



Immaculate Conception Parish

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A Letter to Parishioners
April 5, 2020
Palm Sunday

Dear Parishioners,

As we continue our time, as a parish, and as a people, in a virtual lock-down, I think there are spiritual lessons to be learned and pondered upon, and answers to be gleaned from the current situation. One of these answers that I am going to commend to you in this column is "Spiritual Communion."

The Current Situation. Over the last few weeks, as you know, there have not been public Masses celebrated in the Diocese. This means that the mass intentions for a given day are still being celebrated by your parish priests, but they are being celebrated in private. This is certainly not the way any of us – not you, not me, not our Bishop – would want things to be, but it is the way things are. And, of course, there is a desire, by the faithful, for the Sacraments – especially the Eucharist. This will be especially painful for all of us during Holy Week and Easter. With that in mind, let me say this current situation and circumstance, which may cause many to be down, crestfallen or depressed, may actually present us with an opportunity for spiritual growth by re-engaging in a long-standing practice of our Catholic tradition called "Spiritual Communion." But more on that five paragraphs from now.

The Troubling. First, however, I want to address a troubling misunderstanding or misapplication of the faith in a few areas. There have been several, in my estimation, ludicrous and revival-tent-like, charlatan-style practices that have been seen in various places, and indeed even requested by some parishioners – these relate to the idea of so-called "drive thru" sacraments. I'm not going to lie, I'm appalled at the idea, and even more appalled at the disrespect and indignity it shows to the Lord and to the Sacraments in general.

Holy Communion is not Fast Food. For those who don't know what this scheme is, it is as follows: since there can't be public Masses or Sacraments, why can't the faithful drive up in a vehicle and have the priest, set up outside in a travel lane on parish property, give you communion (or confession, or hey why not confirmation, baptism or marriage) through your car window. That way people are still isolated (socially distant) but the Sacrament can be received. The problem with this gimmick – and it is a gimmick – is that it reduces the Sacraments, the Eucharist in particular, to being nothing more than a product. That is to say, you should not be receiving the Body and Blood of our Lord, or the gift of His forgiveness in the same way you get a Big Mac at McDonald's drive thru.

Turning a Sacrament into a Product. The Sacraments are not products. If they were, then why not put Holy Communion on Amazon or eBay and have the Sacred Host sent to your home like any other product. But we would never do that, because the Sacred Host is not a product, and the Sacraments are not products. They are sacred encounters, and they are to be celebrated with reverence — not with a drive-thru window. They are the Lord being made present to us. The very idea of distributing communion or hearing confession on the equivalent of a fast food line left me appalled. The Sacraments are Sacred Mysteries, and they are not a product to be ordered off a menu, or delivered like a fast food order. And in this regard...

Bishop Malooly Speaks. Our Bishop said it well, in a recent correspondence he wrote: “In light of certain practices that have popped up throughout the country and some questions that have been raised locally, I want to clarify that no sacraments should be celebrated or administered in a ‘drive thru’ manner. This includes, but is not limited to, the distribution of Holy Communion and the sacraments of Confession... we have to ensure that the dignity of the sacraments is not demeaned by novel practices....” Well said.

Spiritual Communion. So, what does this mean for the faithful Catholic? Does this mean the faithful person can’t get communion – ever again? Well, I’ll start with the simple answer: It doesn’t mean they cannot receive communion ever, but just not now. And it means that the answer to hunger for the sacraments isn’t an answer of gimmicks, drive thru lanes, and turning sacraments into products. The answer to the hunger for the Sacraments is to engage in the Catholic tradition of Spiritual Communion, used by the faithful and commended by the saints.

We are Blessed. Some background about our situation. Here in the northeastern corridor of the United States, we are blessed with many Churches, and over the years, many priests, to serve our parish sacramental needs. And, I think that we, the priests and the people, have become spoiled. Relative to much of the world, and indeed, much of our country, we have become used to having access to daily communion, daily mass and communion every Sunday. It is not that way everywhere, and not that way in most of the world, not just historically, but now.

Meanwhile in Nigeria. Fr. Etim was relating to me that in Nigeria, a main Parish would have many outlying mission churches. And that while people who happen to live near the main parish would have access to the Sacraments on a regular schedule, the people outside of the city would have Mass (and access to Holy Communion) at their Churches maybe once every three weeks, and confessions would be limited to a few times a year, and anointing of the sick on an exceptional basis. Likewise, a friend of mine who had family in eastern Oregon noted a similar situation: Mass and communion once a month, in that case. In much of the world, this is the norm.

No Communion? What do I do? So, what do those folks do when they don’t have access to Holy Communion? Well, in those circumstances, the faithful are commended to the practice of Spiritual Communion. What does that mean? I mean, aren’t all receptions of Communion “spiritual”? Yes, that’s true, but “Spiritual Communion” means something very specific, very profound and very powerful. And Spiritual Communion is what will get us through this crisis.

United in Communion. The reception of the Eucharist, that is the reception of Holy Communion, unites us in faith around the altar of the Lord, it connects as a family of faith — our hunger for the Lord is sated, and together we share that experience of being “in communion” with the

Lord and his Church. Likewise, Spiritual Communion also unites us, but in a different way. The faithful are united in their hunger for the Eucharist — for receiving Holy Communion. Thus, they are united in desiring union with Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist. It is a spiritual time to reflect on both the desire to receive and the deprivation of the Sacrament. And in doing this, consider your brother and sister in Christ, who shares, at this time, that same burden.

A good prayer to say, in this regard, was handed down to us by Alphonsus Liguori, a great saint of the 18th century. He commended the faithful who were unable to receive Holy Communion to pray this:

My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the most Blessed Sacrament. I love You above all things and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I cannot now receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there, and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.

That might be a good way to start the day, every day, during this present situation.

Hey, Abbot. A Benedictine Abbot, Jerome Kodell, gave a great explanation of the concept of Spiritual Communion in a 2008 article. Here's what he wrote:

What is spiritual communion? St. Thomas Aquinas described it as "an ardent desire to receive Jesus in the most holy sacrament and lovingly embrace him" at a time or in circumstances when we cannot receive him in sacramental Communion. The Catechism of the Council of Trent devoted a special section to spiritual communion in its program of renewal in the late 16th century. In the past, instruction manuals gave as the most familiar situation, the need of a mother to stay home from Sunday Mass to care for a sick child, thereby missing the opportunity for Communion. In such cases, the mother could make an act of spiritual communion, uniting herself with the Mass in her parish church and receive the spiritual benefit of Communion. The opportunities for receiving spiritual communion are limitless, but particular circumstances make it appealing in our time.

The Particular Circumstance. And we are in one of those particular circumstances right now! The state and the Church have called us to stay inside as much as we can; our Bishop has suspended celebration of public Masses, distribution of Communion, the ministration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) except in danger of death, no blessing of palms, no weddings, no baptisms, no funerals (except for burial rites), and none of those drive-thru items I noted above. Yes, we are in those "particular circumstances" right now!

Called to Spiritual Communion. And so, we are called to Spiritual Communion — to unite ourselves to Christ, to desire and hunger for the Eucharist, and to connect ourselves to our brothers and sisters in Christ. How do we process all of this? Well, that's another story — it involves prayer, reflection, spiritual discipline and continued faithfulness. In Mary Poppins, the lead character sings that "a spoon full of sugar helps the medicine go down." Perhaps our early forebears in Christianity and some of the many saints who have spoken or exemplified in their own lives, this devotion to Spiritual Communion can make "the medicine" (isolation from the Sacraments) go down a little easier.

The Early Christians and Us. I would say that a way of contextualizing the situation we are in is to go back to the early Christians, whose blood was shed to give life to the early Church.

Many of these folks found themselves in prison, unable to be with their fellow Christians, or engage in the worship of the Church (Mass). Their hearts desired what they themselves could not approach because of their situation. These faithful had no choice but make Spiritual Communion; a shared hunger for the Eucharist — Jesus Christ.

Aren't we, all of us, in sort of a prison right now. Locked-in, locked-down, locked-up, and locked-in-place. Like the early Christians we find ourselves unable to be with their fellow Catholic church-goers, or able to attend Mass. Like the early Christians, our hearts desire what we cannot approach because of our present situation.

The Saints and Us. Another way of understanding our situation and the promise extended to us by making Spiritual Communion comes to us by way of the saints:

- **St. Catherine of Siena** was visited in a vision by Our Lord who explained the idea of Spiritual Communion to her in this way: he showed her two chalices: one made of gold, the other of silver. He told her that her sacramental Communion were preserved in the gold chalice and that her spiritual communions were in the silver chalice.
- **St. Jane of the Cross** likewise had a vision of Christ who told her that each time she made spiritual communion, she received graces of the same kind as those received in sacramental Communion.
- **St. Pio of Pietrelcina (Padre Pio)** had the habit of making a spiritual communion many times a day, always desiring, in all that he said and did, to be united with Jesus.
- **St. Maximilian Kolbe**, the martyr of the Nazi persecution, continually made spiritual communion during his time held in the German death camp at Auschwitz. This strengthened him in his last days — and ultimately he gave up his life to save the life of a fellow prisoner in the concentration camp.
- **St. Jose Marie Escriva**, on the topic of Spiritual Communion said, “What a source of grace there is in spiritual communion! Practice it frequently and you will have greater presence of God and closer union with Him in all your actions.”

Making Spiritual Communion. This is somewhat subjective, and is not ritualized within our tradition, however, the writing of the saints, and indeed of Pope St. John Paul II, see four steps in making Spiritual Communion. These steps should be prepared for with some quiet reflection. The four steps are:

- Make an act of faith: That is, express your faith in God's love for you and of your faith in his presence in the Eucharist.
- Make an act of love: That is, express to God that you love him above all things.
- Make an act of desire: That is, express your great desire to receive the Lord, spiritually, and one day, once again, in the Eucharist.
- Invite our Lord Jesus Christ to come into your heart spiritually, with all of the graces he wishes to impart.

And, so, my dear Parishioners, while videos/streaming of Masses or online devotional activities or learning may help you focus on your faith, ultimately Spiritual Communion is the way that

you invite Christ into your heart and your life. Spiritual Communion is the way in which you seek to receive Christ spiritually and prayerfully, until you can once again receive him Sacramentally. I commend you to make daily, or more than daily, Spiritual Communion – stay close to your Lord, seek his love and grace, and he will be waiting for you.

I will continue to pray for all of you, as will Fr. Etim, Fr. Mano and Msgr. McGlynn – I pray you will do likewise for us.

Yours in Christ,
Fr. James Lentini
Pastor