

How to Be a Eucharistic People in a Time of Isolation

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On April 29, twenty-five Associates at Saint Paschal Baylon Church met through the Zoom platform. The board leadership asked Father Paul to write an article that the group could discuss. We are happy to present it here.

None of us has ever experienced a situation where all our ordinary means of contact with God have been taken away from us. No community Masses in our churches, no getting together for prayer or adoration. We are left alone to maintain and deepen our relationship with God. Oh, we can watch the Mass on television, and pray the rosary along with others on EWTN. But it isn't the same. Are there any other things we should be doing in this time of social distancing?

Let me remind you of a key teaching of the Second Vatican Council. It reminded us of a long forgotten but important lesson. The council told us that there were other ways in which Jesus is really present to his church. In recent centuries we had put such an emphasis on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist, that we treated any other form of presence as sort of unreal. We say that Jesus is more present in the Eucharist. But if Jesus is present to us in any way, he is really present; there's no such thing as unreal presence. The main ways in which Christ can be present to us now aside from the Mass is his presence in the Word, and in acts of charity. In a time when we can't have Mass, we should concentrate on these three means of presence.

Presence in the Word

It has been said that we Catholics are not famous for reading the Bible. But if we truly see it as love letters from God, revealing something of himself to all of us, now may be the best time to read the word of God in order to reflect and pray over what we have read. Why not set aside a half hour or more (better still a half hour in the morning and another half hour in the evening to reflect on the God's word? It might be best to begin with the New Testament and go through it book by book.

If we're alone at home, this has to be done alone. We might then adopt something like the practice of a man I heard about. It seems that after hearing a sermon on the importance of reading the Bible, he decided to make it a daily practice. But he knew that he needed some gimmick to remind him so he wouldn't forget. So he started keeping his Bible on his pillow. That way, before he went to bed, he had to pick it up; so he would sit down and read for a while, When he finished he would put the bible on his shoes. Then, when he got up in the morning he had to pick it up again, so he would read it again. Whatever helps you, by all means use it!

But if we have a number of family members together, this is a perfect time to reflect together and share our reflections with one another. This sort of faith sharing is a powerful way to deepen our appreciation of the biblical word. There are a few rules for this type of sharing. First, set some time aside, and read a passage or chapter aloud. After, give yourselves ten or 15 minutes to reflect silently on what you have heard. Then people can share what thoughts the passage brought to mind. It is important here not to pressure anyone to speak if they have not done so. Likewise one ought not to criticize what others have said. For example. "That's not what the passage means!" We must be willing to listen to one another.

We may not have the Liturgy of the Word at Mass, but that does not excuse us from making the

Scriptures an important part of our lives. And we have a real encounter when we make his word our own.

Being a Domestic Church

The home is really the primary place where faith is shared. And if it is impossible to celebrate Mass with others, we can still use the family table to deepen what we celebrate in church. One of the standard meal blessings we use is: “Bless us, O Lord and these thy gifts....” I have been developing more and more of a dislike for this prayer. Primarily because Jesus and his apostles never prayed this way. This implies that what we are about to eat is secular, profane, so we need to ask God to sanctify it so that we can eat it in a way that is pleasing to him.

Jews didn’t ask God to bless things because they knew that God had created all of them, so they were already holy. They didn’t need to be made holy by asking God to bless them. Instead, a typical Jewish blessing would be: “We give you thanks, almighty God, that you have given us this food to eat....” Acknowledging God as the author of all good things and being able to see that the food we eat is a gift from God, is thanking and praising God for his goodness on our behalf.

And would it be asking too much to suggest that we say a special prayer over the bread on the table, recalling the bread that Jesus gave us at the Last Supper, and asking God that, even though we are not able to receive his sacred bread at Mass, this bread reminds us of his gift to us and brings us closer together as his family. And could we not do the same with a glass of water, milk, or even wine, and recall the sacrifice Jesus made for us and asked us to remember at his Supper?

Meals are sacramental moments in our lives, and if we don’t really appreciate the value of a family meal where we all share our lives together, I find it hard to understand how we can appreciate the Mass. And especially when we are separated from church and altar, we should make an effort to recall what Jesus has done for us. We might even precede our meal with a reading of the daily scripture readings and sanctify the whole meal as our own little para-liturgical ceremony in conscious memory of our Masses. Does anyone doubt that Christ would be present there with us?

The Practice of Charity

We are told by Vatican II that Christ is also really present in acts of charity. It’s probably more difficult to do this when physical separation is being asked of us. However, I have read that since the requirement of distance, internet use has gone up exponentially, especially in use of social media. I would imagine that telephone use has as well. I got a phone call recently from someone that I had no contact with except via Christmas cards for ten years. She had decided to call someone each day during this period of enforced isolation. She had worked her way through “A” in her address book and had started on “B” and hit me. Actually, then her husband did most of the talking (we had gone through grade school together!). The point is that this person was taking the initiative of reaching out at time when people are getting cabin fever.

We could well take up a practice like this: to call either friends, members of parish groups that we belong to, or other Associates, etc. A warm voice always brings joy to the heart. And this is true even despite our excess of individualism in this country. A practice like this would help us regain the Christian value of solidarity. One principle that has ever characterized us from the beginning is that we form a community. Baptism does not just put us in personal contact with Jesus. It makes members of his chosen people brothers and sisters of one another.

We began to lose this concept of oneness at the time of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers wanted to put people in direct relationship with God, thus eliminating any intermediaries (which

they saw the clergy as being). The ultimate expression of this is the statement that all we have to do to be saved is “Accept the Lord as your personal savior.” Church then becomes simply a gathering of people who had had the same experience, not a family bought and paid for in the blood of Christ.

There are obviously many other things that could be done under this rubric. Preparing meals for those who are sick, or just a good-will gift of a plate of cookies. If we put our mind to it, we can come up with a number of things we can do to reach out to people with the love and kindness of Christ.

Ultimately, however, the various things mentioned here are very close to what we celebrate in our Masses. And, being various ways in which we encounter the risen Lord in our day-to-day lives, they will keep us rooted in a eucharistic spirituality and prepare us to celebrate even more meaningfully when our churches are once again available for worship.