



**THE MOST REVEREND JOSEPH V. BRENNAN
BISHOP OF THE DIOCESE OF FRESNO**



LORD,

I AM NOT WORTHY

*A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist
to the Diocese of Fresno*



**PUBLISHED BY
DIOCESE OF
FRESNO
OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS**



The Most Reverend Joseph V. Brennan,
Bishop of the Diocese of Fresno

Dedicated to Archbishop Jose H. Gomez,
Archbishop of Los Angeles.
A great mentor, a good friend,
and a lover of Jesus in the Eucharist.



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*Domine, non sum dignus ut intres sub tectum meum, sed tantum
dic verbo et sanabitur anima mea.*

*Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but
only say the word, and my soul shall be healed.¹*

Brothers and Sisters,

At every Mass in the Roman Rite, Catholics echo the words of the Roman centurion who asked Our Lord to heal his sick servant. As a person of military authority, this centurion recognized Christ's power to heal the sick simply by a word of command. Jesus, marveling at the faith of a Gentile and foreigner, miraculously healed the servant without even needing to enter his house.²

The centurion's words express the virtues of *humility* and *hope*: humility, to recognize our own weakness and dependence on God ("Lord, I am not worthy"); and hope, to express confidence in God's power to heal and save us ("But only say the word..."). I love that two-fold dynamic going on at that moment of the Mass.

These virtues are critically important to a proper understanding of the Eucharist. St. Augustine wrestled with the question of how God's presence can suffuse the entire universe, when God is infinitely greater than creation, and would rightly "overflow" it.³ Yet our bodies, our souls are even smaller vessels. How can the all-perfect God condescend to dwell in something so limited, so weak as my own sinful body and soul? We cannot but acknowledge our unworthiness, and the enormity of God's merciful love. Humility consists in acknowledging this reality of God's greatness, our smallness, and God's goodness in giving us himself. How and why does God do this? Simple. He loves us!

It is this incredible, merciful goodness that prompts us to hope. Hope is the virtue by which we trust that God will remain true to his promises and provide us with the grace to receive the kingdom of heaven and eternal life.⁴ By receiving the infinite, merciful God in Holy Communion, we have the greatest possible assurance of the strength needed to continue our spiritual journey and to ultimately complete that journey.

EUCCHARISTIC REVIVAL

This letter comes to you literally in the midst of the “Eucharistic Revival” which has been proposed and is being promoted by all the Bishops of the United States. Parishes throughout the United States, including many in our own Diocese, have beautifully engaged in this revival by encouraging greater devotion to the Eucharist through expanded Eucharistic adoration, processions, opportunities for prayer, and other events. As I write these words some intense preparation is being undertaken for the national Eucharistic Congress to take place in Indianapolis July 17-21, in 2024, following a massive, multi-state procession of Catholics with the Eucharist.

My brother bishops have also spoken on the importance of a “Eucharistic coherence,” a consistency between our worship of the Eucharistic lord in the liturgy, and our conduct in the public square and throughout our lives. This coherence places demands on both our private and public lives, including on the witness of Catholics in the political arena.

As a successor of the Apostles, I not only have the authority to speak and teach on questions of faith and morals in an authoritative manner, I have the duty and obligation to do so. I am obligated to properly teach and exercise the Magisterium of the Church within my Diocese.⁵ Thus, while I support the work of my brother bishops to teach on this topic corporately, I thought it was appropriate and timely to speak directly to you, the faithful of the Diocese of Fresno, as your shepherd and bishop regarding these important questions.

In this pastoral letter, I want to share with you the beauty and the grandeur of the mystery of the Eucharist. I want to challenge you – and myself along with you – about what the Eucharist asks and even demands of us. The first section of this letter will delve into the constant teaching of the Church on the Eucharist: its nature as a Sacrament and a Sacrifice, and the central role that the Holy Mass must play in our lives. In the second section, I will reflect upon how the Eucharist calls us to individual conversion, in particular reflecting upon the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The third section will examine the public “consequences” of the Eucharist, and how it calls us to a “Eucharistic coherence”: an integrity between the Truth that we receive on Sunday, and how we must live out that Truth throughout our lives, particularly not only but even especially in the public square.

SECTION I: THE VERY NATURE OF THE EUCHARIST

THE EUCHARIST AS A SACRAMENT

A 2019 study from the Pew Research Center provided an incredibly disturbing statistic: an astonishing 69% of Catholics believe that the “bread and wine” at Mass are simply “symbols” of Jesus, not his actual body and blood.⁶ Perhaps even more baffling, 50% of Catholics think that the Church actually teaches that the Eucharist is merely symbolic.⁷ Brothers and sisters, we have our work cut out for us and if any of you reading this might count yourselves among the percentages just cited, I am hoping that this letter helps you to appreciate the Eucharist for what and WHO it really is: the True Presence of Jesus Himself, The Word made Flesh, present and effective in our hearts and in our lives.

To understand the Eucharist, we need to understand what the Sacraments are, given that the Eucharist stands at their head. My First-Grade teacher, Sr. Mary Pascal, made sure that I memorized the definition of a Sacrament from the old Baltimore Catechism. When called upon by that beautiful nun I dutifully – and correctly – answered that, “A Sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” Not bad for a start. The Catechism of the Catholic Church goes a *bit* deeper when it tells us that the Sacraments are “efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.”⁸ St. Thomas Aquinas defined a Sacrament as “a sanctification conferred upon man with some visible sign.”⁹ They are physical acts, gestures, words that communicate grace: water is poured, words of absolution and forgiveness are spoken, heads and hands are anointed with oil. That list goes on, but you get the picture. See how much God loves our human nature? The Sacraments are physical, audible, touchable and, dare I say, tastable too. We are not just souls or minds, much less disembodied spirits. We are body and soul. Grace is communicated, given and received by way of bodily and physical gestures. Sacraments engage the whole person.

The 16th Century Council of Trent, building upon the prior centuries of Christian belief, restated and defined the Church’s teaching on a number of points that had come under assault during the Protestant Reformation, including her belief in the Sacraments in general and the Eucharist in particular. It infallibly defined the Eucharist as the “body, blood, soul, and divinity” of Jesus Christ.¹⁰ The Council reiterated that Our Lord is fully God and fully man, and that he is “really, truly, and substantially” present in the Blessed Sacrament under the “accidents” (perceptible physical appearances) of bread and wine.¹¹ We say that, during the Mass, the *substance* of bread and wine is changed to the *substance* of Jesus Christ, while the *accidents* of bread and wine remain. We call this process “transubstantiation.”¹² This metaphysical and dogmatic explanation shows that the Eucharist is not merely a symbol or a sign of Jesus, but actually Jesus Christ himself.

What were the Council Fathers at Trent pointing to with the words, “body, blood, soul, and divinity?” Quite simply, they were reaffirming that Jesus was fully God and fully man. As a divine person, he possessed a divine nature, or *divinity*. As man, he possessed a human nature: a *body* that shed *blood* on the Cross in sacrifice, animated by a human *soul*. By defining the Eucharist as Jesus’ body, blood, soul, and divinity, we are simply acknowledging that the Eucharist is the divine Second Person of the Trinity, whole and entire, God and man.¹³

That is why we speak of the Real Presence in our Catholic tradition. As Pope Francis shared recently during an audience with some members of the organizing committees for the U.S. National Eucharistic Congress and Eucharistic Revival, “Indeed, the Eucharist is God’s response to the deepest hunger of the human heart, the hunger for authentic life because in the Eucharist Christ himself is truly in our midst to nourish, console and sustain us on our journey”¹⁴ In short, his presence is not a metaphor, but a genuine reality. The Eucharist is Jesus!

THE EUCHARISTIC SACRIFICE

Brothers and sisters, the Eucharist cannot be understood apart from the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the Holy Mass,¹⁵ in which Christ is made present and offers himself in sacrifice to God the Father for us. It is the same, identical sacrifice as that offered at Calvary. That one, salvific act and moment in time is made real, present and effective, again and again.

To grasp this reality, we must understand what a sacrifice is. Sacrifice is an act of worship in which humans, through perceptible actions, offer something to God “in sign of the subjection and honor due to him.”¹⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas believed that sacrifice as an act of worship arises out of man’s very nature, and that all men must offer God some form of external sacrifice as worship.¹⁷ St. Augustine wrote that, in every sacrifice, four things are present: (1) someone who offers it, (2) something that is offered, (3) a recipient to whom it is offered, and (4) persons for whom it is offered.¹⁸

Through Adam’s sin, all mankind became estranged from God. The Heavenly Father sent his Son to bridge that gap. While retaining his divinity, Jesus assumed a human nature, lived among us, and offered himself on the Cross as a sacrifice for our sins. As man, he stood as a fitting representative for us. As God, his self-offering was infinitely valuable, and had the ability to reconcile us to the Father. Using St. Augustine’s four elements for sacrifice, we see in Calvary that (1) Jesus Christ (2) offered himself (3) to God the Father (4) to unite mankind to Christ.¹⁹ In a word, he did that to save us.

But Jesus did not just offer the Sacrifice of the Cross as a one-time event. He also instituted a means to memorialize and apply the grace of Calvary to our time and place. The Council of Trent wrote that Christ instituted the Eucharist at the Last Supper “that he might leave to his beloved spouse the Church a visible sacrifice (such as the nature of man requires) where that once-bloody sacrifice that was about to be accomplished on the cross might be presented again, where its memory might remain even to the end of time, and where its saving power might be applied to the remission of those sins which we daily commit[.]”²⁰ The Catechism echoes this when it says. “The Eucharist is the memorial of Christ’s Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice, in the liturgy of the Church which is his Body.”²¹

The Mass is radically identified with and united to the Sacrifice of Calvary as one and the same sacrifice, the same event, with the same four parts. The only difference is that at Calvary, Christ suffered; now, he no longer suffers or dies, but reigns at the right hand of the Father.²² A great 16th Century Dominican theologian, St. Cajetan, put it this way: “The Mass does not repeat the sacrifice of the Cross but is a sacramental and representative offering of that sacrifice where the victim and the One who offers are the same, namely, Christ Himself.”²³ I would say that if you had to define the Mass with one word, “sacrifice” would be a good place to start.

THE CENTRALITY OF THE MASS TO OUR LIVES

In the Catechism, the Church reaffirms the importance of the Mass, and our obligation to participate in it. “The Sunday celebration of the Lord’s Day and his Eucharist is at the heart of the Church’s life. Sunday is the day on which the paschal mystery is celebrated in light of the apostolic tradition and is to be observed as the foremost holy day of obligation in the universal Church.”²⁴ The obligation to attend Mass holds for all the faithful “unless excused for a serious reason (for example, illness, the care of infants) or dispensed by their own pastor. Those who deliberately fail in this obligation commit a grave sin.”²⁵ My own dad struggled with this issue. I remember it clearly. My brothers and sisters and I were still fairly young when our dad was informed by his employers that he would have to work on Sundays or lose his job. Remember, there were no such things as Vigil Masses on Saturday or Sunday Evening Masses either at the time. Without going into complicated details or extenuating circumstances, working elsewhere was not an immediate option and neither was losing his job. After all, dad had a lot of mouths to feed, including my own! Not going to Mass was not an option either for our dad. He took this obligation very seriously, so he took this dilemma to our pastor, Msgr. Patrick F. O’Dwyer. The good Monsignor could have come out of central casting as a crotchety and intimidating Irish pastor, which he was. Well, that tough priest gave my dad the most sound and gentle advice: “You go to Mass on Mondays. That will be your ‘Sunday’ obligation until we get this all straightened out.”

We all have a duty to worship God: we all have a duty to honor the Sabbath and keep it holy. Going to Mass, by the way, is just one element involved in keeping the Sabbath holy. We have lost a sense of the Sabbath, but more on that later. The point is that Sunday Mass attendance is not an arbitrary rule devised by bishops to force people to go to Church. It is actually an invitation from God himself to be with him, to listen to him, to worship him and to receive him. It is a commission to be him and to bring him into the world. All of this arises out of God’s direct command to his people and is a solemn obligation that comes from the Lord himself.

We know that beyond the sense of duty and obligation, it is a tremendous privilege to attend the Holy Mass. I cannot help but think about the example of the Catholics in Japan, a country first evangelized by the great Jesuit missionary St. Francis Xavier. These underground Christians kept the Catholic faith alive for hundreds of years under intense persecution by the Tokugawa shogunate. That government cut Japan off from the outside world. The people had no access to any missionary priests and, thereby, no access to any Sacraments except Baptism and Matrimony. Centuries later, when Japan was reopened to the outside world once again, these Catholics wept tears of joy at being able to return to the celebration of the Liturgy and the reception of the Eucharist.²⁶ I think about so many great 20th Century Catholic martyrs who were executed for the simple crime of attending or celebrating Mass, like Bl. Miguel Pro and the other Cristeros martyrs of Mexico. We are tremendously blessed to live in a land that preserves our freedom to worship our God. How can we voluntarily squander this gift or so easily set it aside, simply because we would rather sleep in, or watch the NFL or the NBA, or take the kids to their club sports, or play golf or go shopping? Yet, we do!

Remember COVID? We all do. During that dismal time my brother bishops and I issued broad dispensations from the ordinary obligation to assist at Sunday Mass. Believe me, we did this with terrible reluctance, given the critical role of the Mass in Christian life. In fact, some of my brother bishops now question, in retrospect, whether we went too far with COVID restrictions, whether we lacked the

evangelical zeal that animated St. Damien of Molokai and other great Catholics who died in service to the sick.²⁷ With tremendous sorrow, we see that many parishes have still not returned to their pre-COVID levels of attendance. The *new normal* is not normal.

If I could speak directly to Catholics who have stopped attending Mass regularly, I would simply urge them to come home. Be healthier in mind, body and spirit. Let the Eucharist be the main ingredient for all of that. I would tell them that the Mass and the Eucharist are not simply important but essential! The Eucharist is crucial to our lives, and we and our families will find ourselves in the worst kind of poverty, spiritual poverty, if we ignore and avoid this precious gift.

SECTION II: INDIVIDUAL PREPARATION FOR THE EUCHARIST

The Eucharist is a gift for which we are, objectively, unworthy. St. Bernard of Clairvaux wrote an extensive work on the virtue of humility by characterizing it as a process of attaining an ever-growing realization and acknowledgment of the *truth* about ourselves, and about God.²⁸ We are limited, God is unlimited; we are sinful, God is perfect. We are utterly dependent on God for our existence and for all the good we do. Humility demands that we acknowledge, in all honesty, “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof.”

Nonetheless, we do not approach the altar on our own volition, but at Christ’s invitation. What greater hope can we have that God will be faithful to his promises of eternal life, than by the fact that he offers his own Son to be our daily, supersubstantial bread?²⁹ Fed with the body, blood, soul, and divinity of the omnipotent God, we exclaim with St. Paul, “I can do all things in him who strengthens me.”³⁰ Christ’s bounty leads us truly to repeat, with Christian hope, “But only say the word, and my soul shall be healed.”

Knowing our unworthiness, but trusting in God’s promises, how do we prepare for the Eucharist? St. Paul vigorously affirmed that preparation is necessary, and that insufficient preparation could even be seriously sinful.³¹

Chiefly we prepare for the Eucharist by purifying our hearts and asking God to forgive our sins. I have occasionally talked about how the Mass always begins with a *guilty plea*. Actually, known as and liturgically named the Penitential Rite, it is a repetitive and corporate admission of guilt and cry for mercy: *Kyrie, eleison*, Lord, have mercy. The corporate nature of the plea is even clearer in Spanish: *Senor Ten Piedad de Nosotros*, that is, Lord have mercy on US! Immediately prior to receiving Communion, our Byzantine Catholic and Orthodox brethren repeatedly use the words of the repentant publican in their prayer before receiving Communion: “God, be merciful to me; I am a sinner.”³² These prayers have the power to bring us forgiveness for our venial sins, and to prepare us for receiving our Lord more fittingly.

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

At minimum, the Church mandates that Catholics may not receive Communion if they have committed a serious or mortal sin without first receiving absolution in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.³³ This formulation of Catholic teaching and praxis arises from St. Paul’s admonition against eating or drinking the Lord’s body and blood unworthily.³⁴ This highlights the importance of Confession to Eucharistic preparation.

Confession is the ordinary means by which God forgives our sins, including mortal sins, and is intimately tied to the Eucharist.³⁵ St. John Paul II stated, “Because the Eucharist makes present the redeeming sacrifice of the Cross, perpetuating it sacramentally, it naturally gives rise to a continuous need for conversion, for a personal response to the appeal made by Saint Paul to the Christians of Corinth: ‘We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God’ (2 Cor 5:20). If a Christian’s conscience is burdened by serious sin, then the path of penance through the Sacrament of Reconciliation becomes necessary for full participation in the Eucharistic Sacrifice.”³⁶

I would argue that we cannot realistically have a Eucharistic revival unless we simultaneously have a revival of the Sacrament of Confession. According to a 2015 survey by the Pew Research Center, 28% of practicing Catholics never go to Confession, with 23% going less often than once per year.³⁷ The research indicates that many such Catholics receive Communion regularly, while rarely or never going to Confession. While it is certainly true that we do not have to go to Confession every time before receiving Holy Communion, I have a hunch that a lot of serious sins are just not being dealt with. Bring serious sin to the confessional before you bring yourself to the altar. There is something amiss when our Communion lines are super long, and our Confession lines are super short.

Canon Law requires Catholics who have attained the use of reason to go to Confession once per year to confess grave sins,³⁸ and that this is the bare *legal* minimum. Doing only that is akin to taking better care of our teeth than the heart that we love with. Here is a rule of thumb: I strongly encourage Catholics to confess their sins on a monthly basis.

Regular and frequent Confession is a good reminder that the sacrament is not solely an “emergency treatment” for when we commit mortal sins. Again, to use a medical metaphor, we do not go to a doctor only when we are dying, right? Confession confers “an increase of spiritual strength for the Christian battle.”³⁹ The Church encourages us to take advantage of this Sacrament for confessing our venial sins, not just for occasions of mortal sin.⁴⁰ Confession is a powerful aid in our spiritual growth, and should be part of one’s regular life as a Christian. Yes, I would love for people to receive the Eucharist as often as possible and as worthily as possible.

PHYSICAL PREPARATION

While spiritual preparation is of first and foremost importance, there is also a role for physical preparation. As creatures with bodies and souls, our physical comportment has an obvious bearing on our spiritual receptivity to God’s grace. The Church requires at least a one-hour fast from food and drink (other than water) prior to receiving Communion.⁴¹ Hey, this is very doable. At the risk of sounding like an *old timer*, when I was a little boy, we had to fast from midnight before! Just remember that like all spiritual fasting, we are creating an artificial hunger to remind ourselves of the deepest hungers and longings of our hearts.

The Catechism also recommends that Catholics reverently participate in Mass through our gestures, and that we dress in a fashion that communicates respect, solemnity, and joy.⁴² Wearing one’s “Sunday best” is not a hollow or vain gesture, but a physical act to acknowledge the seriousness and importance of our worship, similar to a soldier wearing his dress uniform, or any one of us dressing for a wedding, a

reception or any other important occasion. My Mom and Dad always managed to get themselves and ten kids to Church every Sunday, properly dressed and – miraculously – on time. Imagine that!

For daily Masses, we can exercise a greater latitude, and dress in a fashion that fits the obligations of our work and our state of life. For us priests, it is simply beautiful to see healthcare workers in scrubs, laborers and farmers in jeans and work boots, lawyers in suits, and police officers in uniforms all standing shoulder-to-shoulder at daily Mass, taking time from their workday to worship the Lord and receive him.

SECTION III: THE PUBLIC OBLIGATIONS OF COMMUNION

HOLY COMMUNION AND CATHOLIC TEACHING

This last section is going to be challenging and, in some ways, hard to take. Jesus never promised *easy* to any of us, right? To understand the public implications and obligations surrounding the receiving of Holy Communion, we must first understand the connection between the person of Jesus Christ and the teachings of the Church. We must live out a “Eucharistic Coherence” between the truths of the faith we profess, the daily practice of our faith, and the Truth, the person of Jesus Christ, whom we receive in Holy Communion.

The opening of the Gospel of John is a profound philosophical reflection on the nature of Christ: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”⁴³ John repeatedly refers to the Second Person of the Trinity as the Word of God, using the Greek word *logos*. While most English Bibles understandably translate this noun simply as “word,” it has much broader and profound connotations: speech, discourse, story, thought, reason.⁴⁴ Jesus is identified as the Word of the Father, the expression of the Father, by whom, as St. Augustine says, “[the Father] always and unchangeably utters Himself.”⁴⁵ Christ is the eternal expression of God the Father’s own self. As the expression of the all true-God, Jesus rightly calls himself *the* truth: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me.”⁴⁶

The teaching of the Church is not simply a collection of human judgments, but the transmission of God’s revelation, his truth, his *logos*. We do not simply believe in a body of impersonal teachings, but in a person - Jesus himself - with whom we have a personal and intimate relationship.

The Second Vatican Council taught that God’s revelation in the Bible and Sacred Tradition was entrusted to the Church, and that the Holy Spirit commissions the Church to be Scripture and Tradition’s authentic interpreter through her teaching.⁴⁷ A rejection of the Church’s teaching, either through doctrinal denial or through grave violation of moral norms, puts one at odds with a worthy reception of the Eucharist, Jesus Christ, Truth itself.

The reception of Holy Communion is thus intimately connected to our receiving, holding, and living out Truth, as found in our Catholic faith. We can see this in the celebration of the Eucharist itself. It is no accident that we proclaim the Nicene Creed at Mass on every Sunday and Solemnity as we exalt our Lord as, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God...” In the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom, our Byzantine brethren sing the following hymn immediately after the reception of Communion, “We have seen the true light. We have received the heavenly Spirit. We have found the true faith.”⁴⁸ The

Eucharist, in a sense, is our “true faith,” and it demands an integrity between the proclamation of faith on Sunday, and the act of “glorifying the Lord by your life” throughout the week.⁴⁹ The Christian life demands a Eucharistic coherence. It demands that we ‘walk the talk’.

THE EUCHARIST AND JUSTICE TO OUR NEIGHBOR

Eucharistic coherence is first and foremost expressed by how we treat one another. The Great Commandment to love God above all things, and our neighbor as ourselves, is made hollow when one or the other is neglected, when that connection is not made. Thus, our participation in the Eucharist is weakened if we do not respond to God’s love by loving our neighbor in turn. It was significant that the Blessed Mother’s first act upon receiving Our Lord within her womb was a corporal work of mercy: to visit and care for her cousin Elizabeth for three months as she also approached childbirth.⁵⁰

This obligation is particularly grave for those who are weakest in our society. In fact, Christ identifies himself personally with those who are weak, poor, and in need: “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.”⁵¹ We cannot rightly honor Our Lord in the Eucharist while ignoring Our Lord in the person of our neighbor in need, anyone on the *peripheries*, as Pope Francis so often and so beautifully reminds us.

I would hope that all of us could defend the record the Catholic Church has had, both locally and worldwide, in serving those who are materially poor and in need.⁵² Nonetheless, all of us, myself included, need to examine our consciences in this regard: have we worked to help our neighbor lately, not only those who are materially poor, but those impoverished in other ways? Have we visited a sick relative, written to a lonely friend, attended that inconvenient funeral, expressed condolences to one who is grieving? Have we invited someone to the ‘table of the Lord’ who has not been there in a long while? The Church’s corporal and spiritual works of mercy can serve as a point of personal reflection for all of us.

We should also examine our consciences about the way we love our neighbor in the workplace. An employer should ask whether his employees are being paid fairly and justly, with concern for workers as people rather than mere entries on a ledger. Employees should ask if they are serving their employers and customers well in the performance of their duties. My Dad would have called that an honest day’s work for an honest day’s pay.

These “micro” questions of personal interactions hold true at the “macro” levels of public policy. In the realm of politics, the Church has consistently advocated for the poor, for workers, for migrants, for those in positions of relative disadvantage. In that same realm the Church has also stood up for the right of workers to a fair, living wage, and to achieve that goal through lawful collective action, including unionization. Pope Francis has been a harsh critic of modern, technocratic forms of capitalism that disrespect the human dignity of workers, deny protections for working women and pregnant women, and harm the environment through a “throwaway culture.”⁵³

The current chaotic situation at the US-Mexico border highlights the fundamentally broken nature of America’s immigration system. Like me, I am sure that you are sick and tired of the way that the issue is being played for political gain on both sides of the aisle. Having said that, while countries may make and enforce legitimate legal limits and processes for immigration, prosperous countries are obliged to be

welcoming to immigrants, who in turn must respect the laws and heritage of the country that receives them.⁵⁴

While all of these questions are serious, there is one issue that is fundamental and of utmost importance for Eucharistic coherence. Our Eucharistic obligation to reverence Christ in the poor and needy is, if anything, made doubly urgent in the context of abortion. It is the urgent call of the Gospel to protect and cherish children. The economic, political, and legal forces driving women towards abortion, and the ongoing legal killing of hundreds of thousands of children every year in America, represent the single gravest attack against the weakest groups in our country and state: unborn babies, and their mothers. Our Eucharistic obligation to reverence Christ in the poor and needy is, if anything, made doubly urgent in the context of abortion due to the Gospel's calls to protect and cherish children.⁵⁵

According to recent research from the Charlotte Lozier Institute, nearly 70% of abortions are coerced, unwanted, or inconsistent with women's preferences.⁵⁶ I feel this highlights the evil of abortion as a political and cultural force. Abortion advocates promote it as preserving women's autonomy, yet it is so often a choice that occurs without freedom, due to coercive and crushing economic and cultural pressures.

I would ask advocates of abortion: when a woman in an unstable economic situation chooses abortion, how have you helped her? You have done nothing to address the underlying financial forces that made her feel she had to have the abortion in the first place. At best, you have put a bandage on cancerous growth. At worst, you have compounded this woman's economic distress with a grave wound that could result in lifelong emotional and spiritual trauma. Where does true compassion lie?

I believe it is providential that our national Eucharistic revival is taking place so shortly after the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. Most American states are moving away from the status quo that *Roe* represented, for better or for worse. Some states are restricting abortion and taking steps to protect innocent life. Others, like our own home state of California, are aggressively expanding abortion through legislation designed to expand funding and access. The Eucharist calls us to serve Christ in the poor: mothers and unborn children, some of our country's poorest and weakest members, need our help more than ever. I encourage all of you to support the work of the Church and of local pro-life charities that provide direct aid to pregnant women and children, and to advocate for political justice and equality under law for our unborn brethren.

THE EUCHARIST AND PUBLIC OFFICIALS

In the last few decades, controversy has risen in the Church in the United States due to the alarming number of Catholic politicians who have publicly supported actions and positions that are morally unacceptable, such as the legalization of abortion and the redefinition of marriage. Some of these politicians have attempted to justify their positions through muddled and mistaken statements that go something like this, "I am personally opposed to abortion but public support a woman's right to one." Others make appeals to individual conscience: while the Church may teach a certain doctrine, these politicians hold that they may follow their consciences to promote a divergent political position.⁵⁷ This is a grievous misunderstanding of the role of conscience, which must be *formed* through a lifelong process of education through reference to the Word of God and the authoritative teaching of the Church.⁵⁸

As of this writing, we are in the midst of the 2024 election cycle. Having fun yet? Not likely, but I feel compelled to address the question of Catholic politicians supporting legalized abortion here, especially as it relates to “Eucharistic Coherence”. I do this not to exclude other moral issues as being serious, but due to the logical and, frankly, numerical significance that gives abortion a “preeminent” moral status among the social justice issues of our age.⁵⁹ It is preeminent because it “directly attack[s] life itself, the most fundamental human good and the condition for all others.”⁶⁰

Furthermore, the raw numbers of abortions in the United States are still utterly staggering. In 2017, the pro-choice Guttmacher Institute estimated that 862,320 innocent human lives were ended through abortion, with 13.5 abortions per every 1,000 women aged 15-44.⁶¹ In 2020, the total number was over 900,000.⁶² This shockingly evil, legal regime is maintained through the committed effort of hundreds of American politicians at the state and federal levels, many of whom are baptized Catholics, including the current President and Governor.

Legislative votes and initiatives, very public advocacy, and political support for the massive injustice of abortion should give such politicians pause before receiving Holy Communion and, in my opinion, render them unfit to do so. They render themselves unfit to do so. I am joined in this judgment by our late, beloved Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI.⁶³ Such activity is a flat rejection of St. John Paul II’s teaching: “In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is therefore never licit to obey it, or to take part in a propaganda campaign in favor of such a law, or vote for it.”⁶⁴ The Church is clear that the moral responsibility for those children killed in abortion, at least partially, “falls on the legislators who have promoted and approved abortion[.]”⁶⁵ These grave rejections of Catholic faith and morality are utterly at odds with the Truth whom we receive in Holy Communion.

There are other issues in American society where intrinsically moral evils are promoted, the support of which could separate Catholics from the Church: legal assisted suicide, the redefinitions of sexuality and marriage and more. There are also various issues where persons of goodwill may disagree, but which could nonetheless have serious moral consequences: immigration, environmental policy, taxation and economic regulation, the treatment of workers, and more. Again, persons of good will may have differing opinions as to how the Church’s moral principles apply in these much more specific and fact-based cases. This makes them different from issues such as abortion, same sex marriage, or physician-assisted suicide, which are moral evils forbidden by the absolute negative judgments of natural law.⁶⁶ Nonetheless, I ask public officials and voters - you and me - to sincerely examine our consciences on these issues, so that we may discern whether we are acting for the sake of the common good or because of partisan, political, or personal preferences and feelings. “What’s good for me is what is good,” is not a moral stance.

OBSTINATE, MANIFEST, GRAVE SINNERS AND HOLY COMMUNION

I lastly wish to address the topic of whether the Church can, or should, refuse Holy Communion to Catholics who publicly reject the Church on topics such as abortion. Canon 915 of the Code of Canon Law requires that those “obstinately persevering in manifest grave sin are not to be admitted to holy communion[.]”⁶⁷ In a 2004 letter, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, the future Pope and then-prefect of the

Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, affirmed that this canon should rightly be applied to politicians who provide formal support for abortion through “consistently campaigning and voting for permissive abortion . . . laws.”⁶⁸

The decision to refuse Holy Communion is not one that I, or any clergy in our Diocese, can or will take lightly. It is only to be applied under the precise circumstances delineated in Canon Law: it must be a situation with obstinate persistence, seriously sinful activity, and conduct that is “manifest” to the broader community. Nobody should be refused Communion unless and until they have met with their pastor, discussed the problem of their support of the grave moral evil in question, and still rejected the Church’s guidance and obstinately presented themselves for Communion.⁶⁹

Cardinal Ratzinger stated, “This decision [to refuse Holy Communion to manifest, grave sinners], properly speaking, is not a sanction or a penalty. Nor is the minister of Holy Communion passing judgment on the person’s subjective guilt, but rather is reacting to the person’s public unworthiness to receive Holy Communion due to an objective situation of sin.”⁷⁰ As St. John Paul says, this is done out of “pastoral concern for the good order of the community and out of respect for the sacrament.”⁷¹

The situation of a politician openly and consistently supporting abortion throughout the week, yet receiving Holy Communion regularly, projects an image that this person’s conduct is consistent with the Eucharist, who is Truth itself. We must not perpetuate such a bad example of scandal to the Catholic faithful.

I therefore instruct all of the pastors in our parishes: if you are aware of a parishioner who is in such a situation, please consult with me, reach out to this parishioner, and work towards reconciliation. I encourage those individual Catholics whose belief and practice is contrary to the Church’s faith to examine their consciences, to seek greater understanding of the Church’s teaching, and to embrace the truth of the Gospel.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I wish to appeal to every Catholic, whether priest, religious, and lay in the Diocese of Fresno—turn to Jesus Christ in the Eucharist. Seek his face, seek his heart, in the Holy Sacrament of the altar. Initiate in your lives, in your families, and in your parishes, a renewed love and commitment to honoring and worshipping Christ in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and in the Blessed Sacrament.

NOTES

Endnotes

- 1 *Roman Missal*, Ordinary of the Mass 132.
- 2 Luke 7:1-10
- 3 St. Augustine, *Confessions*, Book I.3
- 4 See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1817
- 5 Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, no. 25.
- 6 Gregory Smith, “Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ,” Pew Research Center [https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/].
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* § 1131.
- 9 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* Supp. Q. 34, Art. 3. (“[S]acramentum . . . nihil est aliud quam quaedam sanctification homini exhibitum cum aliquo signo visibili.”).
- 10 Council of Trent, Session XIII, *Concerning the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist*, First Decree, Chapter I; *ibid.* at First Decree, Canon I.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1376.
- 13 It is significant to note that Christ’s *entire* humanity is present in any portion of the Eucharist. One does not receive “more” of Jesus by receiving Holy Communion under both species, though there is a greater symbolic value. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1390.
- 14 Pope Francis, Audience on June 19, 2023
- 15 We call the Eucharistic Sacrifice in the Roman Church the “Mass” (Latin *Missa*) from the last Latin words of the Mass in the Roman Rite, “*Ite, Missa Est*,” which literally translates to “Go, it is the sending-forth.” *Missa* is a late-Latin noun stemming from the verb *mittere*, which means “to send.” The Eucharistic sacrifice in other Catholic traditions has different names: for example, the Greek Orthodox and Catholics in the Byzantine tradition refer to it as the “Divine Liturgy.”
- 16 St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, II-IIae, Q. 85, Art. 1.
- 17 Ibid. at Art. 1 and Art. 4.
- 18 St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, Book 4, Ch. 14.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Council of Trent, *On the Sacrifice of the Mass*, Session XXII, Chapter I.
- 21 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1362.
- 22 See 1 Peter 3:18, Romans 6:9-10, Hebrews 9:28.
- 23 James T. O’Connor, *The Hidden Manna: A Theology of the Eucharist* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 228.
- 24 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2177.
- 25 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2181.
- 26 See Paul Taguchi, D.D., *The Catholic Church in Japan* (Melbourne: Advocate Press 1949).
- 27 Timothy Cardinal Dolan, “Cardinal Dolan: Did we go too far with COVID-19 restrictions?” *Our Sunday Visitor*, June 30, 2023 [https://www.oursundayvisitor.com/dolan-too-far-covid/].
- 28 St. Bernard of Clairvaux, *The Twelve Degrees of Humility and of Pride*, Part I, Chapter I.
- 29 See Matthew 6:11, Luke 11:3.
- 30 Philippians 4:13.
- 31 1 Cor 11:27-29.
- 32 See Luke 18:10-14. The full pre-Communion prayer from the Byzantine liturgy is beautiful, and worth review: “I believe, O Lord, and confess that You are truly Christ, the Son of the living God, Who came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am first. Accept me this day, O Son of God, as a partaker of Your mystical Supper. I will not tell the mystery to Your enemies, nor will I give You a kiss as did Judas, but like the thief, I confess to You: Remember me, O Lord, when You come into Your kingdom. Remember me, O Master, when You come into Your Kingdom. Remember me, O Holy one, when You come into Your Kingdom. May the partaking of Your Holy Mysteries, O Lord, be unto me not for judgement or condemnation but for the healing of soul and body. God, be merciful to me, a sinner. God, cleanse me of my sins and have mercy on me. I have sinned without number, forgive me, O Lord.” See Rev. Peter Galadza (Ed.), *The Divine Liturgy: An Anthology for Worship* (Metropolitan Andrey Sheptytsky Institute of Eastern Christian Studies, Ottawa: 2004), 447-49.
- 33 *Code of Canon Law*, Can. 916.
- 34 1 Cor 11:27.
- 35 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1436, 1484, 1496.
- 36 St. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 37.

- 37 Pew Research Center, “US Catholics Open to Non-Traditional Families: 45% of Americans Are Catholic or Connected to Catholicism.” Sept. 2, 2015. [https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2015/09/02/chapter-2-participation-in-catholic-rites-and-observances/#:~:text=About%20four%2Din%2Dten%20Catholics,they%20go%20once%20a%20year.]
- 38 *Code of Canon Law*, Can. 988 §1.
- 39 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1496.
- 40 *Code of Canon Law*, Can 988 §2.
- 41 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1387.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 John 1:1. The Tridentine Mass preserves the beautiful ritual, originally a private devotion, of the priest reading this section from the beginning of John’s Gospel (Chapter 1, verses 1-14) at the end of every Mass, with the whole congregation briefly genuflecting at the words in verse 14: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us[.]”
- 44 “λόγος,” Liddell and Scott, *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Clarendon Press, Oxford: 1889).
- 45 St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, Book VII, Chap. 1, 1.
- 46 John 14:6.
- 47 Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, 7, 10
- 48 Galadza, at 453.
- 49 *Roman Missal*, Ordinary of the Mass at 144.
- 50 Luke 1:39-56.
- 51 Matthew 25:40.
- 52 See The Most Rev. Joseph V. Brennan, “Fresno’s Catholic bishop enters debate over Planned Parenthood funding by City Council.” *The Fresno Bee*, 5 Sep. 2022, Op-ed. [https://www.fresnobee.com/opinion/readers-opinion/article265354291.html]
- 53 Pope Francis, Address to Managers and Delegates of the Italian General Confederation of Labor (CGIL) [https://catholiclabor.org/address-of-his-holiness-pope-francis-to-managers-and-delegates-of-the-italian-general-confederation-of-labour-cgil/].
- 54 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2241.
- 55 See Mark 10:13-16, Matthew 18:6.
- 56 David C. Reardon et al. “The Effects of Abortion Decision Rightness and Decision Type on Women’s Satisfaction and Mental Health.” *Cureus* 15(5): e38882. [https://www.cureus.com/articles/146123-the-effects-of-abortion-decision-rightness-and-decision-type-on-womens-satisfaction-and-mental-health#1/]
- 57 “Renewed Statement of Principles” by Catholic Members of the House of Representatives, June 24, 2023. [https://delauro.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/delauro-leads-catholic-lawmakers-releasing-renewed-statement-principles#:~:text=We%20are%20committed%20to%20making, blessings%20of%20this%20great%20country, accessed ____].
- 58 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1783-1785.
- 59 See United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, 22.
- 60 *Ibid.*
- 61 Rachel K. Jones, Elizabeth Witwer, Jenna Jerman, “Abortion Incidence and Service Availability in the United States, 2017,” Guttmacher Institute, https://www.guttmacher.org/report/abortion-incidence-service-availability-us-2017.
- 62 Jeff Diamant and Besheer Mohamed, “What the data says about abortion in the U.S.” Pew Research Center [https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/01/11/what-the-data-says-about-abortion-in-the-u-s-2/].
- 63 See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cdl. Joseph Ratzinger’s Memorandum “Worthiness to receive Holy Communion: General Principles,” Summer 2004, *Origins* 34/9 (29 July 2004) 133-134, https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/worthiness-to-receive-holy-communion-general-principles-2153.
- 64 St. John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae*, 73 (internal quotations omitted).
- 65 *Ibid.* at 59.
- 66 See Ratzinger, “Worthiness to receive Holy Communion: General Principles.” As Cardinal Ratzinger stated, “There may be a legitimate diversity of opinion even among Catholics about waging war and applying the death penalty, but not however with regard to abortion and euthanasia.” The specific topic of the death penalty may be subject to a different analysis than that employed by Cardinal Ratzinger in 2004, given Pope Francis’ more negative judgment, inserted into the *Catechism* in 2018, of the “inadmissibility” of the death penalty. See *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 2267. Nevertheless, the principle holds that abortion stands above a number of other political issues that, though serious, often do not deal with intrinsic moral evils, and can admit to a broader range of perspectives for how to enact the principles of justice enshrined in Catholic teaching.
- 67 *Code of Canon Law*, Canon 915.
- 68 Ratzinger, “Worthiness to receive Holy Communion: General Principles.”
- 69 *Ibid.*
- 70 *Ibid.*
- 71 St. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 37.