



Pastoral Letter of the Bishops of Scotland

On the Holy Eucharist

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a communion with the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? As there is one bread, so we, though many, are one body for we all share in the one bread.”

St Paul is speaking here of the celebration of the Lord’s Supper, the Eucharist, and of the unity it both symbolises and brings about. His words are timely in the wake of the pandemic - a pandemic which affected all of us and some cruelly so, which even separated us from the celebration of the Mass and so from one another. We need to come together again and recover our “communion in the body of Christ”.

On the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ (Corpus Christi), the Bishops of Scotland want to proclaim the truth, goodness and beauty of the Eucharist and encourage all the faithful to centre their lives once again on its celebration at Mass. At the unforgettable liturgy in Bellahouston Park on 1 June 1982, Pope St John Paul II gave this simple advice: “Be faithful to your daily prayers, to the Holy Mass and the Sacrament of Penance, meeting regularly with Jesus as a loving and merciful Saviour.” 40 years on, the Bishops of Scotland want to re-echo that appeal. The Eucharist is a mystery to be believed, to be celebrated and to be lived.

A mystery to be believed

Anticipated in the Old Testament and several Gospel episodes, the Eucharist was instituted by the Lord at the Last Supper and given to the apostles to celebrate in his memory. It is many things. It is thanksgiving and praise to the Father. It is the memorial of Christ’s Passover, the making present and the sacramental offering of his unique sacrifice, enabling the Church to be united to his saving self-gift through the centuries. It is the presence of Christ by the power of his word and of his Holy Spirit. It is the paschal banquet, in which we eat his flesh and drink his blood, become his body and heirs of the resurrection.

The Eucharist is the summit and source, the heart and centre of our Christian life. Somewhat as the rhythmic beating of our hearts draws in our lifeblood to send it out purified and re-oxygenated, so a pattern of eucharistic worship draws our own lives into God’s heart and fills them with the Holy Spirit.

A mystery to be celebrated

We experience this especially at Sunday Mass. St Ignatius of Antioch, the early Christian martyr, understood Christianity as “living according to the Lord’s Day”.⁴ He meant that Christians draw their strength from encountering the risen Christ in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist.

Let us recall here what it is we enter into at Mass. We come to church, each with our differences. We come of our own free will, but also, beyond that, moved by the Holy Spirit. In the opening moments of the Mass, the Spirit rekindles our common faith, draws us together and brings us, forgiven sinners, before the Lord. We are no longer just our separate selves. We are now a worshipping community, the Church gathered in this place and turning to its Lord. When the Mass is full of music and song, we feel this all the more.

In the Liturgy of the Word, the God’s living word addresses us. It is proclaimed in the Scriptures and linked to our lives by the homily. In the Profession of Faith and Prayers of the Faithful, we respond in faith and prayer.

In the Liturgy of the Eucharist, we are drawn further still into the reality of Christ. In the bread and wine presented to the Lord at the Offertory, we bring to the Father the gifts of nature, our human work and the joys and hardships of our lives. In the Eucharistic Prayer, this bread and wine are transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit into the Body of Christ given for us and his Blood poured out for us. As the self-offering of Christ is commemorated and made present among us, the whole Church and each and all of us offer our Amen and become a sacrifice pleasing to God. Through him, with him and in him, we give thanks to the Father in union with the angels and the saints, while our prayer reaches out to the living and the dead, the Church and the world.

In the Rite of Communion, we pray for forgiveness and peace and find ourselves at the Table of the Lord, called to his Supper. The risen Lord himself, the true Passover Lamb, comes to feed us with himself. Even if we cannot receive him sacramentally, we are never deprived of his blessing.

Finally in the blessing and dismissal we are sent out to live what we have shared.

A mystery to be lived

The Eucharist does not end with the Mass. It is prolonged, for example, in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, something to be greatly encouraged. It is destined, too, to extend still further into the whole of our life as members of the Church. Through the Eucharist we become what we receive, namely the Body of Christ. There is no corner of our humanity and our Christian life which the Eucharist cannot enter, purify and raise to a new level. Any commitment to prayer, to community life, to our own family and friends or to our work can be inspired and nourished by it. Any form of caring, the task of teaching and educating, any form of social service or pastoral care can become part of “living by the Lord’s Day” and be an overflow of Christ’s self-gift. Any passion for the unity of Christians or for deeper relationships with those of other faiths, for social justice or outreach to the poor and marginalised, can be fuelled by the power of the Eucharist. It “is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation.”

Thanks to the Eucharist, these various efforts become more than personal causes; they are taken up into the charity of Christ; they become part of the life of the Church, Christ’s Body and Bride, in the world. Christ’s presence is extended into the whole of life. The synodal process to which Pope Francis is urging us can also find its pattern in active participation in the Liturgy. Even the bother and tedium of daily life take on deeper meaning in the sacrifice of Christ. And there is no suffering which his Heart has not embraced. Thanks to the joy of the Eucharist, the “medicine of immortality”, even death loses its power, as we experience at a Funeral Mass.

This is why we, as your Bishops, desire that Christ’s great Eucharistic gift be continually acknowledged in faith, celebrated in prayer and lived out in love. We encourage all, especially our families and young people, to live by the Lord’s Day. We ask your prayers for vocations to the priesthood. We pray that the Eucharist may amaze us more and more, “as we await the blessed hope and the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.”

Yours devotedly in Christ,

+ Hugh Gilbert, Bishop of Aberdeen, President of the Bishops’ Conference of Scotland
+ Leo Cushley, Archbishop of St Andrews and Edinburgh
+ William Nolan, Archbishop of Glasgow
+ Joseph Toal, Bishop of Motherwell
+ Stephen Robson, Bishop of Dunkeld
+ John Keenan, Bishop of Paisley
+ Brian McGee, Bishop of Argyll and the Isles
Rev. William McFadden, Diocesan Administrator, Diocese of Galloway