



OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

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11 April 2021

Divine Mercy Sunday

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

(1 Corinthians 11:23-26)

Dearest Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

This passage from the First Letter of Saint Paul to the Corinthians is the oldest account of the Last Supper, and is the foundation of our belief in the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

It is fitting that we recall these inspired words on this Divine Mercy Sunday as we begin the Year of the Real Presence, a Jubilee Year in the Diocese of Allentown, celebrating the 60th Anniversary of our founding in 1961 by Pope Saint John XXIII. On this date in that year, Most Reverend Joseph Mark McShea, First Bishop of Allentown, took possession of the Cathedral of Saint Catharine of Siena, and our diocesan life began.

Ever since our founding, the Diocese of Allentown, her clergy, religious men and women, and the lay faithful, have been blessed by the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist. Our faith in and reception of this "Most Holy Sacrament of the Altar" have been the nourishment for all of our apostolic works and endeavors of bringing the Light of Christ to each other and to our community.

The Holy Eucharist is the anchor of parish and diocesan life and serves as a constant source of nourishment. It has seen us through many challenges, both from within and outside our Church. Every age of the Church faces challenges, and now is our time to confront and heal them through the grace of the Holy Eucharist. The power of the Most Blessed Sacrament is our armor against the “snares of the devil” who “prowls about the world seeking the ruin of souls.”

Sadly, 69% of Catholics do not believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Holy Eucharist; that is to say, they do not believe the Holy Eucharist is Our Lord’s Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity. This lack of such a core belief is manifested by a decline in Mass attendance. When the Diocese was founded in 1961, 67% of American Catholics attended Mass. Today, that number is 24%. While there have been many challenging disagreements and tragic revelations in the Church since 1961 that could be cited to explain this decline, we must also honestly say that there are other reasons for this lack of participation: an erosion in preaching, teaching, and belief that Christ is really present in the Holy Eucharist, as well as cultural influences and shifting societal priorities. For if one truly believes he or she really encounters Christ in Holy Communion, who would not run to meet our Eucharistic Lord? Nothing should separate us from the most intimate encounter with Our Savior. As a Diocese, this Year we will pray before the Most Blessed Sacrament for a return to the Real Presence of those who have been estranged, harmed, saddened, marginalized, or disaffected.

In this Jubilee Year for our Diocese, we also will work to invite our parishioners to come back to Mass, to be really present before the Real Presence. As pandemic restrictions ease and a more routine life returns, so too will parish life need to recommence, beginning with the heart of parish life and the foundation of our Faith: worship of the Holy Eucharist at Sunday Mass.

While streaming Mass over the internet and Spiritual Communion were appropriate during the months of prudent isolation, except for the ill and homebound, virtual Mass is not an ongoing substitute for physical presence at Mass and the worthy reception of Holy Communion. It is my hope that, during this Year of the Real Presence, conditions will allow for a restoration of the Sunday Mass obligation.

Since we cannot separate the Holy Eucharist from its worthy reception, the Sacrament of Penance, which prepares our souls to receive the Lord, must also be an emphasis in this Jubilee Year dedicated to Christ’s Real Presence. It is my fervent hope that pastors will be very generous in offering extra weekly times for the Sacrament of Penance, especially on weekdays, to make it more accessible for the faithful.

From Old Testament times, priests offered sacrifices to God on an altar. Because every Mass is the unbloody sacrifice of Christ the High Priest on the Cross, priests are needed to offer this sacrifice in the person of Christ on the altars of our churches. There can be no Holy Eucharist without the Priesthood. Therefore, this Year of the Real Presence will be a privileged time of praying for vocations to the Priesthood before our Eucharistic Lord in Adoration. Parishes will be asked to set aside time at least weekly for Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament to beg the Lord of the Harvest to send priestly laborers into His vineyard of the five counties of the Diocese of Allentown.

In God’s Providence, our Jubilee also is taking place during the Year of Saint Joseph who, with Mary, lived each day in the Real Presence of Jesus. Joseph was the first protector of the Real Presence, and we seek his intercession on our efforts as a Roman Catholic Family of Faith to center our diocesan life on the Holy Eucharist each day.

Turning to our Diocesan Patroness, Mary, Mother of the Church, in gratitude we thank God for sixty years of feeding His sheep, especially in the ever-abiding Real Presence of His Son.

Devotedly yours in Our Eucharistic Lord,



✠ Most Reverend Alfred A. Schlert
Bishop of Allentown