

Divine Mercy Sunday

Acts 2: 42-47

1 Peter 1: 3-9

John 20: 19-31

In my efforts to be positive and find silver linings on cloudy days, I must say that Fr. Linh and I have enjoyed celebrating the octave of Easter this week. It is unusual for us to celebrate daily Masses together and with full music but the last seven days, in celebration of our Lord's resurrection, has been a pleasant relief amid these dark days. The only thing missing, of course, is you!

There are hopeful signs on the horizon but until further notice we will continue to offer Mass on Sundays and weekdays via live stream. Which I'm happy to report that on any given day between Facebook and YouTube we average between 50-70 people attending a Mass at a time (which is double our normal daily Mass attendance) and between 300-500 "views." A "view" is a person who clicks on our link and may or may not watch for very long but I'm gratified that we are reaching so many people or that so many people are reaching us.

BUT as I mentioned last Sunday, the Sacraments are intended to be experienced IN PERSON and there is no real substitute. So, we continue to wait with eager anticipation for the day when we can worship together again.

It has been one month since Archbishop Coakley suspended all public Masses and from the start the one aspect, I disliked the most, was celebrating Mass in an empty church (or chapel). Looking at rows and rows of unoccupied pews is sad and depressing—so this week we've decided to do something new (that is actually old) instead of facing a camera we've decided to face east or in Latin, *ad orientem* which literally means "toward the east." This is an ancient posture for the priest when he offers the Eucharistic Prayer, and like all liturgical actions, it reveals what we believe. In this case, it reveals what we believe about the priesthood and indeed the Mass itself.

The priest acts *in persona Christi* (which means "in the person of Christ") and his main responsibility is to be a spiritual Father to the people entrusted to his care by his example, by his preaching, by his teaching and, in the liturgy, by his prayer on your behalf to God, our heavenly Father. Liturgically speaking this role becomes most prominent when he offers bread and wine ("the work of human hands") and says the words of consecration and by the Holy Spirit these ordinary gifts become the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. This is *the* central part of the Mass and by it we participate in the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ at this very altar. With *ad orientem* the priest stands on the same side of the altar as the people and he faces in the same direction as they do because the Eucharistic Prayer (like all the prayers of the Mass) is offered to God and all of us are making this sacrificial offering to Him. We are not praying to one another as God watching us from above. No, we are praying to Him! And praying in the same direction reveals that there is no doubt that this is what we are actually doing.

Of course, this is enhanced in our church even more by the fact that the architecture lends itself to this practice because it was actually built facing east, all of the pews are facing in the same direction, the altar is situated under a *baldacchino* and is elevated on a *predella*. The word *baldacchino* is derived from a luxurious cloth from Baghdad that was used as a canopy over places of importance (and there is no place more important in a Catholic church than the altar of sacrifice and the tabernacle) and the *predella* is just a fancy word for a raised platform, again providing a visual reminder of its importance—with three steps representing the Trinity.

One of the comments one often hears about *ad orientem* is that ‘the priest turned his back on us.’ And to this I would say that’s what happens when you FOLLOW someone—not me personally—but Christ. We follow him and him alone. It is impossible for him, who laid down his life for us, to turn his back on his people—in fact, we through sin, turn our back on him—but never the other way around. We follow him because we know that he suffered on the cross and rose from the dead for our salvation and we recognize that he is leading us to the New Jerusalem. Think of *ad orientem* as a procession and the priest, acting in the person of Christ, is leading the people to heaven, and as he stands at the altar facing towards the east WITH the people he offers the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ, we wait for his coming again.

One of the things, I love about the Easter season is that we listen to passages from the Acts of the Apostles and we hear the stories of how the disciples continued the work of the Church after Jesus had rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. In the first reading today we hear how the disciples were conducting themselves—“they devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles,” “they were together and had all things in common,” “they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s needs,” “every day they devoted themselves to meeting together...and to breaking bread in their homes” and “the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.”

Obviously, the world has changed significantly since the time of these early disciples—we wouldn’t dare sell all our possessions and property and divide them equally among ourselves!—but the Church has also changed and so has our lifestyle but what hasn’t changed is the fact that how we live is a reflection of what we believe. Just like I mentioned earlier about how the liturgy (our prayer) reveals what we believe so must our lives reveal our faith in Jesus Christ, our risen Lord.

When our faith in him is disconnected from our life then there is confusion and conflict. Integration was probably one of the most difficult challenges the early Christians faced yet it became one of their strongest and most influential characteristics. It was their integrity and their willingness to accept every trial in the name of the Jesus Christ that brought others into the fold.

In this unique (but not unprecedented time) we must rely on the foundational and most fundamental aspects of our faith. We must acknowledge that the Lord would never turn his back on us—he is Divine Mercy—always ready to forgive the sinner who repents. He shows us, by his own example of sacrifice, how we must live not for ourselves but for others. And we follow him, we dedicate our lives to serving him and we come to believe in him by the witness of those who came before us. Like them, with the eyes of faith, we profess, “My Lord and my God!”

*Very Rev. William L. Novak, V.G.
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