

# Missing Each Other, Missing the Lord

## Pastoral Letter The Ascension of the Lord, 24th May 2020 Bishop Dermot Farrell



### Diocese of Ossory

*“I have come that you may have life, and have it to the full” (John 10:10)*



*Eucharist, Marko Ivan Rupnik, S.J.*

#### **Introduction**

Now that the pathway to the public celebration of the sacraments, particularly the Mass, is coming into view, Catholics look forward to returning to their parish church with the planned easing of restrictions on public gatherings. Since the suspension of public Masses in mid-March, people have been encouraged to tune into live-streamed Masses. As they attended Mass virtually, they looked forward to the day when they would be able to attend in person, and receive sacramentally again. Many people have told me that while this arrangement in the health emergency was a great comfort, they also felt a loss that they could not receive the Eucharist—the Bread of Life—in person. Grandparents acutely understand such a loss. Although their children and grandchildren could phone or Zoom or FaceTime, it was no substitute for a visit, for hugs and kisses, the closeness and life visiting brings.

#### **Restricted Access to the Sacraments**

The pandemic restrictions affect more than Mass: celebrations of First Holy Communion and of Confirmation have also been postponed until the spread of this disease is brought under control. Engaged couples have been forced to cancel and defer their weddings. Restricted access to hospitals and nursing homes means that celebrating the Sacrament of the Sick, and bringing Holy Communion to those who are ill is far more difficult. Many have had to bid farewell to a loved one without the consolation of extended family and friends at the funeral. Understandably, we all look forward to a time when it will be possible, again, to share our lives, to gather in our churches, to celebrate and be nourished by our faith. However, we also have to acknowledge that in disturbing the rhythm of our lives, the pandemic can also disturb our faith; it can interrupt the good habits of a lifetime, changing our patterns of prayer, and restricting how we celebrate the Sacraments. I, therefore, wish to reflect with you, from the perspective of our faith, on some aspects of what is unfolding in our lives, in our land, and across the world.

#### **Beyond the Virtual: The Sacraments and the Real**

What many Catholics lament is the loss of the community dimension of our faith, and its human dimension. There is no Church without community; our humanity is at the heart of our faith. Just as the Saviour is truly human and truly divine, so the People of God need to be in communion with each other, and in communion with their Lord (see 1Cor 10:16–17). We don't often reflect on these things; we don't have to. But when they're taken away almost overnight, we naturally wonder what is happening, and what is happening to us. Of course, people are grateful for the televised celebrations, as well as Masses on webcams from churches near and far. The driving force behind this 'virtual' participation in the Eucharistic liturgy is clear, but online Masses and spiritual Communion are only a partial reflection of our common experience of the Church, both past and present.

We believe that the Sacraments are privileged moments of encounter with God. Through these actions of the community of faith, we are drawn into a deeper relationship with God and with each other. Through Baptism and the Eucharist we are incorporated into Christ (1

Cor 12:13). We become not only united with Christ, but we become one in Christ (Gal 3:26-29; Col 3:11). Here, as always, we see God and people ‘working’ hand-in-hand. Becoming one in Christ is something that happens over time; it is something that happens in our lives; it happens in the reality of our lives; over time we are changed, changed by God in Christ, changed by God’s grace. While there are moments of insight and illumination, while things happen that stop us in our tracks, most change is slow. It demands attention, humility, lots of starting over and over again. Like building a house, or creating a garden, growing in God’s grace requires time and plenty of self-investment. We all marvel at the beautiful gardens and homes on TV shows. We see the before and after; it is harder to see what comes in-between.

Our day-to-day lives are the in-between. The Sacraments, especially the Eucharist, are food for those day-to-day lives. As we could not receive these Sacraments during the pandemic, we were not being nourished and strengthened by them in the usual way. That is part of the reason, Pope Francis stressed that live-streamed Masses even from parish churches, and spiritual Communion, are less than the Church (see homily 17th April 2020). Virtual Mass is not the Church. The liturgy is not a film, nor are we spectators. Many people, unable to attend a funeral Mass, appreciated the value of modern technology, but also realised that there was a missing dimension in the virtual which was no substitute for being present. A virtual funeral helps when we are geographically apart, but it is no substitute for being present, for being with those who are important to us. People have come to the realisation that “watching Mass” is very different from being physically present and participating in the celebration with other members of their family and the community. For all its advantages and immediacy, the virtual is no substitute for physical presence with the assembled community.

### **Sacrament and Community**

From its very beginning Jesus’ mission had two inseparable dimensions—announcing Good News, and gathering a community of disciples. Right from the start, Jesus preached, and as he preached, he called people to follow him. And he called them in twos and threes. While Jesus calls us person to person, he calls us into community at the same time. From our very beginnings then, the Church has been a community who gathered around their Lord—to hear his word, to give praise and thanks to God—and who were sent forth on mission (see 1 Cor 15:9 and Gal 1:13). Christ gathers us and sends us forth. The Good Shepherd gathers his flock, feeds us, and sends us forth: “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.” We, who are people of the Eucharist, must ourselves become “the people of the towel and the water,” to use a wonderful phrase from Canadian mystic, Catherine de Hueck Doherty. Sharing the Bread of the Eucharist and washing the feet of our neighbour go together (see John 13:14). In recent weeks, it is not our faith that has been taken from us—but the closeness, the touch, of those who accompany us on the road of life—our sisters and brothers, and the Lord Jesus himself. We hunger for the Bread of Life. We long for that bread in all its dimensions: the Eucharist, our parish at prayer, our friends and neighbours with us in our time of sorrow, and in our day of joy. We experience the loss of this community dimension acutely because all the mysteries of our faith—the Sacraments, the Church, the Incarnation itself—cannot be relegated to the realm of the spiritual.

The Sacraments that we miss are actions of the Christian community. They are Christ working among his people. That is why we celebrate them together in church, and are oriented to the “full and active participation of the whole community” (Second Vatican Council, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, 14). Sacraments, then, are moments for *we* and not *I*. These days, as I preside at Mass, and look out at the empty pews, I pray with and for the people who cannot be there. St Mary’s Cathedral has beautiful stained-glass windows depicting the saints. As the sunlight filters in, I am reminded that the liturgy joins heaven and earth in one act of praise to God. But, as a parishioner noted in an Easter message, “It is wonderful to watch the Mass, but it is not the same. I miss my church family. I pray that we can all be together again soon.”

### **The Sacraments and Life**

God sent his only Son into the world that we might have life through him (see 1 John 4:9 and John 3:16). God did just not send us a message. Christ did come and the disciples broke bread with him at the Last Supper and beside the Sea of Galilee (see John 21:9–14). In other words, Christianity is not an abstract religion, or some philosophy. In Jesus, God became flesh, and more to the point, he invites us to eat his body and drink his blood. We receive the Bread of Life, the Body of Christ into our bodies; we take him into ourselves. Each time we participate in the Eucharist, Christ nourishes us with the gift of himself. We receive the Body of Christ first and foremost to enter into a deeper communion with Christ, and thereby into a deeper communion with God and with each other. It is this fullness of life, and its celebration among us that we miss in these strange pandemic days.

As we lament our distance from Sacraments, and the Eucharist in particular, may God give us the strength to become the body of Christ for one another as the current pandemic requires: to love our neighbours by staying away, to practice mercy through acts of care, to speak and share only the truth, to serve the common good even when it inconveniences us, to give thanks for our many blessings, and not to forget the sacrifice and generosity of so many. In a word, to be for one another living signs of God’s kingdom, living sacraments of God’s life. In stepping back, for now, may we see the fullness of the powerful picture being painted by our actions in these days.

### **Waiting in Hope**

For all their difficulty, these very difficult times bring home to people what is truly important for us. After our initial shock and fear, we began to appreciate that a full fridge might permit us to survive, but was no guarantee of the fullness of life (see John 10:10). For fullness of life we need more: we need the people that are important to us. That is what the pandemic has been taking from us, the good and ordinary way of being with each other. But we wait patiently with hope. It is in this spirit that we need to follow the public health guidance. While this is painful and difficult, it is also necessary. We keep a distance to keep each other safe. But the distance we thus create will keep us safe; it is, like the poem says, “the light from the lighthouse that protects as it pushes away” (John Ashbery).

The following prayer, which we know from the Mass, has been for me a prayer of hope and strength. May it be same for you.

*“Deliver us, Lord, we pray, from every evil, graciously grant peace in our days,  
that, by the help of your mercy, we may be always free from sin and safe from all distress,  
as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.”*

**+Dermot Farrell**  
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