

Let us return to the Eucharist with joy!

Letter on the celebration of the liturgy during and after the COVID 19 pandemic to the Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences of the Catholic Church

The pandemic caused by the COVID-19 virus has produced upheavals not only in social, family, economic, educational and work dynamics, but also in the life of the Christian community, including the liturgical dimension. To prevent the spread of the virus, rigid social distancing was necessary, which had repercussions on a fundamental trait of Christian life: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them" (Mt 18:20); "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And all who believed were together and had all things in common" (Acts 2:42.44).

This community dimension has a theological meaning: God is a relationship of Persons in the Most Holy Trinity. He creates humanity in the relational complementarity between male and female because "it is not good that man should be alone" (Gen 2:18). He puts himself in relationship with man and woman and calls them in turn to relationship with him. As Saint Augustine intuited, our heart is restless until it finds God and rests in him (cf. Confessions, I, 1). The Lord Jesus began his public ministry by calling to himself a group of disciples to share with him the life and proclamation of the Kingdom; from this small flock the Church is born. Scripture uses the image of a city to describe eternal life: the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. Rev 21). A city is a community of people who share values, fundamental human and spiritual realities, places, times and organized activities and who contribute to building the common good. While the pagans built temples dedicated only to the divinity, to which people had no access, Christians, as soon as they enjoyed freedom of worship, immediately built places that were the *domus Dei et domus ecclesiae*, where the faithful could recognize themselves as the community of God, a people summoned for worship and constituted as a holy assembly. God can therefore proclaim: "I am your God, you will be my people" (cf. Ex 6:7; Dt 14:2). The Lord remains faithful to his Covenant (cf. Dt 7:9) and Israel becomes for this very reason the Abode of God, the holy place of his presence in the world (cf. Ex 29:45; Lv 26:11-12). For this reason, the house of the Lord presupposes the presence of the family of the children of God. Today too, in the prayer of the dedication of a new church, the Bishop asks that it be what it should be by its very nature:

"[...] make this for ever a holy place [...]"

Here may the flood of divine grace

overwhelm human offenses,

so that your children, Father,

being dead to sin,

may be reborn to heavenly life.

Here may your faithful,

gathered around the table of the altar, celebrate the memorial of the Paschal Mystery and

be refreshed by the banquet

of Christ's Word and his Body.

Here may the joyful offering of praise resound,
with human voices joined to the song of Angels,
and unceasing prayer rise up to you
for the salvation of the world.

Here may the poor find mercy,
the oppressed attain true freedom,
and all people be clothed with the dignity of your children, until they come exultant
to the Jerusalem which is above.

The Christian community has never sought isolation and has never made the Church a city with closed doors. Formed in the value of community life and in the search of the common good, Christians have always sought insertion into society, while being aware of an otherness - to be in the world without belonging to it and without being reduced to it (cf. *Letter to Diognetus*, 5-6). And even in the pandemic emergency, a great sense of responsibility has emerged. In listening to and collaborating with civil authorities and experts, the Bishops and their territorial conferences were prompt to make difficult and painful decisions, even to the point of suspending the participation of the faithful in the celebration of the Eucharist for a long period. This Congregation is deeply grateful to the Bishops for their commitment and effort in trying to respond in the best possible way to an unforeseen and complex situation.

As soon as circumstances permit, however, it is necessary and urgent to return to the normality of Christian life, which has the church building as its home and the celebration of the liturgy, especially the Eucharist, as "the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the font from which all her power flows" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10).

Aware that God never abandons the humanity He has created, and that even the hardest trials can bear fruits of grace, we have accepted our distance from the Lord's altar as a time of Eucharistic fasting, useful for us to rediscover its vital importance, beauty and immeasurable preciousness. As soon as is possible, however, we must return to the Eucharist with a purified heart, with a renewed amazement, with an increased desire to meet the Lord, to be with him, to receive him and to bring him to our brothers and sisters with the witness of a life full of faith, love and hope.

This time of deprivation gives us the grace to understand the heart of our brothers and sisters, the martyrs of Abitinae (beginning of the 4th century), who answered their judges with serene determination, despite a sure death sentence: "*Sine Dominico non possumus*". The absolute verb *non possumus* (we cannot) and the significance of the neuter noun *Dominicum* (that which is the Lord's) cannot be translated with a single word. A very brief expression sums up a great wealth of nuances and meanings that are offered to our meditation today:

- We cannot live, be Christians, fully realizing our humanity and the desires for good and happiness that dwell in our hearts without the Word of the Lord, which in the celebration of the liturgy takes shape and becomes a living word, spoken by God for those who today open their hearts to listen;

- We cannot live as Christians without participating in the Sacrifice of the Cross in which the Lord Jesus gives himself unreservedly to save, by his death, humanity which had died because of sin; the Redeemer associates humanity with himself and leads it back to the Father; in the embrace of the Crucified One all human suffering finds light and comfort;

- We cannot be without the banquet of the Eucharist, the table of the Lord to which we are invited as sons and daughters, brothers and sisters to receive the Risen Christ himself, present in body, blood, soul and divinity in that Bread of heaven which sustains us in the joys and labours of this earthly pilgrimage;

- We cannot be without the Christian community, the family of the Lord: we need to meet our brothers and sisters who share the sonship of God, the fraternity of Christ, the vocation and the search for holiness and the salvation of their souls in the rich diversity of ages, personal histories, charisms and vocations;

- We cannot be without the house of the Lord, which is our home, without the holy places where we were born to faith, where we discovered the provident presence of the Lord and discovered the merciful embrace that lifts up those who have fallen, where we consecrated our vocation to marriage or religious life, where we prayed and gave thanks, rejoiced and wept, where we entrusted to the Father our loved ones who had completed their earthly pilgrimage;

- We cannot be without the Lord's Day, without Sunday which gives light and meaning to the succession of days of work and to family and social responsibilities.

As much as the means of communication perform a valued service to the sick and those who are unable to go to church, and have performed a great service in the broadcast of Holy Mass at a time when there was no possibility of community celebrations, no broadcast is comparable to personal participation or can replace it. On the contrary, these broadcasts alone risk distancing us from a personal and intimate encounter with the incarnate God who gave himself to us not in a virtual way, but really, saying: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him". (Jn 6.56). This physical contact with the Lord is vital, indispensable, irreplaceable. Once the concrete measures that can be taken to reduce the spread of the virus to a minimum have been identified and adopted, it is necessary that all resume their place in the assembly of brothers and sisters, rediscover the irreplaceable preciousness and beauty of the celebration of the liturgy, and invite and encourage again those brothers and sisters who have been discouraged, frightened, absent or uninvolved for too long.

This Dicastery intends to reaffirm some principles and suggest some courses of action to promote a rapid and safe return to the celebration of the Eucharist.

Due attention to hygiene and safety regulations cannot lead to the sterilisation of gestures and rites, to the instilling, even unconsciously, of fear and insecurity in the faithful.

It is up to the prudent but firm action of the Bishops to ensure that the participation of the faithful in the celebration of the Eucharist is not reduced by public authorities to a "gathering", and is not considered comparable or even subordinate to forms of recreational activities.

Liturgical norms are not matters on which civil authorities can legislate, but only the competent ecclesiastical authorities (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 22).

The participation of the faithful in liturgical celebrations should be facilitated, but without improvised ritual experiments and in full respect of the norms contained in the liturgical books which govern their conduct. In the liturgy, an experience of sacredness, holiness and beauty that transfigures gives a foretaste of the harmony of eternal blessedness. Care should therefore be taken to ensure the dignity of the places, the sacred furnishings, the manner of celebration, according to the authoritative instruction of the Second Vatican Council: "The rites should be distinguished by a noble simplicity" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 34).

The faithful should be recognised as having the right to receive the Body of Christ and to worship the Lord present in the Eucharist in the manner provided for, without limitations that go even beyond what is provided for by the norms of hygiene issued by public authorities or Bishops.

In the Eucharistic celebration the faithful adore the Risen Jesus present; and we see with what ease the sense of adoration, the prayer of adoration, is lost. In their catechesis we ask Pastors to insist on the necessity of adoration.

A sure principle in order not to err is obedience. Obedience to the norms of the Church, obedience to the Bishops. In times of difficulty (e.g., wars, pandemics), Bishops and Episcopal Conferences can give provisional norms which must be obeyed. Obedience safeguards the treasure entrusted to the Church. These measures given by the Bishops and Episcopal Conferences expire when the situation returns to normal.

The Church will continue to cherish the human person as a whole. She bears witness to hope, invites us to trust in God, recalls that earthly existence is important, but much more important is eternal life: sharing the same life with God for eternity is our goal, our vocation. This is the faith of the Church, witnessed over the centuries by hosts of martyrs and saints, a positive proclamation that frees us from one-dimensional reductionisms and from ideologies. The Church unites proclamation and accompaniment towards the eternal salvation of souls with the necessary concern for public health. Let us therefore continue to entrust ourselves confidently to God's mercy, to invoke the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, *salus infirmorum et auxilium christianorum*, for all those who are sorely tried by the pandemic and every other affliction, let us persevere in prayer for those who have left this life, and at the same time let us renew our intention to be witnesses of the Risen One and heralds of a sure hope, which transcends the limits of this world.

From the Vatican, 15 August 2020

Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary

The Supreme Pontiff Francis, in the Audience granted on 3 September 2020 to the undersigned Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, approved this Letter and ordered its publication.

Robert Card. Sarah Prefect