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PASTORAL LETTER

- Feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord –

AM I RESPONDING TO CHRIST WHO WANTS INTIMACY WITH ME?

Today, we celebrate the intimacy the Risen Jesus seeks with each of us. The question arises: 'Am I responding to the Risen Jesus who wants to be closer with me?'

Jesus taught the Christian to be someone who is 'in me and I in them'.^[1] His Last supper promise was to 'make a home' in them.^[2] St Paul taught that belief in Christ's presence within through Baptism was proof of Christian faith.^[3]

Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith, test yourselves. Do you not recognise that Jesus Christ is in you ...?

Why does Christ want intimacy with us?

The Risen Jesus wants intimacy because he loves us. We need to remember too some basic teachings.

First, he revealed through miracles that, through himself, people could experience the kingdom of God. Those who enter into personal relationships with him by repenting and believing the good news could experience, for example, healing where this is needed in their lives; freedom from crippling influences; sight for areas of blindness where we cannot see; personal renewal and evil influences. He revealed also that he forgives sins, replacing guilt with inner peace. In these ways, Jesus revealed himself as Redeemer or liberator from all in our lives that is not from God.

He revealed also that, for those who relate even more closely with him by taking up their daily life crosses to follow him, he would share with them the power of his Resurrection.^[4] It was his Resurrection which revealed his divine life.

Finally, Jesus taught that the purpose of his coming was to share this divine or 'eternal' life with those who believe in him.^[5]

I came that they may have life and have it to the full.

^[1] John 17:23; see also John 6:56; 14:20;15:4-7

^[2] John 14:23

^[3] 2 Corinthians 13:5

^[4] Mark 8:34

^[5] John 10:10

In sharing his life as the Son of God – the life he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit – the Risen Jesus shares with us also his divine love through the Holy Spirit. [6] This empowers believers to love in ways which would be beyond the power of human love alone. It is the love which empowers', for example, to turn the other cheek; to bless persecutors; to pray for those who hate us; and to forgive repeatedly and unconditionally.

To the extent that Christ's divine life grows in us, we experience him as Redeemer and Saviour. We become changed from within to think, perceive, hear, speak, and behave more like the Jesus of the gospels. We grow empowered to live increasingly as he taught.

The Eucharist

Jesus taught that the Eucharist is essential for nourishing the divine life – the life which changes us from within as it strengthens and empowers us to live the Christian life as he taught. [7] Jesus taught that, without the Eucharist, we suffer spiritual malnutrition, even bulimia.[8]

Sometimes people sincerely believe that 'I can be a good Christian without going to Mass'. They may in fact be able to live many of Jesus' teachings to the extent that human gifts make possible - but not to the degree he taught. They are not the people they have the potential to become with Christ.

The Church calls Catholics to celebrate the Eucharist on Sundays for this reason – to deepen in their personal relationships with Jesus as he taught so as to grow empowered by him to live as he taught in their married, family, school, work, sports and other life settings.

Seeking the Redeeming and Saving power of the Risen Jesus within

Christ came so that people of all nations could deepen in personal relationship with him and grow in his blessings. He wants all to seek healing, freedom, forgiveness and other experiences of his redeeming power for their daily lives; and to be empowered to live and love increasingly as he taught by drawing daily upon the power of his Resurrection as Saviour.

Before his Resurrection, people could approach Jesus personally with their needs, as we see in the gospels. So that people of all nations in future could do so, he instituted seven sacraments, the most important of which is the Eucharist.

A Thanksgiving Sacrifice

He gave us this Thanksgiving Sacrifice during the Last Supper, the night before he died on the cross, replacing the Passover thanksgiving sacrifice of the old covenant. Jesus then offered himself as a sacrifice to God the Father next the day on Calvary, body and blood, divine and human, for the redemption and salvation of the human race.

[6] Romans 5:5

[7] John 6:54

[8] John 6:53, 56-57

During the Last Supper, Jesus commanded the Apostles and those who succeed them to ‘take and eat, this is my body’, ‘take and drink, this is my blood’. As celebrants of Masses obey this command today, the Risen Jesus, with the Holy Spirit, changes the bread and wine into his Body and Blood.

He is fully present, body and blood, divine and human, as on Calvary. Though the appearances of bread and wine remain, what were bread and wine are bread and wine no longer; they are the Body and Blood of our Risen Lord.

A ‘memorial’: ‘a great work of God’ present.

Jesus commanded the Apostles to obey his command ‘in remembrance’ or ‘in memorial of me’.

^[9] From the time of the Jewish exodus from slavery in Egypt, ‘memorial’ in a liturgical context meant ‘making present’ a ‘great work’ of God. ^[10]

In the Eucharist, therefore, the Risen Christ is present as the one continuing to offer himself in sacrifice to God the Father for the redemption and salvation of humanity. It is not a new sacrifice but a making present of his ‘great work’ on Calvary.

He is present too as the Risen One who offers redemption and salvation to all who participate in their hearts and seek deeper relationships with him by offering too their daily lives with him to God the Father. ^[11]

The ‘Real Presence’

We refer to the presence of the redeeming and saving Risen Jesus under the appearances of bread and wine as the ‘Real Presence’. It is radically different from other ways Jesus promised to be present for he is present in a way that can be seen, touched, and consumed. To not receive him in Holy Communion has the same consequence spiritually as going without meals has upon the human body physically.

Responding to Christ who seeks intimacy

Intimate personal relationships require two parties. It is one thing for the Risen Jesus to want intimacy with us: whether we choose to respond to him and to receive his blessings is quite another matter.

Intimacy with him is not a matter of feeling close. During the Last Supper, he taught that the proof of a relationship with him is actually living his teachings, particularly his commandments ^[12] Being able to do so is the fruit of growth in the divine life in those who ‘eat my flesh and drink my blood’. ^[13]

^[9] 1 Corinthians 11:23-25; Luke 22:19

^[10] eg Exodus 13:3

^[11] Catechism of the Catholic Church 366, 613

^[12] John 14:15, 21, 24; 15:10, 14

^[13] John 6:54

There are many ways to grow in intimacy with Christ. On this Feast, I mention three.

(i) *Receiving the Risen Jesus in Holy Communion*

The most important response to the Risen Jesus' efforts to relate with us personally is to receive him in Holy Communion. As mentioned at the beginning of this Letter, Jesus taught that the Christian is 'in me and I in them'.

Receiving the Risen Jesus in Holy Communion is a sign of commitment made during the Eucharist to offer our lives with him as he offers himself to the Father. This includes efforts to live as he taught, ^[14] especially in daily works, prayers, family and married life, daily routines, mental and physical relaxation – and even the hardships of daily life if patiently borne – all of these become spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

We offer with him too where in our lives we need healing, strength against temptations, guidance, freedom, renewal, empowerment and other experiences of his redeeming and saving power.

The 'sacred silence' after Holy Communion is an important moment to thank the Risen Jesus for being present within us and to share with him our most intimate joys, sorrows and concerns.

(ii) *Visits to Christ really present in the Blessed Sacrament*

In early times, the Body of the Lord was reserved after Masses so that the sick, the dying and those in prison because of their faith could receive the nourishment of Holy Communion. However, believers realised fairly quickly that the Real Presence meant they could approach the Risen Jesus to talk about their lives and needs, just as did people in the gospels.

The practice developed, therefore, of going to Christ, as did people in the gospels, where his Real Presence is reserved. It is a practice that accepts deep personal intimacy with him and his redeeming and saving power in our lives. It always leaves us more peace filled within afterwards than before.

It is an opportunity to place before the Risen Jesus our personal issues and challenges; our worries and the pressures we feel. We can converse with him about family and marriage concerns; significant decisions and personal questions about life. We can share with him feelings of hurt and sadness; where we need consolation and peace in our lives. The list of possibilities is as varied as life itself.

These days, there are reasons why churches cannot always remain open. However, I ask Priests and Parish Pastoral Councils whether it is possible for their churches to be open at set times, such as for an hour before or after Mass or key shopping times.

[14] Vatican II: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church 34

(iii) *Daily conversations with Christ*

St Paul VI stressed the importance of 'conversation with Christ' for personal relationships with him.
[15]

In Christ's conversation ... Child and mystic, both are called to take part in this unfailing, trustful dialogue; and the mystic finds there the fullest scope for his spiritual powers.

We share with Christ the details of our lives, especially – again – where we need his redeeming and saving power.

Conclusion

Let us remember on this Feast of the Body and Blood of the Lord that the personal intimacy the Risen Jesus wishes with each of us can never be fulfilled completely in this life. Nor can the blessings he wishes for us, for these relate to our responses to him.

But let us pray for the faith to keep responding more deeply with him each day of our lives.

Bishop Gerard Holohan

6th June 2021

[15] Paul VI: Your Church 70