

BELONGING TO GOD'S FAMILY



A Pastoral Letter
to the
Clergy, Religious and Laity
of the
Archdiocese of Washington

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Grace and peace to all of you in Christ

Introduction

“You know, Father, I should be Catholic. I just sort of drifted away. I miss belonging.” The man who offered this self-assessment had just approached me at a charity reception and clearly was somewhat uneasy about his “confession.” Later in the conversation, he admitted, “even though I was never the best of Catholics, I miss being a part of it all.”

Many of us probably know someone like that, those who just drifted away, or felt they had a good reason to walk away. Whatever their motive for leaving, it is time we invited them home.

Lent, as we prepare for Easter and reflect on what our faith means to us, is a time to invite others who are not at Mass any more to rejoin our Church family. This Lent, across the archdiocese we will make a special effort to say to our family, our friends and our neighbors who no longer attend Mass, “We miss you. You used to be with us at Mass on Sunday. We invite you back to your home – your spiritual home.”

Christ Speaks to Us as Friends

Why is this so important to do? Perhaps the starting point for our reflection and our invitation are the words in the Second Vatican Council’s document, *Dei Verbum*. Here we are reminded, “the invisible God (see Col 1:15, 1 Tm 1:17) out of the abundance of His love speaks to men as friends (see Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15) and lives among them (See Bar 3:38), so that He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself” (*Dei Verbum*, 2).

God wants our friendship. He offers us his. So strong is God's love for us that he chose to come among us, to be with us and never to leave us. The Eternal Word of God, who is one with God, chose to take on human flesh, our human nature, and to become one of us. Lent is about why he chose to do this: to show the incredible depth of God's love for each of us, a love so deep that it would bring Christ to the cross and us to the foot of the cross.

Jesus freely laid down his life to save us and to make us adopted children. Saint Paul writes so beautifully in his letter to the Galatians: "But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba! Father!' So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir" (Gal. 4.4-7). Jesus gave his life as a ransom for us. It is for this reason that we recognize that Jesus is the sole mediator between God and man, in the Church he established.

God offers his friendship through his Word, the Word that became flesh, Jesus Christ, in order to enter into a heart-to-heart conversation with us. Pope Benedict XVI, in his encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, reminds us of what is truly at the core of our decision to be a follower of Christ: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction. Saint John's Gospel describes that event in these words: 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should...have eternal life' (Jn 3:16)" (*Deus caritas est*, 1).

The Church is Our Family

The thought of inviting others to join us at Mass, to come home to Christ, to belong once again to God's family makes us all more aware of the role of the Church in God's plan. It also should make us all the more conscious of Jesus' continuing presence in the Church that he established, bridging the gap between God and mankind so that his mission might go on. After all, the work of redemption did not end when Jesus returned in glory to his Father but it continues today and until the last day: "Behold I am with you always, to the end of time" (Mt. 28.20).

Where does the conversation with God continue today? The home of that dialogue is the Church. This is where we continue to hear God's Word and where we encounter Christ in a very real and tangible way, by receiving his Body and Blood in the Eucharist. In the Church we find an unbroken continuity with the experience and teaching of the Apostles that verifies and authenticates our own personal faith. Through the Church we come to encounter the living Lord not just as an historical reality but also as a living person present to us sacramentally as brother and Savior.

Just as salvation and grace come to us through Jesus, they continue to reach us through his Church. That is why Christ founded his Church. We do not relate to God solely as individuals, but also as members of his family united with Christ. It is through Christ who is present and manifest in his Church that we come to God. The mediatorship of Jesus continues in the visible communion that we identify as the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church

This is very different from those who accept personal faith alone as the means of salvation. To be a Catholic is to recognize the role of the Church, not as incidental or

secondary to salvation, but as the very means created and given to us by Jesus so that his work, accomplished in his death and Resurrection, might be re-presented in our day and applied to us.

Christ and the Church

Jesus did not hesitate to identify himself with his Church. To the disciples, as he sent them to preach in his name, he said: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me" (Lk 10:16). To those who did deeds of charity for his little ones he proclaimed: "As you did it for one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:24). Of Saint Paul, who had been vigorously persecuting the Church before his own conversion, Christ asked: "Why do you persecute me? ...I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting" (Acts 9:4-5). At the Last Supper he spoke of the intense unity that makes him one with those who are united by faith and love to him: "I am the vine, you are the branches" (Jn 15:5). The vine and branches are one living reality. So it is also with Christ and his Church.

At every stage of our lives the Church offers us an encounter with Christ in a way that signifies and, at the same time, realizes the personal contact with the Lord. The word "sacrament" refers to the seven graced actions instituted by Christ to accomplish his new life-giving activity. The sacraments such as baptism, the Eucharist, reconciliation and marriage, are some of the most visible aspects of the Catholic Church.

In the Breaking of the Bread

A sacrament is a very special kind of symbol or sign. What is unique is that it not only points to what is beyond it but also actually realizes what it symbolizes. In the sacrament

of baptism, for example, the water symbolizes the washing away of sin and the restoration of new life, the dying with Christ and rising to share in his resurrection. At the same time, it also begins to accomplish what it expresses. Because sacraments actually achieve what they symbolize, they are signs unlike any other. They put us in contact with God in a way that God's grace touches us. Sacraments are holy signs.

In the sacrament of the Eucharist, the very death and Resurrection of Christ are re-presented for us in a way that allows us to enter the mystery of salvation. It is for this reason that the sacrament is said to "re-present" the Paschal Mystery. It is the faith of the Church that every time the Eucharist is celebrated and the priest consecrates the bread and wine making them the Body and Blood of Christ, the holy sacrifice of Christ's death on the cross and his Resurrection to new life are re-presented for us – sacramentally but truly in a way that we participate now in this sacred action.

In his last encyclical on the Eucharist before his death, Pope John Paul II highlighted for us this same reality: "When the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the memorial of our Lord's death and Resurrection, this central event of salvation becomes really present and 'the work of our redemption is carried out'" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 11).

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, in *Deus caritas est*, reminds us again of this important fact of our faith: "Jesus gave this act of oblation an enduring presence through his institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. He anticipated his death and resurrection by giving his disciples, in the bread and wine, his very self, his body and blood as the new manna (cf. Jn 6:31-33)" (*Deus caritas est*, 13).

“I am the bread of life...I myself am the living bread come down from heaven. If anyone eats this bread he shall live forever; the bread I will give is my flesh, for the life of the world” (Jn. 6.48-51). What Jesus promised in his ministry was fulfilled at the Last Supper the night before he died. “Taking bread and giving thanks he broke it and gave it to them saying: ‘This is my body which will be given up for you. Do this in remembrance of me...This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which will be shed for you’” (Lk 22:19-20).

To Be One with Christ is to be One with the Church

To be a Catholic is to recognize and accept this extraordinary mystery of redemption and to realize our part in it. To receive Holy Communion is to manifest one’s unity with the Church’s faith and solidarity with her structure. We approach the table of the Lord, the altar of sacrifice, with a lively adherence to the mystery unfolding around us and within us. Holy Communion is a sign that we are one with Christ and his Church.

Precisely because we are called to share the precious gifts we have received from Christ, I ask you to invite back to Church, to Mass, someone you know who has drifted or walked away from the Church.

We All Long for the Same Thing

You may see over the next few weeks billboards and signs across the Archdiocese that read, “What are you longing for? Maybe it’s God.” We are running these advertisements for two reasons. First, we want to remind ourselves that we are all always longing for God. While we may know Christ and be active in our parish we still long for a deeper relationship

with God. Saint Augustine wrote that our hearts would not rest until they rest in Him. We know this yet we often forget. It is good for us to be reminded.

Secondly, we want to propose this question, “What are you longing for?” to those who are away from the Church. Even if they are not active in the Church, they are still searching for fulfillment and peace. We would like gently to point out to them, in the end, it is God who will satisfy them.

In this campaign we would also like to invite people back to Mass and the faith community. Asking someone back to Church can seem daunting. Yet, Jesus Christ shows us how to do it.

Jesus Shows Us How

Each one of us knows someone, perhaps many, who have simply drifted away from the practice of the faith. They might be members of our family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, people we regularly meet and deal with in all types of situations. To be a Catholic is to share the joy of our faith with them by inviting them once again to reconnect with their Church and with the life-giving sacraments.

In Saint Luke’s gospel we can learn how Jesus reached out to those who have faith – but who have lost heart, become disillusioned, confused or given up. “Now that very day two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him.” (Luke 24:13-17)

Does this not sound like many of our discussions about

faith and God with family and friends who are away from the Church? It is usually in the ordinary activities of our life where the topic comes up and it leads to conversations and debates. Yet, like those walking with Jesus in this passage, our family and friends often struggle to recognize Christ in their midst.

“And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him...” Luke 24:30-31

It is not until the breaking of the bread that those in the gospel story recognize Christ. For us and those who long to see Christ fully they must be with their faith family, the Church. For this to happen we need to have a way to ask them.

An Invitation from the Two of Us

The process is a simple one. In each parish across the archdiocese, starting with the first Sunday of Lent and continuing throughout this holy season of “turning to the Lord,” invitations will be available for you to take with you after Mass. The invitations are from both of us. They are meant for you to give to someone else. You can tell that person that I asked you to pass it along. The message is simple: “If you have been away, please come back. You are an important part of our family and we miss you.”

An Invitation to the Breaking of the Bread

What a fruitful goal it would be for this Lenten season to invite back, beginning perhaps with those closest to us, someone who may have drifted away from the faith. It is difficult to think of a more significant personal missionary

activity for ourselves and a better gift for another than to encourage someone to come back to their spiritual home.

Conclusion

A Catholic is a follower of Christ. The Catholic Church is made up of those who have placed their faith in Christ – a deep personal faith that Jesus is the living Lord of history and our Savior. “This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

It is with both hope and gratitude that we claim the name Catholic. Our hope is that we can live up to the wondrous challenge that Jesus places before us when he calls us to intimate friendship with himself. Our gratitude is for the grace that Jesus so freely bestows on each of us to remain faithful to the call.

May this Lenten season be for all of us a time of fervent hope and generous love as we proudly renew our faith – the faith of the Church. May it also be a time of fruitful and caring outreach to those we know and whom we invite back to a place at the table to share richly in God’s great love.

Faithfully in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, starting with a cross symbol and followed by a cursive name that appears to be Donald C. Williams.

Archbishop of Washington

January 25, 2009

The Conversion of Saint Paul