a parent caring for a sick child, or if the priest is sick.