**THE MYSTERY OF THE EUCHARIST IN THE LIFE OF THE CHURCH**

**Day 1: The Beginning of Faith**

**From the Document:** On March 27, 2020, at an early point in the global pandemic, Pope Francis walked alone in the rain across an empty St. Peter’s Square to offer prayer for the world in a time of crisis. “Faith,” he said, “begins when we realize we are in need of salvation. We are not self-sufficient; by ourselves we founder: We need the Lord, like ancient navigators needed the stars.” Recalling when Jesus was asleep in the boat as a tempest was raging (Mk. 4:35-41), the Holy Father said, “The Lord awakens so as to reawaken and revive our Easter faith.”

On that day, Pope Francis presided over the rite of Eucharistic Exposition and Benediction in order to focus our attention on the presence of Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. The Pope was reminding us that even in a time of turbulence and crisis, Jesus is present among us, as present as He was long ago in the boat on the Sea of Galilee.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 1. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** The storms and turbulence of our daily lives, further complicated by societal strife and the pandemic, continually remind us that we need a Savior, that we need the Lord Jesus. The Holy Father reminds us that the Lord is here with us during the storm.

Jesus is here with us in many ways, including in our hearts, in Sacred Scripture, and in the midst of two or three of us gathered in His name (cf. Mt. 18:20). But in a singularly remarkable way, He is truly present in the Most Holy Eucharist, which gives life to the world (cf. Jn. 6:51).

At this critical moment in history, the Church is calling for a Eucharistic revival, so that we may more fully recognize and avail ourselves of this precious gift the Lord has bequeathed to His Church. Thank you for beginning this journey with us, as over the next 40 days we ponder this profound mystery with the eyes of faith.

**Ponder:** Do I realize that I need a Savior? If so, what do I need to be saved from? Am I open to what the Church teaches regarding the Eucharist? What do I hope to gain from this “40-for-40”?

**Day 2: Separated from the Eucharist**

**From the Document:** Pope St. John Paul II reminded us of Jesus’ ongoing presence when he repeated to us the words of Christ: “I am with you always, to the end of the age”(Mt. 28:20). He proclaimed: “This promise of Christ never ceases to resound in the Church as the fertile secret of her life and the wellspring of her hope. As the day of Resurrection, Sunday is not only the remembrance of a past event: It is a celebration of the living presence of the Risen Lord in the midst of His own people.”

We call on these inspiring words of the saintly Holy Father as we offer these reflections on the importance of the Eucharist in the life of the Church. We do so mindful of how the pandemic has forced us to stay physically distant from one another and, for a time, to view the celebration of the Mass on a television or computer screen.

Many of the faithful appear to have had their faith and their desire for the Eucharist strengthened by such a long separation. At the same time, we sense that others, having lived without Mass for so long, may have become discouraged or accustomed to life without the Eucharist. . . .

As Christians, we know that we need Christ to be present in our lives. He is our very sustenance as He reminded us: “Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you”(Jn. 6:53).

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 2-4. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** The bishops recall the painful days at the height of the pandemic, when we were not able to gather for Sunday Mass to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord, and how we are still feeling its effects. We probably have friends or relatives who have not stepped foot in a church since March 2020—if they didn’t walk away before that.

The Eucharist is supernatural food that God has given us to renew, heal, and sanctify our bodies, minds, and souls—to prepare us for eternal life with Him in heaven.  It is also a powerful reminder—here and now—of Christ’s abiding presence with us and His thirst to be part of our lives. The Eucharist makes the Resurrection present and real in our very midst.

**Ponder:** How has the pandemic affected my experience of Sunday as “a celebration of the living presence of the risen Lord”? What are the ways in which attending Sunday Mass in person is fundamentally different from watching it on TV or on the laptop?

**Day 3: Daily Nourishment**

**From the Document:** The Lord accompanies us in many ways, but none as profound as when we encounter Him in the Eucharist. On our journey toward eternal life, Christ nourishes us with His very self. Once, when told by someone that she no longer saw the point of going to daily Mass, the Servant of God Dorothy Day reflected:

“We go eat of this fruit of the tree of life because Jesus told us to. . . . He took upon himself our humanity that we might share in his divinity. We are nourished by his flesh that we may grow to be other Christs. I believe this literally, just as I believe the child is nourished by the milk from his mother’s breast.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 5. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** Dorothy Day, an adult convert to the faith, was a prominent lay Catholic in the 20th century and the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement.

In a footnote, the bishops’ document quotes this prayer from the Mass on Christmas day:

“O God, who wonderfully created the dignity of human nature and still more wonderfully restored it, grant, we pray, that we may share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity.”

The Eucharist facilitates our sharing in the divinity of Christ, as amazingly we become what we eat. This, incidentally, is why the pelican often appears in Christian art. In ancient times, it was believed that pelicans pecked on their own flesh to feed it to their starving offspring. This became a symbol for Christ, because He nourishes us with His own Body and Blood in the Eucharist.

**Ponder:** Do I truly hunger for the Eucharist? Do I find nourishment in the Eucharist every Sunday? Do I seek out other times during the week to receive this nourishment?

**Day 4: Saved as Members of Christ’s Body**

**From the Document:** We know that Christ is present to us in a way that binds us together as one body, which we proclaim by our “Amen.” We recall the words of Pope St. John Paul II:

“For this presence to be properly proclaimed and lived, it is not enough that the disciples of Christ pray individually and commemorate the death and Resurrection of Christ inwardly, in the secrecy of their hearts. Those who have received the grace of baptism are not saved as individuals alone, but as members of the Mystical Body, having become part of the People of God.”

As we continue to welcome people back to the communal celebration of the Mass, it must be acknowledged that no document can exhaust the mystery of the gift of the Eucharist. . . . At this particular moment for the Church in the United States, with its many challenges, we would like to reflect on Christ’s *gift* of Himself in the Eucharist and our *response* to that gift.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 6-7. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** The Eucharist entails a most intimate encounter with our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Yet, at the same time, God saves us as a people—even more, as a family, as brothers and sisters in Christ. So the Eucharist is necessarily a communal celebration that also connects us with one another.

Especially during our recent pandemic, we may have felt a sense of isolation or disconnect from one another. But our God does not leave us there. He does not save us as isolated individuals. Just as He rescued Israel from slavery in Egypt as His chosen people and fed them with manna in the desert, so now He saves us as from slavery to sin through His Church, the New Israel, and feeds us with the bread of everlasting life (cf. Jn. 6:58).

**Ponder:** How can I better reflect in my own life the reality that the Eucharist connects us with other members of the Body of Christ?

**Day 5: The Gift**

**From the Document:** At the Mass of the Lord’s Supper celebrated on Holy Thursday, the priest prays these words:

For he is the true and eternal Priest,

who instituted the pattern of an everlasting sacrifice and was the first to offer himself as the saving Victim, commanding us to make this offering as his memorial.

As we eat his flesh that was sacrificed for us, we are made strong,

and, as we drink his Blood that was poured out for us, we are washed clean.

The words of the liturgy on the night the Church commemorates the institution of the Eucharist speak to us of the Mass as the re-presentation of Christ’s unique sacrifice on the Cross, the reception of Christ truly present in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, and the marvelous effects of communion in those who receive this gift.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 8. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** We fittingly recall the institution of the Eucharist in a particular way at the Holy Thursday liturgy, where we also commemorate the institution of the ordained priesthood. For the priest, acting in the person of Christ, brings about the Eucharist at every Mass.

This gift of the priesthood is a singular way by which Christ continues to bless and nourish all people. In fact, Pope St. John Paul II emphasized that the Eucharist is the principal purpose for the sacrament of priesthood, which came into being at the Last Supper (2003 encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 30). The Holy Father went on to stress that the centrality of the Eucharist in the life and ministry of priests is the basis of its centrality in the promotion of priestly vocations (no. 31).

The profound harm done by scandals of recent decades is real and demands ongoing healing and reform. Yet we cannot allow the sin of others to undermine our connection with our Eucharistic Lord.

**Ponder:** How can I show my appreciation to the Lord this week for the gift of the priesthood, without which there is no Eucharist?

**Day 6: Sharers in the Divine Nature**

**From the Document:** The mission of the Lord’s entire life on earth was to glorify the Father by bringing us salvation. In the Nicene Creed recited at Mass, we profess, “For us men and for our salvation he came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man.”

The salvation offered in the Life, Death, and Resurrection of Christ is nothing less than sharing in the very life of God, in the communion of love among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is no greater gift that God could possibly give us. In Christ, we are “sharers in the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4).

The Church Fathers referred to this participation in the divine life as “divinization.” The eternal Son of God made this possible by becoming man and uniting humanity to His divine Person. St. Augustine explained: “The maker of man was made man, so that man might be a receiver of God.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 9. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** Parents communicate their “nature” to their offspring. Therefore, we all received a human nature from our parents. Further, when we were “reborn” as children of God at Baptism, we truly became “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). However, we are not divine by nature—only Jesus is. Rather, we become God’s children by the grace of adoption (cf. Gal. 4:4-7). This grace puts us into a new, intimate relationship with the Holy Trinity and with the entire People of God.

In a human family, our birth is significant, but only a beginning, as our human nature only comes to maturity over time, as our parents nourish and form us. In like fashion, our new birth at Baptism is but the beginning of our transformation in Christ, as our Mother the Church continues to nourish and form us—and most especially nourish us weekly if not daily with the Bread of Life, the Eucharist.

**Ponder:** Do I recognize that divine life was given to me at Baptism? What does that say about my dignity and purpose in life? Am I open to growing and maturing as a child of God?

**Day 7: The Reality of Sin**

**From the Document:** To begin to comprehend the tremendous gift offered by Christ through His Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection, which is made present to us in the Eucharist, we must first realize how truly profound is our alienation from the Source of all life as a result of sin. We have abundant experience of evil, yet so many of us deny the cause of much of that evil—our own selfishness, our own sins. As St. John wrote in his first letter*,* “If we say, ‘we are without sin,’ we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn.1:8).

Sin is an offense against God, a failure to love God and our neighbor that wounds our nature and injures human solidarity. The capabilities, talents, and gifts we have received from God are meant to be used for good—not the false and illusory good that we in our self-centered desire create for ourselves, but the true good that glorifies the Father of goodness and is directed for the good of others and, in the end, is also good for us.

When we misuse the gifts of creation, when we selfishly focus on ourselves, we choose the path of vice rather than the way of virtue. This self-centeredness is an inheritance of the Fall of our first parents. Without the grace of Christ received at Baptism, strengthened in Confirmation, and nourished by the Eucharist, this selfishness dominates us.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 10. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** We recognize that we are sinners in need of God’s mercy. Further, despite our good intentions and resolutions, we remain prone to selfishness.

One of the great fruits of the Eucharist is that it strengthens the love of God in us, and in the process washes away venial sins. In addition, the Eucharist preserves us from future mortal sins by strengthening our friendship with the Lord (cf. Catechism, nos. 1393-95).

In a future installment, we will discuss the necessity of the Sacrament of Reconciliation for the forgiveness of mortal sins. For now, it is important to note the spiritually medicinal qualities of the Eucharist that are so important for daily Christian living.

**Ponder:** Where is selfishness and vice most evident in my life? Am I serious about opposing my vices with the corresponding virtues? Am I willing to ask Jesus in the moments after receiving Him in Communion to help me in these areas of difficulty?

**Day 8: The Sacrifice of Christ**

**From the Document:** In Christ, what was lost by sin has been restored and renewed even more wondrously by grace. Jesus, the *new Adam,* “was crucified under Pontius Pilate,” offering Himself up as a sacrifice so that we may receive the inheritance that was lost by sin. By freely offering His life on the Cross, Christ allows us to “become the children of God”(Jn. 1:12) and to inherit the Kingdom of God. St. Peter reminds us, Christ “bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” (1 Pet. 2:24).

At the Last Supper, celebrating the Passover, Jesus makes explicit that His impending death, freely embraced out of love, is sacrificial: “While they were eating, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and giving it to his disciples said, ‘Take and eat; this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins’” (Mt. 26:27-28).

In the words and gestures of the Last Supper, Jesus makes it clear that out of love for us He is freely offering His life for the forgiveness of our sins. In doing so, He is both the priest offering a sacrifice and the victim being offered.

As priest, Jesus is offering a sacrifice to God the Father, an offering prefigured by the offering of bread and wine by the priest Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18; cf. Ps. 110:4; Heb. 5-7). Anticipating His Passion in the institution of the Eucharist, Christ has indicated the forms under which His self-offering would be sacramentally present to us until the end of time.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 12-13. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** Today’s installment brings us the mysterious figure of Melchizedek, whose only appearance in the biblical narrative occurs when he offers a sacrifice of bread and wine and accepts a tithe offering from Abram (Abraham) in Genesis 14.

We know that Jesus is the son of David, a descendent of the royal tribe of Judah, which is important because Jesus claimed to be the king, the Messiah. But we also know that the priests of the Old Covenant were descended from the tribe of Levi, not Judah. How could Jesus claim to be a priest—*the* priest—when He lacked the credential of being descended from the priestly tribe?

Melchizedek is a priest during the age of the patriarchs, before Levi was even born. According to Psalm 110, the Messiah would be a priest—not a priest of the order of Levi, but of the order of Melchizedek (cf. Heb. 7).

The role of the priest is to offer sacrifices for the atonement of sin. Jesus did not offer up the blood of bulls and goats, but rather He offered His own Body and Blood on the Cross.

**Ponder:** As a baptized Christian, I participate in the royal priesthood of Christ through the offering of my own prayers, works, joys, and sufferings. Is there a sacrifice I can make today for the benefit of the Church? How can I unite myself more fully to the sacrifice of Christ?

**Day 9: Entering the Mystery**

**From the Document:** Why is it so important that we understand the Eucharist as a sacrifice? It is because all that Jesus did for the salvation of humanity is made present in the celebration of the Eucharist, including His sacrificial death and resurrection. Christ’s sacrifice of Himself to the Father was efficacious and salvific because of the supreme love with which He shed His blood—the price of our salvation—and offered Himself to the Father on our behalf. His blood, shed for us, is the eternal sign of that love.

As a memorial the Eucharist is not another sacrifice, but the re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ by which we are reconciled to the Father. It is the way by which we are drawn into Jesus’ perfect offering of love, so that His sacrifice becomes the sacrifice of the Church. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

“The remembrance of his perfect gift consists not in the mere repetition of the Last Supper, but in the Eucharist itself, that is, in the radical newness of Christian worship. In this way, Jesus left us the task of entering into his ‘hour.’ . . . We enter into the very dynamic of His self-giving.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 14. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** We need to get right what a “memorial” is if we are to correctly understand the Eucharist.

On the one extreme are those who relegate Christ’s sacrifice to the distant past. They believe that, in the Mass, we remember what Jesus did for us, but these events do not become present realities. And so with each successive generation, the memory becomes weaker and cloudier. The Eucharist becomes merely a symbolic reminder that Jesus loves us. The focus then becomes disproportionately placed on the “horizontal” dimension of the Mass: the “gathered assembly,” the external participation of the faithful, and the human needs and aspirations of the community. While these elements surely have their proper place, they become empty if they are disconnected from Christ’s saving presence.

On the other extreme is a more privatized (“me and Jesus”) approach to Christianity. Christ is so present to us that we do not need the sacred liturgy to encounter Him. Some Christians fundamentally misunderstand the sacrificial character of the Mass. They believe that Catholics claim to sacrifice Christ repeatedly, which seems contrary to the biblical teaching that Christ died “once for all” (Heb. 7:27). While it’s important to realize that we can and should encounter Our Lord in prayer frequently apart from the liturgy, we encounter Our Lord in a singular way at Mass.

As a memorial, the Eucharist is not merely a symbolic reminder of the salvation Christ won for us long ago, but it actually makes present and effective in our midst Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross for us (see Catechism, nos. 1363-67). Christ is not sacrificed repeatedly. Rather, the Eucharist is a present, unbloody participation in the one sacrifice of Christ.

**Ponder:** Do I “get” that Jesus’ sacrifice is not simply an event that occurred 2,000 years ago? How would I explain the concept of a “memorial” to a friend or co-worker who asks about the Eucharist?

**Day 10: New Passover**

**From the Document:** The Eucharist is a sacrificial meal, the sacred banquet of communion with the Lord’s body and blood. Its fundamental pattern is found in the Jewish celebration of the Passover, which involves *both* a meal *and* a sacrifice.

The Passover meal is celebrated in remembrance of the Exodus, when the Israelites were told to sacrifice a lamb to the Lord and to mark the doorposts of their houses with the blood, so that the angel of death would pass over their houses and leave the Israelites unharmed. This marked a people set apart and chosen by God as his special possession. Each family was then to eat the lamb with unleavened bread as a reminder of the haste with which the Israelites had to prepare for their departure from Egypt and with bitter herbs as a reminder of their deliverance from slavery.

At the Last Supper, Jesus reveals Himself as the Paschal Lamb (“Behold the Lamb of God”), whose sacrifice brings liberation from slavery to sin and whose blood marks out a new people belonging to God. All the sacrifices in the Old Testament prefigure and find their fulfillment in the one perfect sacrifice of Jesus.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 15. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** The concept of a memorial is not new to Christianity. That’s how the Jewish people have always understood the Exodus. The Passover celebration not only calls to mind Israel’s liberation from slavery thousands of years ago, but also makes present the liberation and salvation God offers His chosen people right now.

In the New Covenant, Christ has given us the Eucharist as a memorial of His suffering and death, so that His saving presence may be diffused through space and time. Jesus is truly and intimately present with His people, and each time the Eucharist is celebrated Jesus is really present to us.

After the words of consecration, the priest recalls the saving work of God in salvation history. This portion of the Eucharistic Prayer is known as the anamnesis. Recalling the mighty works of God helps us to focus on what is truly happening here and now on the altar of our parish church. This unfolding reality should encourage all of us to be “really present” to the mysteries that are being celebrated in our midst–and to become silent before what is unfolding in front of us.

We must see the anamnesis not as a redundancy but as a necessary reminder of our identity, purpose, and destiny as Christians. Nowhere in Scripture does anyone cruise through life in God’s friendship without regularly calling to mind God’s promises, commandments, and saving actions. Rather, those who forget about God are those who fall from the state of grace and do evil in God’s sight. If the living God doesn’t have our attention, then something else inevitably will.

**Ponder:** How is the Eucharist both a sacrifice and a meal? Why can’t it be one without the other? How is the Mass like the Passover meal? How is it different?

**Day 11: Heaven on Earth**

**From the Document:** The saving work of Jesus Christ, which has brought to fulfillment what was foreshadowed in the Passover, is now re-presented in the celebration of the Eucharist. The Eucharist makes present the one sacrifice of Christ the Savior.

As Pope St. John Paul II taught: “The Church constantly draws her life from [this] redeeming sacrifice; she approaches it not only through faith-filled remembrance, but also through a real contact, since *this sacrifice is made present ever anew*, sacramentally perpetuated, in every community which offers it at the hands of the consecrated minister” (original emphasis).

Finally, this great sacrament is also a participation in the worship offered in heaven, in and through Christ, by the angels and saints. Pope Benedict XVI explained that “every Eucharistic celebration sacramentally accomplishes the eschatological gathering of the People of God. For us, the Eucharistic banquet is a real foretaste of the final banquet foretold by the prophets (cf. Is. 25:6-9) and described in the New Testament as ‘the marriage-feast of the Lamb’ (Rev. 19:7-9), to be celebrated in the joy of the communion of saints.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 16-17. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** It is no accident that the Eucharistic Prayers include Mary, the ever-Virgin Mother of Jesus Christ our Lord and God, the angels, the holy apostles, the glorious martyrs and all the saints. The Eucharist unites us to the heavenly liturgy—it is truly a glimpse of heaven on earth.

While the Mass connects us even now with heavenly realities, this should only increase, rather than decrease,our sense of responsibility for the world today. Our participation in the Eucharist changes our perspective of earthly realities and orders them toward the eternal.

Think about two drivers on a highway. The first driver is just out for a drive “to kill time.” The second driver is on the way to her daughter’s wedding in another city. Note that there is a difference not only in destination. The fact that the second driver has a specific destination doesn’t lessen the importance of her drive. To the contrary, the fact that she has a specific goal in mind actually invests the drive with meaning and significance.

**Ponder:** Do I hunger for the marriage feast of heaven? What is my destination in life? Does the Eucharist affect my approach to my daily activities in the world?

**Day 12: The Real Presence of Christ**

**From the Document:** From the very beginning, the Church has believed and celebrated according to the teaching of Jesus Himself: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him”(Jn. 6:54-56).

It is not ordinary bread and ordinary drink that we receive in the Eucharist, but the flesh and blood of Christ, who came to nourish and transform us, to restore our relationship to God and to one another.

In the Eucharist, with the eyes of faith we see before us Jesus Christ, who in the Incarnation became flesh(Jn. 1:14) and who in the Paschal Mystery gave Himself for us (Tit. 2:14), accepting “even death on a cross”(Phil. 2:8). . . .

How can Jesus Christ be truly present in what still appears to be bread and wine? In the liturgical act known as the *epiclesis*, the bishop or priest, speaking in the person of Jesus Christ, calls upon the Father to send down His Holy Spirit to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. This change occurs through the institution narrative, by the power of the words of Christ pronounced by the celebrant.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 18-20. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** St. Robert Bellarmine was a brilliant theologian and defender of the faith shortly after the Protestant Reformation. Listen to what this doctor of the Church has to say about the Eucharist:

“Take and eat: This is My Body. Weigh carefully, dear brethren, the force of those words. . . .

“Suppose a prince promised one of you a hundred gold pieces, and in fulfillment of his word sent a beautiful sketch of the coins. What you would think of his liberality? And suppose that when you complained, the donor said, ‘Sir, your astonishment is out of place, as the painted coins you received may very properly be considered true crowns by the figure of speech called metonymy,’ would not everybody feel that he was making fun of you and your picture?

“Now Our Lord promised to give us His flesh for our food. The bread which I shall give you, He said, is My flesh for the life of the world. If you argue that the bread may be looked on as a figure of His flesh, you are arguing like the prince and making a mockery of God’s promises. A wonderful gift indeed that would be, in which Eternal Wisdom, Truth, Justice, and Goodness deceived us, its helpless pensioners, and turned our dearest hopes to derision.

“That I may show you how just and righteous is the position we hold, let us suppose that the last day has come and that our doctrine of the Eucharist has turned out to be false and absurd. Our Lord now asks us reproachfully: ‘Why did you believe thus of My Sacrament? Why did you adore the host?’ may we not safely answer Him: ‘O Lord, if we were wrong in this, it was You who deceived us. We heard Your word, THIS IS MY BODY, and was it a crime for us to believe You? We were confirmed in our mistake by a multitude of signs and wonders which could only have had You for their author. Your Church with one voice cried out to us that we were right, and in believing as we did we but followed in the footsteps of all Your saints and holy ones . . .’”

**Ponder:** Do I find St. Robert Bellarmine’s words convincing? In the Gospel, many disciples walked away when Jesus spoke about the Eucharist (cf. Jn. 6:66). Do I make my own the words of St. Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go, you have the words of everlasting life” (Jn. 6:68)?

**Day 13: Through the Eyes of Faith**

**From the Document:** The reality that, in the Eucharist, bread and wine become the Body and Blood, Soul and Divinity of Christ without ceasing to appear as bread and wine to our five senses is one of the central mysteries of the Catholic faith. This faith is a doorway through which we, like the saints and mystics before us, may enter into a deeper perception of the mercy and love manifested in and through Christ’s sacramental presence in our midst. While one thing is seen with our bodily eyes, another reality is perceived through the eyes of faith. The real, true, and substantial presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the most profound reality of the sacrament. “This mysterious change is very appropriately called by the Church transubstantiation” (Pope St. Paul VI, *Credo of the People of God*).

Though Christ is present to us in many ways in the liturgy, including in the assembly gathered, the presiding minister, and the word proclaimed, the Church also clearly affirms that “the mode of Christ’s presence under the Eucharistic species is unique” (Catechism, no. 1353). . . .

In the sacramental re-presentation of His sacrifice, Christ holds back nothing, offering Himself, whole and entire. The use of the word “substantial” to mark the unique presence of Christ in the Eucharist is intended to convey the totality of the gift He offers to us.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 21. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** The *Tantum Ergo* is the last two stanzas of the *Pange Lingua*, a hymn composed by St. Thomas Aquinas and commonly sung at Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. This hymn contains the verses *Praestet fides supplementum / Sensuum defectui,* which is translated “Faith for all defects supplying, / Where the feeble senses fail.”

The “eyes of faith” take us beyond the capabilities of our feeble senses, as we perceive the presence of Our Lord and Savior under the appearances of bread and wine.

**Ponder:** Do I have the eyes of faith? How is Jesus present in my life? Can I step out in faith this week to spend time alone with Jesus in a church or adoration chapel?

**Day 14: Intimate Encounter with Christ**

**From the Document:** When the Eucharist is distributed and the minister says, “the Body of Christ,” we are to look not simply at what is visible before our eyes, but at what it has become by the words of Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit—the Body of Christ. The communicant’s response of “Amen” is a profession of faith in the Real Presence of Christ and reflects the intimate personal encounter with Him—with His gift of self—that comes through reception of Holy Communion.

The Church’s firm belief in the Real Presence of Christ is reflected in the worship that we offer to the Blessed Sacrament in various ways, including Eucharistic Exposition, Adoration, and Benediction; Eucharistic Processions; and Forty Hours Devotions.

In addition, the practices of reverently genuflecting before the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the tabernacle, bowing one’s head prior to the reception of Holy Communion, and refraining from food and drink for at least one hour before receiving Communion are clear manifestations of the Church’s Eucharistic faith.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 22-23. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** We manifest our belief in the Real Presence when we say “Amen” as we receive Communion. As the document teaches, we also manifest our Eucharistic belief in our worship of the Blessed Sacrament as well as our reverence when we are in His presence.

The pious practice of genuflecting (or bowing deeply) upon entering Our Lord’s presence in a church or chapel is but one example. We kneel before Our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament, not so much as an act of penance, but even more as an act of profound adoration of our God. Before Mass, we do not act in church as we would in a movie theater or sports arena; we do not carry on casual conversation, but rather maintain silence. We do that not only to dispose ourselves to pray, but also out of reverence for Our Lord’s abiding presence in the tabernacle.

**Ponder:** How does my manner and “body language” in church reflect my belief in Our Lord’s Eucharistic presence? What can I do at Mass this coming Sunday to intentionally express reverence and awe before Jesus?

**Day 15: Eucharist Makes the Church**

**From the Document:** When we receive Holy Communion, Christ is giving Himself to us. He comes to us in all humility, as He came to us in the Incarnation, so that we may receive Him and become one with Him. Christ gives Himself to us so that we may continue the pilgrim path toward life with Him in the fullness of the Kingdom of God. . . . Through this sacrament, the pilgrim Church is nourished, deepening her communion with the Triune God and consequently with one another.

The Sacrament of the Eucharist is called Holy Communion precisely because, by placing us in intimate communion with the sacrifice of Christ, we are placed in intimate communion with Him and, through Him, with each other. Therefore, the Eucharist is called Holy Communion because it is “the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being” (Catechism, no. 1325).

How can we understand this? The Gospel of John recounts that, when Jesus died on the Cross, blood and water flowedout (Jn. 19:34), symbolizing Baptism and the Eucharist. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65) teaches:

“The origin and growth of the Church are symbolized by the blood and water which flowed from the open side of the crucified Jesus,” and that “it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church.”

In this image from the Gospel of John, we see that the Church, the Bride of the Lamb, is born from the sacrificial love of Christ in His self-offering on the Cross. The Eucharist re-presents this one sacrifice, placing us in communion with it and with the divine love from which it flows forth. We are placed in communion with each other through this love that is given to us. That is why we can say, “the Eucharist makes the Church.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 24-25. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** We often understand Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon Mary and the disciples in the Upper Room, as the “birthday” of the Church. There is certainly truth to that image, as filled with the Spirit the infant Church emerges from the Upper Room into the world, much as a new baby emerges from the womb.

Through the lens of St. John, however, the “birth” of the Church is symbolized by the blood and water flowing from the side of Christ (cf. Jn. 19:34). St. Ambrose, the famous Church Father who brought St. Augustine into the Church, taught that as Eve was formed from the sleeping Adam’s side, so the Church was born from the pierced side of Christ on the Cross (cf. Catechism, no. 766).

**Ponder:** Do I understand that Holy Communion is even now a participation in the very life of God, which will be fully ours for eternity in the heavenly Kingdom? Does the image of blood and water flowing from the pierced side of Christ help us to see the relationship between our life in Christ and the sacraments of the Church?

**Day 16: Source and Summit of Christian Life**

**From the Document:** We are first incorporated into the Body of Christ, the Church, through the waters of Baptism. Yet Baptism, like the other sacraments, is ordered toward Eucharistic communion.

“The other sacraments, as well as with every ministry of the Church and every work of the apostolate, are tied together with the Eucharist and are directed toward it. . . . In this light, the Eucharist shows itself as the source and the apex of the whole work of preaching the Gospel. Those under instruction are introduced by stages to a sharing in the Eucharist, and the faithful, already marked with the seal of Baptism and Confirmation, are through the reception of the Eucharist fully joined to the Body of Christ” (Vatican II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, no. 5)

That is why the Church calls the Eucharistic sacrifice “the source and summit of the Christian life” (Catechism, no. 1324).

St. Paul emphasizes that this communion exists not only among ourselves, but also with those who came before us. In addressing the Church at Corinth, he praises them for “[holding] fast to the traditions, just as I handed them on to you” (1 Cor.11:2). Later, he highlights the Eucharist as a sacred tradition handed on by Christ to the apostles, and in which we now share: “For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you” (1 Cor. 11:23). At every Mass we are united with all the holy men and women, the saints, who have preceded us.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 26-27. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** The Eucharist is the *source* of all the Church’s activity (after all, how can we do anything without Christ?—Jn. 15:5), and the Eucharist is also the *summit* toward which the Church aspires, where we receive a foretaste of eternal life with God and with all the angels and saints.

When we think of our communion with our brothers and sisters in Christ through the Eucharist, we rightly think of other believers spread throughout the world. However, the document reminds us as well of our intimate connection in Christ to all the holy ones who have gone before us. The Eucharist puts us in communion with all believers, extended through space *and* time.

**Ponder:** Does this teaching provide some consolation and hope regarding friends and family members who have preceded us in death? Why?

**Day 17: The Lord’s Day**

**From the Document:** The obligation to attend Mass each Sunday, the Lord’s Day, on which we commemorate the Resurrection of Jesus, and on other Holy Days of obligation, is a vital expression of our unity as members of the Body of Christ, the Church. It is also a manifestation of the truth that we are utterly dependent upon God and His grace.

A third-century instruction on the life of the Church points out one of the consequences of willful absence from Mass: “Let no one deprive the Church by staying away; if they do, they deprive the Body of Christ of one of its members!” St. John Paul II, writing of Sunday as “a day which is at the very heart of the Christian life,” further asserts, “Time given to Christ is never time lost, but is rather time gained, so that our relationships and indeed our whole life may become more profoundly human.”

We have been reborn in Baptism and nourished by the Eucharist so that we may live in communion with God and one another, not only today but also in the fullness of the heavenly Kingdom. To worship God on Sundays, then, is not the mere observance of a rule but the fulfillment of our identity, of who we are as members of the Body of Christ. Participation in the Mass is an act of love.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 28. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** In the Gospel, Jesus tells us not only that He is the Lord of the Sabbath, but also that “the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath” (Mk. 2:27). In other words, the weekly day of rest is God’s gift to us, for our good. As Christians, we are further aware that the weekly Sabbath obligation has become Sunday—“the Lord’s Day”—in commemoration of the Resurrection. Sunday Mass is the centerpiece of the Lord’s Day, where Our risen Lord welcomes us and invites us to His banquet (cf. Catechism, no 1166).

Interestingly, our observance of Sunday as a day that was made for our own good goes beyond the obligation to participate at Mass. We might not realize that on Sundays and holy days we are called “to abstain from those labors and business concerns which impede the worship to be rendered to God, the joy which is proper to the Lord’s Day, or the proper relaxation of mind and body” (Catechism, no. 2193, quoting Church law).

**Ponder:** Am I able to set aside my work and other pursuits to worship God? Do I understand the Lord’s Day as His gift to me? What can I do this week to make the Lord’s Day more of a priority in my life?

**Day 18: Responding in Gratitude**

**From the Document:** At Mass, the priest sometimes prays the following: “For, although you have no need of our praise, yet our thanksgiving is itself your gift, since our praises add nothing to your greatness but profit us for salvation . . .”

These words speak of the grace of God, the gift freely given, which inspires us to give thanks and worship Him, works our transformation into the likeness of Christ, helps us to seek pardon and to receive it when we fall into sin, and impels us to go forth and bear witness to Christ in the world.

Having been sanctified by the gift of the Eucharist and filled with faith, hope, and charity, the faithful are called to respond to this gift. Indeed, it is only natural that we give thanks to the Lord for all that He has given to us. “How can I repay the Lord for all the great good done for me? I will raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord”(Ps. 116:12).

The word “Eucharist” literally means “thanksgiving.” Even our manner of giving thanks comes from God, for we do so by following the command of the Lord: “do this in memory of me”(Lk. 22:19).

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 29-30. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** “In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus” (1 Thess. 5:18).

Everything in our lives, even the tragedies, failures, inconveniences, and sufferings, are part of God’s plan. He doesn’t make mistakes. Every circumstance affords us an opportunity—indeed, sometimes a real challenge—to grow in the love of God. Of course, when seemingly bad things happen to us, our first response may not be an expression of gratitude, and even if it is, it may be dripping with sarcasm: “Gee, thanks a lot.”

Yet God wills that we develop the virtue of perpetual gratitude—at least if we want to be happy in this world and, even more, in the next. The Eucharist, as the supreme sacrifice of thanksgiving (Catechism, nos. 1359-60), continually opens us more fully to God’s superabundant gifts. That’s why great saints like St. Teresa of Avila, who developed this inner disposition of gratitude, can honestly say, “Nothing disturbs me.”

**Ponder:** Gratitude is the appropriate response when being presented with a gift. Do I have the habit, or virtue, of expressing gratitude to others? Do I regularly thank God for all of my blessings?

**Day 19: Active Participation**

**From the Document:** The Second Vatican Council taught that, in order to give thanks properly in the celebration of the Mass, we should “take a full, conscious, and active part in the liturgical celebration.”

We need to be conscious of the gift we have received, a gift that is none other than the Lord Himself in His act of self-giving. We become conscious of this gift when we actively engage our minds, hearts, and bodies in every part of the liturgy, allowing God through the words, actions, gestures, and even the moments of silence to speak to us. We actively and consciously participate by giving our full attention to the prayers and the Scriptures, even if we have heard them hundreds of times before. We do so also by listening to the homily and reflecting upon how the Lord may be speaking to us through His ordained minister.

We are actively giving thanks when we join in singing and in the responses; when we kneel, stand, and sit; and when we pay attention to the liturgical seasons where the entire history of what God has done for us, in and through His Son, is revealed to us.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 31. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** At Mass we not only thank God for our many blessings, but we also unite ourselves to Christ’s offering on the Cross (cf. Catechism, no. 1083). We call to mind the words of St. Paul: “I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship” (Rom. 12:1)

By calling for our “active participation” at Mass, the Church is not referring primarily to liturgical roles such as readers, EMHCs, ushers, and so forth, important as they are. Nor is the Church primarily interested in our sitting or standing at the right time, or joining in the responses and singing, though that is also important. Rather, most fundamentally, the Church earnestly desires us to engage fully, intentionally, and interiorly in what is unfolding before us in the Mass.

**Ponder:** How much of myself do I bring with me to Mass? Am I trying to lift my mind and heart to God, or am I simply going through the motions? If the latter, what can I do next week to gently redirect my thoughts and energies during Mass?

**Day 20: Liturgical Beauty**

**From the Document:** The gratitude which inspires us to give thanks and worship God in the celebration of the Eucharist should be nurtured and enriched by the beauty of the liturgical action itself. Bishops and priests have a particular duty to ensure that the Mass is celebrated in a manner befitting the sacredness of what takes place.

As Pope Francis recently wrote to the bishops of the world, “I ask you to be vigilant in ensuring that every liturgy be celebrated with decorum and fidelity to the liturgical books promulgated after Vatican Council II, without the eccentricities that can easily degenerate into abuses.”

Priest celebrants of the Mass should have a prayerful understanding of the liturgical books, as well as of the feasts and seasons, and be faithful to the texts and rubrics established by the Church. In doing so, they will lead the people more deeply and reverently into the exchange which is the dialogue of the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 32. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** This section pertains most especially to bishops and priests, but all of us are called to participate reverently in the Mass.

Popes in recent decades have lamented “unauthorized innovations” that detract from the unity and beauty of the sacred liturgy. Christian author C.S. Lewis suggests that this tendency may be rooted in our tendency to make worship more about us than about God:

“The modern habit of doing ceremonial things unceremoniously is no proof of humility; rather it proves the offender’s inability to forget himself in the rite, and his readiness to spoil for everyone else the proper pleasure of ritual.”

In addressing this subject, Pope St. John Paul II writes:

“Priests who faithfully celebrate Mass according to the liturgical norms, and communities which conform to those norms, quietly but eloquently demonstrate their love for the Church. . . . No one is permitted to undervalue the mystery entrusted to our hands: it is too great for anyone to feel free to treat it lightly and with disregard for its sacredness and its universality” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 52).

**Ponder:** This section speaks of “the beauty of the liturgical action.” What makes for a beautiful liturgy in my opinion? Why do the Popes connect the beauty of the liturgy with fidelity to liturgical norms?

**Day 21: Come, Let Us Adore!**

**From the Document:** Our gratitude is also expressed in our worship of the Blessed Sacrament outside of Mass. These forms of worship are all intrinsically related to the Eucharistic celebration.

In the Eucharist, the Son of God comes to meet us and desires to become one with us; Eucharistic adoration is simply the natural consequence of the Eucharistic celebration. Receiving the Eucharist means adoring Him whom we receive. Only in this way do we become one with Him, and are given, as it were, a foretaste of the beauty of the heavenly liturgy.

We rejoice in the growing numbers of the faithful who pray in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, a testament of faith in the Real Presence of the Lord in the Eucharist. We encourage this devotion, which helps all of us to be formed by the self-giving love we behold in the Lord’s gift of Himself in the Eucharist. Saint (Mother) Teresa of Calcutta reportedly once said: “When you look at the crucifix, you understand how much Jesus loved you then. When you look at the Sacred Host, you understand how much Jesus loves you now.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 33. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** There have been concerns expressed about the rise of Eucharistic adoration outside of Mass. After all, Our Lord Himself said, “take and *eat*.” Does Eucharistic adoration detract from the Mass? Pope St. John Paul II’s teachings on this subject are instructive:

“The*worship of the Eucharist outside of the Mass* is of inestimable value for the life of the Church. . . . It is the responsibility of Pastors to encourage . . . the practice of Eucharistic adoration, and exposition of the Blessed Sacrament in particular, as well as prayer of adoration before Christ present under the Eucharistic species. . . .

“If in our time Christians must be distinguished above all by the ‘art of prayer,’how can we not feel a renewed need to spend time in spiritual converse, in silent adoration, in heartfelt love before Christ present in the Most Holy Sacrament? How often, dear brother and sisters, have I experienced this, and drawn from it strength, consolation and support!

“This practice, repeatedly praised and recommended by the Magisterium,is supported by the example of many saints. Particularly outstanding in this regard was St. Alphonsus Liguori, who wrote: ‘Of all devotions, that of adoring Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament is the greatest after the sacraments, the one dearest to God and the one most helpful to us.’

“The Eucharist is a priceless treasure: by not only celebrating it but also by praying before it outside of Mass we are enabled to make contact with the very wellspring of grace. A Christian community desirous of contemplating the face of Christ . . . cannot fail also to develop this aspect of Eucharistic worship, which prolongs and increases the fruits of our communion in the body and blood of the Lord” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 25, original emphasis).

**Ponder:** What has been my experience of Eucharistic adoration outside of Mass? Does my time with Jesus in adoration deepen my experience of the Mass? Does it impel me to bring the love of Christ to the world?

**Day 22: Transformation in Christ**

**From the Document:** The person who shares worthily in the Eucharist is enabled more and more to live the new law of love given by Christ precisely because Christ communicates Himself in the sacrament of the altar. The foundation of our personal and moral transformation is the communion with Himself that Christ establishes in Baptism and deepens in the Eucharist.

In the celebration of the Mass, we are shown what love truly is, and we receive grace that enables us to imitate the love that Christ shows us. St. John Paul II noted that the moral life of the Christian flows from and is nourished by “that inexhaustible source of holiness and glorification of God” that is found in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist: “by sharing in the sacrifice of the Cross, the Christian partakes of Christ’s self-giving love and is equipped and committed to live this same charity in all his thoughts and deeds.”

The personal and moral transformation that is sustained by the Eucharist reaches out to every sphere of human life. The love of Christ can permeate all of our relationships: with our families, our friends, and our neighbors.

It can also reshape the life of our society as a whole. Our relationship with Christ is not restricted to the private sphere; it is not for ourselves alone. The very solidarity or communion in Christ’s self-giving love that makes the Church and makes us members of the Church orders us beyond the visible community of faith to all human beings whom we are to love with that very same love that forms our communion with the Lord. Otherwise, if we do not love all human beings in this way, our communion with the Lord is impaired or even contradicted.

This love extends particularly and “preferentially” to the poor and the most vulnerable. We all need to be consistent in bringing the love of Christ not only to our personal lives, but also to every dimension of our public lives.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 34-35. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** The Catholic Church is fond of the word “transformation” when speaking of our lives as Christians in the world. The term speaks to the fact that the grace we receive in the Eucharist is meant to effect a gradual change within us. For this change to happen, we have to be open to the divine Physician doing “heart surgery” on us, changing our hearts of stone into hearts alive with the love of God. It can be a scary proposition, but who among us doesn’t need such a Physician? (cf. Mk. 2:17).

Our transformation is all about Christ living in us and through us, expressed in charitable words and deeds, and in a particular way by our preferential love toward the poor and downcast.

**Ponder:** Am I open to being transformed by the Eucharist? Why am I resistant? To whom can I reach out today, in word or action, with the love of Christ?

**Day 23: Renewing Society**

**From the Document:** It is the role of the laity in particular to transform social relations in accord with the love of Christ, which is carried out concretely in actions that work for the objective common good. Lay people, conscious of their call to holiness by virtue of their baptismal vocation, have to act as leaven in the dough to build up a temporal city in keeping with God’s project. Consistency between faith and life in the political, economic, and social realms requires formation of conscience, which translates into knowing the Church’s social doctrine.

Lay people who exercise some form of public authority have a special responsibility to form their consciences in accord with the Church’s faith and the moral law, and to serve the human family by upholding human life and dignity.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 36. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** One of the primary overarching themes of Vatican II (1962-65) and the Church in recent decades is that all Catholics are called to holiness and to bring the light of Christ to the world around us. As our reading says, lay people have a pivotal role when it comes to allowing the Gospel to penetrate secular society as well as family life.

However, this presupposes that we are open to having the teachings of Christ and His Church inform our consciences. In this regard, we might note that the Catechism teaches that the “assertion of a mistaken notion of autonomy of conscience . . . can be at the source of errors of judgment in moral conduct” (no. 1792).

One of the big problems today is that “conscience” is confused with our feelings and passions. Many people invoke the mantra “if it feels right, do it.” Of course, if that were really a moral imperative, then God’s law would be, “Thou shall do whatever feels good to thee.”

Rather, a well-formed conscience is about doing what God wants, not what I want. There are many voices—internal (e.g., our own preferences, memories, motivations, disordered desires) and external (e.g., family, friends, media, political affiliations)—competing for our attention. We need a certain interiority to be able to hear the Shepherd’s voice, to discern God’s law that is already on our hearts. Otherwise, we do whatever is expedient, agreeable, or enjoyable in the moment, and then we carelessly assume that we’re just following our conscience.

**Ponder:** What do I mean when I say “Amen” when receiving Holy Communion? Am I saying “yes” to having Jesus enter not only my body but every aspect of my life? Am I open to having His teachings inform my conscience and choices?

**Day 24: Eucharist Commits Us to the Poor**

**From the Document:** The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* reminds us that the “Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren” (no. 1397).

Preaching on Matthew 25, Saint John Chrysostom observed: “Do you wish to honor the body of Christ? Do not ignore Him when he is naked. Do not pay Him homage in the temple clad in silk only then to neglect Him outside where He suffers cold and nakedness. He who said: ‘This is my body’ is the same One who said: ‘You saw me hungry and you gave me no food.’”

Saint Teresa of Calcutta is an outstanding example in more recent times of someone who learned to recognize Christ in the poor. Her deep faith in the Eucharist and her reception of Holy Communion motivated her loving care of the poorest of the poor and commitment to the sanctity of all human life. In beholding the face of Christ in the Eucharist, she learned to recognize His face in the poor and suffering.

Mother Teresa is said to have asserted: “We must pray to Jesus to give us that tenderness of the Eucharist. Unless we believe and see Jesus in the appearance of bread on the altar, we will not be able to see Him in the distressing disguise of the poor.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 37. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** Pope St. John Paul II also perceives a strong connection between the Eucharist and our concern for the poor, as well as for peace and justice in the world:

“Many problems darken the horizon of our time. We need but think of the urgent need to work for peace, to base relationships between peoples on solid premises of justice and solidarity, and to defend human life from conception to its natural end. And what should we say of the thousand inconsistencies of a ‘globalized’ world where the weakest, the most powerless, and the poorest appear to have so little hope!

“It is in this world that Christian hope must shine forth! For this reason too, the Lord wished to remain with us in the Eucharist, making His presence in meal and sacrifice the promise of a humanity renewed by His love.

“Significantly, in their account of the Last Supper, the Synoptics recount the institution of the Eucharist, while the Gospel of John relates, as a way of bringing out its profound meaning, the account of the ‘washing of the feet,’ in which Jesus appears as the teacher of communion and of service (cf. Jn. 13:1-20). The Apostle Paul, for his part, says that it is ‘unworthy’ of a Christian community to partake of the Lord’s Supper amid division and indifference towards the poor (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-22, 27-34)” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 20).

**Ponder:** Do I see others as Christ “in disguise”? Have I ever considered why Christ washed the disciples’ feet at the Last Supper? In considering the words of Saints John Chrysostom, Teresa of Calcutta, and John Paul II, does anything particularly strike me and call me to a deeper conversion of heart?

**Day 25: Reverence for the Human Person**

**From the Document:** Pope Francis has warned us that in our “throwaway culture” we need to fight the tendency to view people as “disposable”: “Some parts of our human family, it appears, can be readily sacrificed for the sake of others considered worthy of a carefree existence. Ultimately, persons are no longer seen as a paramount value to be cared for and respected, especially when they are poor and disabled, ‘not yet useful’–like the unborn, or ‘no longer needed’–like the elderly.”

As Christians, we bear the responsibility to promote the life and dignity of the human person, and to love and to protect the most vulnerable in our midst: the unborn, migrants and refugees, victims of racial injustice, the sick and the elderly.

The Second Vatican Council stresses the importance of reverence toward the human person: “Everyone must consider his every neighbor without exception as another self, taking into account first of all his life and the means necessary to living it with dignity, so as not to imitate the rich man who had no concern for the poor man Lazarus.”

The Council goes on to say that “whatever is opposed to life itself, such as any type of murder, genocide, abortion, euthanasia or willful self-destruction; whatever violates the integrity of the human person, such as mutilation, torments inflicted on body or mind, attempts to coerce the will itself; whatever insults human dignity, such as subhuman living conditions, arbitrary imprisonment, deportation, slavery, prostitution, the selling of women and children; as well as disgraceful working conditions, where men are treated as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons; all these things and others of their like are infamies indeed. They poison human society, but they do more harm to those who practice them than those who suffer from the injury” (*Gaudium et Spes*, no. 27).

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 38-39. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** As we come to recognize and reverence Christ “in the breaking of the bread” (Lk. 24:35), so also we come to recognize and reverence Christ in the most vulnerable in our midst. Christ united Himself with every human person, thereby giving each one of us without exception inestimable value. In Christ we have a mission on earth and a destiny in heaven—the very opposite of being “disposable.”

The recognition of the God-given value of all human life has obvious ramifications for society and for each one of us as we strive to promote a “culture of life.” The loving care we show for our neighbor begins (but certainly doesn’t end) with protecting him or her from attacks on his or her very life.

**Ponder:** Is the dignity of every human life merely a private ethical or religious conviction? Am I indifferent to offenses against human life? How does the Eucharist lead me to recognize and reverence the value of human life?

**Day 26: New Heavens and New Earth**

**From the Document:** Just as we are impelled by the Eucharist to hear the cry of the poor, and respond in love, we are also called to hear the cry of the earth and, likewise, respond with loving care. Pope Francis, like Pope Benedict XVI before him, has eloquently drawn the connection between the celebration of the Eucharist and care for the environment. All creation gives glory to God and journeys toward divinization, toward union with the Creator.

We look forward to the day when all such evils will be eliminated, when the Kingdom of God is established in its fullness. Then, there will be a new heavenand a new earth, and the human community will dwell in a new Jerusalem, in which God Himself will dwell with His people (Rev. 21:1-3). No one will suffer from poverty or injustice or violence. We will be able to see each other as God sees us, without any of the distortions caused by sin or by structures of sin such as racism or the various manifestations of the throwaway culture. No one will be seen as “disposable.” We will be able to love each other in a way that reflects the way God loves us.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 40-41. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** The Church teaches that at the end of time, the Kingdom of God will come in its fullness. Not only will we have resurrected bodies, but even the material universe itself will be transformed. All things will be restored in Christ (cf. Eph. 1:10) and God will then be “all in all” (1 Cor. 15:28).

The Catechism, quoting Vatican II, teaches: “We know neither the moment of the consummation of the earth and of man, nor the way in which the universe will be transformed. The form of this world, distorted by sin, is passing away, and we are taught that God is preparing a new dwelling and a new earth in which righteousness dwells, in which happiness will fill and surpass all the desires of peace arising in the hearts of men” (no. 1048).

So there is a tension at work: We do our best to build the earthly city, yet we also long for the day when every tear will be wiped away (cf. Rev. 21:4), when we will see God face to face, no longer hidden behind the appearance of bread and wine.

**Ponder:** Do I take the wonders of creation for granted? How does the Eucharist impel me to be a better steward of creation, even as I await “a new heaven and a new earth”?

**Day 27: Kingdom Building**

**From the Document:** While it is all too obvious that in our current world the Kingdom has not been fully established, our communion with the Lord shows that the Kingdom of God is not simply something we await at the end of time. The Kingdom is already present, if not in its fullness: “The kingdom has come in the person of Christ and grows mysteriously in the hearts of those incorporated into Him,” until its fulfillment when He comes again in glory. The mystery of the Kingdom remains present in the Church because she is joined to Christ as the members of a Body are to their Head. In the communion which is the Church, “the Kingdom of heaven, the Reign of God, already exists and will be fulfilled at the end of time” (Catechism, no. 865).

God has not only called us out of sinful indifference to do whatever we can to contribute to the coming of the Kingdom; through Christ He has given us the grace we need to do this. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* explains:

“Men and women who are made ‘new’ by the love of God are able to change the rules and the quality of relationships, transforming even social structures. They are people capable of bringing peace where there is conflict, of building and nurturing fraternal relationships where there is hatred, of seeking justice where there prevails the exploitation of man by man. Only love is capable of radically transforming the relationships that men maintain among themselves.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 42-43. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** Modernist scholar Alfred Loisy famously observed a century ago that Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom, but all we got was the Church. Fr. Loisy was disappointed by this apparent turn of events, but the early Christians did not see it that way.

The early Christians knew that Christ would come again at the end of time, but they also understood that there is a “second coming” right now, whenever they celebrated the Mass. As Dr. Scott Hahn writes: “Where the king is present, there is the kingdom. And where the Eucharist is, there is the King.”

**Ponder:** What does it mean to me when Jesus says, “the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk. 1:15)? Is Jesus the sovereign Lord of my life? Strengthened by the Eucharist, how am I called to help “build the kingdom”?

**Day 28: Conversion**

**From the Document:** Christ began His public ministry by calling people to repentance and conversion: “Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mk. 1:15; cf. Mt. 4:17). It is thus fitting that, at the beginning of every Mass, we are invited to acknowledge our sins in order to prepare ourselves to celebrate the sacred mysteries. We confess that we have sinned, and we implore the Lord’s mercy. This is necessary since we are all sinners and sometimes fail to live up to our vocation as disciples of Jesus and to the promises of our Baptism.

We need continually to heed Christ’s call to conversion. We trust in His mercy, the mercy which we behold in His body broken for us and His blood poured out for us for the forgiveness of our sins. We are to approach the Lord with humble and contrite hearts and to say with sincerity: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 44. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** As Catholics, we believe that conversion is an ongoing, lifelong journey. In a previous installment, we used the word “transformation” to describe this process. Sure, there are significant moments or turning points along the way, but none of us have fully arrived at our goal just yet (cf. Phil 3:12-14).

The Penitential Act at the beginning of Mass reminds us of this fundamental truth and consequently our ever-present need for divine mercy. When we respond in humility to the invitation to call to mind our sinfulness with the words “Lord, have mercy,” we open ourselves to a new infusion of grace, culminating in the reception of Holy Communion.

**Ponder:** Do I make a conscious effort at the beginning of Mass to dispose myself to receive the Lord Jesus in Holy Communion? Read the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk. 18:9-14). Is my body language and disposition at Mass more like that of the Pharisee or the tax collector?

**Day 29: Mortal and Venial Sin**

**From the Document:** While all our failures to do what is right damage our communion with God and with each other, they fall into different categories, reflecting different degrees of severity. This brings us to the distinction between venial and mortal sins. Venial sins are those sins and everyday faults that, although they reflect a degree of selfishness, do not break the covenant with God. They do not deprive the sinner of friendship with God or of sanctifying grace. Venial sins are not to be taken lightly, but they do not destroy communion because they do not destroy the principle of divine life in us.

Indeed, reception of the Eucharist strengthens our charity and wipes away venial sins, while also helping us to avoid more serious sins. Pope Francis brought attention to this medicinal character of the Eucharist when he pointed out that it “is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.” He also warns us against the Pelagian error of forgetting our constant need for grace and thinking that living a holy life depends on our own force of will.

There are some sins, however, that do rupture the communion we share with God and the Church, and that cause grave offense to human dignity. These are referred to as grave, or mortal, sins (cf. 1 Jn. 5:16-17). One commits a mortal sin by freely, knowingly, and willingly choosing to do something that involves grave matter and that is opposed to charity, opposed to love of God and neighbor.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 45-46. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** In subsequent installments, we will take a closer look at “mortal sins”—how they rupture our relationship with God and our faith community, and what that means in terms of our reception of Holy Communion. Today, however, it is appropriate to pause and consider Pope Francis’ observation that the Eucharist “is not a prize for the perfect but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak.”

First, the Eucharist is not a “prize” or something we deserve based on our own merit. We acknowledge that truth right before Communion when we say, “Lord, I am not worthy to receive you . . .”

Second, the Eucharist has often been referred to in recent decades as the “source and summit” of the Christian life. One way that the Eucharist is a “source” is that it cleanses us of venial sins, helps us in our daily struggle to eliminate vice and cultivate virtue, and gives us the grace to renew our commitment to follow Jesus. It truly provides necessary medicine and nourishment in our faith journey.

Third, we really do want to be cleansed of our venial sins and avoid them in the future. Married people do not ask themselves “how much can I offend my spouse without making him or her divorce me?” Rather, we want to grow ever closer to our spouse and certainly not go down a path that causes harm to our relationship. Shouldn’t that also be our attitude toward our relationship with God?

**Ponder:** Do I desire greater intimacy with God? Am I open to the healing qualities of the Eucharist? Is there a particular sinful habit or tendency that I can consciously bring to Our Eucharistic Lord for mercy and healing this week?

**Day 30: Reconciliation before Communion**

**From the Document:** One is not to celebrate Mass or receive Holy Communion in the state of mortal sin without having sought the Sacrament of Reconciliation and received absolution. As the Church has consistently taught, a person who receives Holy Communion while in a state of mortal sin not only does not receive the grace that the sacrament conveys; he or she commits the sin of sacrilege by failing to show the reverence due to the sacred Body and Blood of Christ.

St. Paul warns us that “whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself” (1 Cor. 11:27-29).

To receive the Body and Blood of Christ while in a state of mortal sin represents a contradiction. The person who, by his or her own action, has broken communion with Christ and His Church but receives the Blessed Sacrament, acts incoherently, both claiming and rejecting communion at the same time. It is thus a counter-sign, a lie—it expresses a communion that in fact has been broken.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 47. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** Yesterday, we considered how the Eucharist is not some sort of prize for righteous behavior. Today, however, that teaching is balanced by the admonition from St. Paul that we nonetheless must be properly disposed to receive Communion. In particular, we should not receive the Sacrament in a state of mortal sin. A mortal sin is a serious sin done with full knowledge and consent.

The good news is that there is a readily available “fix” for that, as all our sins—mortal *and* venial—may be absolved through the Sacrament of Reconciliation (aka “Confession” or “Penance”).

Sin is never a private matter, since it always disrupts the order of creation and the whole community. Confession reconciles us with Christ and His Body, the Church, whom we have wounded by our sin. As the Catechism teaches, “reconciliation with the Church is inseparable from reconciliation with God” (no. 1445). Before approaching our Eucharistic Lord on the altar, we should go seek reconciliation with the Church (cf. Mt. 5:24).

Following today’s reflection question are links to a sampling of some online resources on Confession.

**Ponder:** When was the last time I went to Confession? What is my attitude toward this sacrament? Am I open to going to Confession during this Lenten season?

[Resources on Confession from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops](https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/penance)

[School of Faith Rosary Reflections on Reconciliation](https://www.schooloffaith.com/rosary-archive/reconciliation)

[Catholic Answers on Confessing Sins to a Priest](https://www.catholic.com/magazine/online-edition/god-chooses-to-uses-human-intermediaries)

[Fr. Mike Schmitz on Making a Good Confession](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCmumpsrwBE)

**Day 31: Ecclesial Communion**

**From the Document:** We also need to keep in mind that “the celebration of the Eucharist presupposes that communion already exists, a communion which it seeks to consolidate and bring to perfection.” The Eucharist is the sacrament of ecclesial communion, as it both signifies and effects most fully the communion with Christ that began in Baptism. This includes communion in its “visible dimension, which entails communion in the teaching of the Apostles, in the sacraments, and in the Church’s hierarchical order.” Likewise, the reception of Holy Communion entails one’s communion with the Church in this visible dimension. We repeat what the U.S. Bishops stated in 2006:

“If a Catholic in his or her personal or professional life were knowingly and obstinately to reject the defined doctrines of the Church, or knowingly and obstinately to repudiate her definitive teaching on moral issues, however, he or she would seriously diminish his or her communion with the Church. Reception of Holy Communion in such a situation would not accord with the nature of the Eucharistic celebration, so that he or she should refrain.”

Reception of Holy Communion in such a situation is also likely to cause scandal for others, weakening their resolve to be faithful to the demands of the Gospel.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 48. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** Let’s take a little deeper dive into this. The point is that the reception of the Eucharist cannot be the starting-point for “communion.” Rather, the reception of the Eucharist presupposes that communion already exists, even as we strive for deeper communion. That’s why those in RCIA are excused before the liturgy of the Eucharist for further formation until they are ready to enter into “full communion” at the Eucharistic banquet.

The Eucharist is an expression of our communion with the Church in both her visible *and* invisible dimensions. The visible dimension entails communion in the teaching of the Apostles, in the sacraments, and in the Church’s hierarchy. To put it simply (but accurately), we must be “Catholic” in our belief and worship in order to receive Communion.

The Eucharist is also an expression of our bond of communion in itsinvisible dimension, which is sanctifying grace, the life of charity in us. When we commit a mortal sin, we may still be “Catholic” visibly, but we have severed ourselves from the life of grace and thus need to be reconciled before going to Communion.

Pope St. John Paul II says that “it is an intrinsic requirement of the Eucharist that it should be celebrated in communion, and specifically maintaining the various bonds of that communion intact” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 35; cf. Catechism, no. 815).

**Ponder:** Do I identify myself as a Catholic? Am I “Catholic” in my beliefs and worship? Why is it important that only those in visible (and invisible) communion with the Church receive Holy Communion?

**Day 32: Eucharistic Congruence**

**From the Document:** One’s communion with Christ and His Church, therefore, involves both one’s “invisible communion” (being in the state of grace) and one’s “visible communion.” St. John Paul II explained:

“The judgment of one’s state of grace obviously belongs only to the person involved, since it is a question of examining one’s conscience. However, in cases of outward conduct which is seriously, clearly, and steadfastly contrary to the moral norm, the Church, in her pastoral concern for the good order of the community and out of respect for the sacrament, cannot fail to feel directly involved. The Code of Canon Law refers to this situation of a manifest lack of proper moral disposition when it states that those who ‘obstinately persist in manifest grave sin’ are not to be admitted to Eucharistic communion.”

It is the special responsibility of the diocesan bishop to work to remedy situations that involve public actions at variance with the visible communion of the Church and the moral law. Indeed, he must guard the integrity of the sacrament, the visible communion of the Church, and the salvation of souls.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 49. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** The question of whether one is in “invisible” communion (i.e., a “state of grace”) is between the person and God, and no one else really can or should make a judgment in that regard. However, when it comes to “visible” communion, the Church can and should make judgments regarding beliefs and actions that conflict with Church teaching. Obviously, this is a matter that must be addressed with tremendous pastoral sensitivity and love.

Nonetheless, if one persists—without any attempt or desire to change—in “manifest grave sin,” the bishop has the responsibility to step in for the good of the person and for the good of the Church. This is especially the case when the individual is a public figure whose “incongruent” actions (i.e., receiving Communion while persisting in, for example, abortion advocacy) will likely cause confusion, wonderment, and scandal.

The following is from a homily by St. John Chrysostom, a prominent 4th-century bishop and doctor of the Church:

“I speak not only to the communicant, but also I say to the priest who ministers the Sacrament: Distribute this gift with much care. There is no small punishment for you, if being conscious of any wickedness in any man, you allow him to partake of the banquet of the table: ‘Shall I not now require his blood at your hand?’ (2 Sam. 4:11). If some public figure, or some wealthy person who is unworthy, presents himself to receive Holy Communion, forbid him. . . .

“Consider if your task were to guard a clean spring of water for a flock, and you saw a sheep approach with mire on its mouth–you would not allow it to stoop down and pollute the stream. You are now entrusted with a spring, not of water, but of blood and of spirit. If you see someone having sin in his heart (which is far more grievous than earth and mire), coming to receive the Eucharist, are you not concerned? Do you try to prevent him? What excuse can you have, if you do not? . . .

“[If] a sinful person receives Communion, and you did not know his character, you are not to blame. . . . I say the things above concerning only those who sin openly. . . . I say these things, not to repel sinners or cut them off, but I say [them] in order that we may bring them to repentance, and bring them back, so that we may take care of them. For thus we shall both please God and lead many to receive worthily. And for our own diligence, and for our care for others, we will receive a great reward. May we attain that reward by the grace and love that God gives to man through Our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be glory, world without end. Amen.”

**Ponder:** Do I understand why under certain circumstances the Church discourages or even prohibits individuals from receiving Communion? How is the motive medicinal rather than punitive?

**Day 33: Should I Receive?**

**From the Document:** Before we receive Holy Communion, we should make a good examination of conscience to ensure that we are properly disposed to receive the Body and Blood of the Lord. If we find that we have broken communion with Christ and His Church, we are not properly disposed to receive the Eucharist.

However, we should not despair since the Lord in His mercy has given us a remedy. He loves us and deeply desires to forgive us and to restore our communion with Him. On the first Easter night, the Risen Jesus gave to the apostles and their successors the power to forgive sins and to reconcile sinners with the Church. He gave the Church the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation when He breathed on the apostles and said to them: “Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained”(Jn. 20:22-23).

Whenever we sin, we have this beautiful opportunity to be renewed and strengthened by God’s grace. If we have sinned gravely, the Sacrament provides us with the opportunity to recover the gift of sanctifying grace and to be restored to full communion with God and the Church. All the Sacrament requires of us as penitents is that we have contrition for our sins, resolve not to again, confess our sins, receive sacramental absolution, and do the assigned penance.

We encourage all Catholics to experience a renewed appreciation for this wonderful sacrament in which we receive the Lord’s pardon and peace. In the words of Pope Francis, we say to all Catholics in our country: “Don’t be afraid to go to the Sacrament of Confession, where you will meet Jesus who forgives you.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 50. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** We sometimes encounter public debate whether person X should be able to receive Communion. Often the discussion is colored by one’s politics or personal agenda rather than an authentic Catholic worldview.

But even more fundamentally, I must keep in my mind that for me, the worst sins are the ones *I* have committed, because only my sins are capable of separating me from God. My principal focus, therefore, should be on my own disposition, my own readiness, to receive the King of the Universe in Holy Communion.

Ultimately, I am responsible for maintaining visible (Catholic in my beliefs and practices) and invisible (life of grace) communion with the Church. And where else would I want to go, as through His Church Christ speaks the words of eternal life (cf. Jn. 6:68)?

**Ponder:** Do I examine myself to ensure that I am in a state of grace before receiving Communion? Is remaining in communion with the Church a priority in my life?

**Day 34: Food for the Journey**

**From the Document:** The lives of the saints and blesseds show us the importance of the Eucharist on our journey as disciples of Jesus. Many testify to the power of the Eucharist in their lives. We see the fruits of Holy Communion in their lives of faith, hope, and charity. It was their intimate union with Jesus in Holy Communion and frequently their prayer before the Blessed Sacrament that nourished and strengthened them in their journey to heaven. They teach us that “growth in Christian life needs the nourishment of Eucharistic Communion, the bread for our pilgrimage until the moment of death, when it will be given to us as viaticum” (Catechism, no. 1392).

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 51. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** As Americans, we are a very pragmatic, practical people. All the doctrine, learned theology, and liturgical pomp are great, yet they only take us so far. What most of us really need are convincing, concrete examples of how the Eucharist truly changes lives. We rightly look for role models to inspire us and encourage us in our own journey of faith.

That is where the saints come in. In the next couple of installments, we will hear about a few saints whose lives were dramatically transformed by the Eucharist. But those are just a very small sampling. We can pick a saint—any saint—and read about his or her life and soon discover the central role of the Eucharist in their transformation from sinner to saint. There are many great quotes on the Eucharist by contemporary saints like Pope John Paul II and Mother Teresa. Here is a quote from J.R.R. Tolkien, the Catholic author of *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*:

“Out of the darkness of my life, so much frustrated, I put before you the one great thing to love on earth: the Blessed Sacrament … There you will find romance, glory, honor, fidelity, and the true way of all your loves upon earth.”

**Ponder:** Who inspires me in my Catholic faith? What is/was that person’s relationship to the Eucharist? Do I desire to become a saint? Am I open to having the Eucharist transform me?

**Day 35: Example of the Saints**

**From the Document:** Blessed Carlo Acutis, a young Italian teenager, who died at the age of 15 and was beatified in 2020, used to say: “The Eucharist is my highway to heaven.” Blessed Carlo attained sanctity at such a young age because the Eucharist was at the center of his life. He attended Mass daily and prayed each day before the Blessed Sacrament in adoration. He discovered the joy of friendship with Jesus and brought that joy, the joy of the Gospel, to others. He was an apostle of the Eucharist through the internet. He said: “To always be united with Christ: This is my life’s program.”

Likewise, Saint José Sánchez del Río, a Mexican teenager who was martyred at the age of 14 and canonized in 2016, was so filled with love of Christ and his Church that he was willing to give up his life rather than renounce Christ and His Kingship. While imprisoned, Saint José Sánchez del Río was able to receive the Blessed Sacrament when it was smuggled into his cell along with a basket of food. Strengthened by this viaticum, he was able to endure torture and to remain faithful to Christ when his captors told him he must renounce his faith or be executed. He replied to his persecutors: “My faith is not for sale.”

We encourage all, especially our young people, to learn about the lives of these holy teenagers. In the midst of many distractions in our life, Blessed Carlo and Saint José Sánchez del Río teach us to focus on what is more important than anything else.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, nos. 52-53. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** Today’s installment highlights a couple teenagers who made the Eucharist the center of their lives, empowering them to be heroically courageous in their discipleship of Jesus.

While receiving the Eucharist on Sundays and Holy Days is surely a great practice, we are reminded that we are not just limited to Sundays. All parishes offer weekday Masses for the faithful. For many Catholics—young and old—the daily Eucharist is their supernatural “vitamin” that over time enables them to grow strong in their commitment to Christ.

St. Therese of Lisieux, the beloved “Little Flower,” once wrote that “the best means to reach perfection is through receiving Holy Communion frequently. Experience sufficiently proves it in those who practice it.”

Tolkien, in a letter to his son Michael, has some interesting thoughts on daily Communion:

“The only cure for sagging or fainting faith is Communion. Though always itself, perfect and complete and inviolate, the Blessed Sacrament does not operate completely and once for all in any of us. Like the ‘Act of Faith’ it must be continuous and grow by exercise. Seven times a week is more nourishing than seven times at intervals.”

**Ponder:** Saint José Sánchez del Río told his persecutors that his faith “is not for sale.” Is *my* faith for sale? Am I taking offers—perhaps from my peers, my politics, my work, or even my hobbies or other interests?

How often do I receive Jesus in Holy Communion? Am I open to receiving Him more frequently and devoutly in the coming month?

**Day 36: Mother Seton**

**From the Document:** There are many people who have been attracted to the Catholic Church and entered the Church because they came to believe in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Our first U.S. born saint, Elizabeth Ann Seton, is one of these converts. She was drawn to enter the Catholic Church after she witnessed the devotion of Catholics to the Blessed Sacrament. She wondered about that devotion. God’s grace led her to faith in the Real Presence. While still an Episcopalian, she found herself at worship in her church in New York looking out the open window and praying to Jesus in the tabernacle one block away in a Catholic church.

On the night after her entrance into the Catholic Church and her First Communion, Saint Elizabeth Ann wrote in her journal: “At last GOD IS MINE and I AM HIS.” For the rest of her life, her deep faith and pioneering service to the Church in our young nation was nourished by the Holy Eucharist.

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 54. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** Another great champion of the Eucharist here in the United States was Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen. He insisted that his daily hour of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament was essential for his ministry as a priest, noting that for him “the Holy Hour became like an oxygen tank to revive the breath of the Holy Spirit.” Archbishop Sheen frequently promoted quiet meditation before the Blessed Sacrament: “We become like that which we gaze upon. Looking into a sunset, the face takes on a golden glow. Looking at our Eucharistic Lord for an hour transforms the heart in a mysterious way.”

The Eucharist continues to draw people into the Church. For example, contemporary philosopher and author Peter Kreeft writes, “In my pilgrimage from Dutch Reformed Calvinism to Roman Catholicism, the one Catholic dogma that most drew me in was the Eucharist.” The [Coming Home Network](https://chnetwork.org/) has many powerful testimonies of men and women whose journey to the Catholic Church was fueled by their hunger for the Eucharist.

Jen Fulwiler, a noted convert from atheism, writes in her blog, “When I started living my life according to Catholic teaching the proof was, as they say, in the pudding. It worked. It worked better than I could have ever guessed it would. And since I’ve been able to receive what they say is really the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ, my soul, my entire life, has changed profoundly.”

**Ponder:** Am I open to having *my* life dramatically changed by the Eucharist?

**Day 37 Welcome Home!**

**From the Document:** In recent years, increasing numbers of Christians in our country have left their churches and become religiously unaffiliated. We invite Catholics who have left the Church or who no longer practice the faith to come home. We miss you and we love you. We pray that Jesus will draw you back to your Catholic family, His Mystical Body, through His Eucharistic Body.

We repeat words attributed to Saint Teresa of Calcutta: “Once you understand the Eucharist, you can never leave the Church. Not because the Church won’t let you, but because your heart won’t let you.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 55. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** A tragic phenomenon of our time has been the growth of the “Nones”—those no longer affiliated with any church. A good number of the “Nones” are Catholics who for whatever reason have walked away from the Catholic faith. That of course means that they have also walked away from the Eucharist, probably not even realizing what it is—or Who it is—they were walking away from.

This invitation to “come home” is at the heart of the new evangelization. It is beautiful that the U.S. bishops are extending this invitation, but it cannot stop there. This invitation must be echoed by the rest of us, with great hospitality and love. Evangelization is at the very core of the Church’s identity and mission.

One wonderful organization that exists to welcome people back to the Church is [Catholics Come Home](https://www.catholicscomehome.org/).If you or someone you love is considering a return home to the Catholic Church, that organization has many good resources to assist you.

**Ponder:** Have I considered that a friendly invitation to a “None” to come back to the practice of the faith is “evangelization”? Is there someone I might invite to attend the Holy Week liturgies with me?

**Day 38: Sent Forth**

**From the Document:** Pope Benedict XVI reminded us that the “love that we celebrate in the sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all.” We are not the only ones in need of the love that Christ has shown us. We are called to help the rest of the world experience it. “What the world needs is God’s love; it needs to encounter Christ and to believe in Him. The Eucharist is thus the source and summit not only of the Church’s life, but also of her mission.”

Jesus is sent by the Father for the salvation of the world. At the very end of the celebration of the Eucharist, we who have received the Body and Blood of Christ and have been incorporated more profoundly into His Mystical Body are likewise sent out to proclaim the Good News for the salvation of the world: “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 56. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** A little over a decade ago, Pope Benedict XVI authorized new forms of the dismissal rite of the Mass. Now the deacon’s choices include “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” and “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life.”

These phrases do a better job of capturing the mission of lay people to bring what they have received back out into our secular lives. They invite all of us to be intentional with our “Thanks be to God” about going forth as ambassadors of the Eucharist. The love that we receive through the Eucharist truly is the source of the Church’s life in the world.

**Ponder:** How do I “glorify the Lord by my life”? Do I consider myself “commissioned” at the end of Mass, or am I already thinking about the rest of my day? Have I ever thought of myself as an ambassador of the Eucharist? What does that mean to me?

**Day 39: Missionary Disciples**

**From the Document:** Pope Francis has insisted that evangelization—spreading the Good News of Jesus Christ—is a task that belongs to every member of the Church, not just a few specialists:

“All the baptized, whatever their position in the Church or their level of instruction in the faith, are agents of evangelization, and it would be insufficient to envision a plan of evangelization to be carried out by professionals while the rest of the faithful would simply be passive recipients. The new evangelization calls for personal involvement on the part of each of the baptized.”

He exhorts us all to become missionary disciples: “Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: We no longer say that we are ‘disciples’ and ‘missionaries,’ but rather that we are always ‘missionary disciples.’”

What is essential is not that one have advanced training, but rather that one discover through Christ the love that God has for us and that one desire to lead others to that same joyful discovery: “[A]nyone who has truly experienced God’s saving love does not need much time or lengthy training to go out and proclaim that love.” All that is needed is for one who has known that love—the love that is displayed most preeminently in the Eucharist—to tell other people about it.

“All of us are called to offer others an explicit witness to the saving love of the Lord, who despite our imperfections offers us His closeness, His word and His strength, and gives meaning to our lives. In your heart you know that it is not the same to live without Him; what you have come to realize, what has helped you to live and given you hope, is what you also need to communicate to others” (quotes from Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 120-21).

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 57. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** Pope Francis’ comments and the concept of the “new evangelization” in a real way are present in seminal form in the writings of Pope St. Paul VI. In particular, in the mid-1970s the Holy Father convened a synod on the topic of evangelization, after which he issued a document entitled *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (“Evangelization in the Modern World” or “EN”). In EN, Pope St. Paul VI wrote:

“The first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one’s neighbor with limitless zeal. . . . Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses.”

Nearly 50 years later, this observation still rings true. Today’s world is not looking so much for experts with fancy degrees as they are looking for witnesses—men and women whose lives have been changed through their encounter with Jesus, especially in the Eucharist.

This does not mean we do things perfectly—far from it! But it does mean that we live our “missionary discipleship” with authenticity and vulnerability, bearing witness to the love of God in our hearts.

**Ponder:** Do I have any fears or reservations about being a “missionary disciple”? What does being a missionary disciple “look like” in today’s world? Who have been the witnesses and teachers who have drawn me to Jesus? Why was I willing to listen to them?

**Day 40: Eucharistic Renewal**

**From the Document:** We have offered these reflections on the Eucharistic faith and practice of the Church as a starting point. There is much more that could be said, but what is most important is that we enter more deeply by faith and love into this great Mystery of Mysteries. Let us all ask the Lord to call us into a time of Eucharistic renewal—a time of prayer and reflection, of acts of charity and sincere repentance.

The Lord is with us in the Eucharistic Mystery celebrated in our parishes and missions, in our beautiful cathedrals, and in our poorest chapels. He is present and He draws near to us, so that we can draw nearer to Him. The Lord is generous to us with His grace; and so we, by His grace, should always humbly ask Him to give us what we need.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” the Risen Christ says to us, “the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give a gift from the spring of life-giving water” (Rev. 21:6). Brothers and sisters, let us thirst for the Lord who first suffered thirst for us (cf. Jn. 19:28). Let us adore Jesus who ever remains with us, on all the altars of the world, and lead others to share in our joy!

--United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Life of the Church*, no. 58. For the complete text and access to a free, two-hour course, click [here](https://www.usccb.org/resources/mystery-eucharist-life-church).

**Reflect:** The document we have now completed is part of the U.S. bishops’ three-year plan for Eucharistic revival or renewal, culminating in a national Eucharistic Congress in Indianapolis in 2024.

After the priest says the words of institution (“This is my Body” and “This is my Blood”), he recites or chants the words, “The Mystery of Faith.” In response, we acclaim, “We proclaim your Death, O Lord, and profess your Resurrection until you come again.”

This sacred moment in the liturgy not only points us to the mystery of Christ and His saving Passion, death, and Resurrection, but also the mystery of the Church, where these saving events are made present and unite us with all believers through space and time.

This realization rightly leads to what St. John Paul II called “Eucharistic amazement.” The Church draws her life and nourishment from the Eucharist wherever it is celebrated, uniting heaven and earth, to the glory and praise of the Father.

During this time of “Eucharistic renewal,” may the Holy Spirit rekindle in our hearts a profound appreciation for the Church’s most precious possession: Our Lord Himself, who comes to us in the Eucharist. May this mystery fill us with us with the love of God flowing forth in our love for one another.

**Ponder:** What do I think a “Eucharistic renewal” looks like—in my life, in my family, in my parish, and in the Church? What might the fruits of such a renewal be?

What have I learned from this 40-for-40? What practical steps can I take to foster Eucharistic renewal in my life and in my parish?