

Corpus Christi
June 7, 2015
Homily for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass
of
St. Thomas More Catholic Parish
celebrated at
St. Joseph Catholic Church
Scranton, PA
Mark 14:12-16, 22-26

Around the time I was in seminary, a little former Episcopal church in lower Manhattan was closed, sold, and made into a dance club. As scandalous as that sounds, it was even more terrible because that little church was the first place in America that one could go to church for free. In a supreme irony the first place historically in which one could worship in America for free was turned into a place where people pay to honor the new American idols of sex, drugs, and rock 'n roll.

This incident revealed to me a practice that was not just present in Episcopal churches. The Catholic Church did it, too. As recently as the sixties some Catholic parishes charged their parishioners for the spot they used in the pews. Guests were charged, too. The uncle of one of my boyhood friends told me he was turned off by Catholicism when he had to give the usher a dime in order to go to Mass with one of his Catholic friends. His first experience of Catholicism was being asked for money so that he could sit down.

As strange as it sounds to us today, this practice of pew rentals is how the Church in America funded her operation for generations. People with seats in the front of the church paid the most, and the amount decreased as pews got farther from the altar. The cheapest seats were in the lofts, and churches drew maps to indicate which pew was whose, and thus came the origin of the American phenomenon of being told, "You're sitting in my pew."

It is altogether a good thing that this practice of pew rentals is extinct in America today. On the one hand, charging a price to go to church to receive the sacraments sounds like simony, the sin of buying and selling spiritual goods. On the other hand, the prices charged were in no way representative of what the goods were worth. Anything charged at all would be a pittance in comparison to a gift that is priceless. Charging money at all puts a price on graces of inestimable worth, and ultimately gives the impression that the sacraments aren't worth very much at all. Remember my friend's uncle; he paid to be at Mass what he would have paid for a little bottle of Coke at the corner store. Charging pew rentals is a sure way to extinguish the Faith in those whose faith is weak.

So what is this gift for which we no longer pay money to receive? It is Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ and the Feast Day we celebrate this morning. Instituted to increase devotion to the Sacrament of our Lord's Body and Blood, the feast points to several realities that we must honor if we desire the Faith within us and our neighbors to increase.

First, Holy Communion is precisely what Jesus Himself says it is, the Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. To receive Holy Communion is to receive Jesus and participate in the process of divinization, whereby we lowly human creatures are incorporated into the Godhead, the process that culminates in our glorification for all eternity before the Throne of Grace. God became man in order that man could become like God, and the principal means by which this is accomplished are the Sacraments of Baptism and Holy Communion.

Second, since Holy Communion is in fact the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ, the celebration of the Mass has a sanctifying presence wherever it is celebrated. The presence, the actual physical presence of God in the most Holy Sacrament of the Altar, means that the physical environs where it is celebrated increase in holiness. Remove the Mass and the environment descends into the most inhuman behavior. Witness the reversion to paganism as faith in the Eucharist is abandoned.

Third, the graces that we receive from God flow through the celebration of the Holy Eucharist. Jesus promised that He would be with us always, to the close of the age, and that promise is fulfilled in the physical presence of Jesus in tabernacles in Catholic churches throughout the world. St. Padre Pio said that the world could sooner exist without the sun than without the Mass; and we must confess this is true when we think for but a moment about all we receive from God because this sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving is offered to God from East to West by people from every race and nation at every hour of every day. I have attributed the many blessings our parish has received these past eight years to the daily celebration of the Mass. Indeed it is indisputable that as I began to celebrate daily Mass—and had substitutes come when I couldn't—that our ministry has grown exponentially. This is a figure for the growth of the Church world-wide. To the degree we are devoted to the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we will see a concurrent increase in the life of the Church.

Fourth, the Mass is a prefigurement of heaven, a glimpse of the glory yet to be revealed. In that we are in God's presence and that in Holy Communion we become one with God, we see that this great sacrament is a pledge of God's will for us for all eternity. God desires us to dwell with Him forever, so He instituted the Sacrament of Holy Communion in order to dwell with us now, pointing all the while to our ultimate destiny. To miss Mass is to miss the weekly, even daily, reminder of what God wills for His human creation, indeed the reminder of what He wants for those not yet Catholic. Thus, our heavenly destiny points to what we should be doing while we yet walk this earth—inviting others to get to heaven by first going to Mass.

All these benefits are free. For all that God offers us in Holy Communion we must pay nothing. Yet paradoxically it is also true that we must pay the bills that make it possible to offer the Mass. While there is no longer such a thing as pew rentals, the obligation to pay to get in the door, we still must ask the faithful to give voluntarily to advance the mission of Holy Mother Church. Had you not given, we would have no church, no pastor, no parish. And if you don't give, we will not keep these gifts.

It is helpful, then, to remember that the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is not exclusively Christ's sacrifice of Himself to the Father. In the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass we unite ourselves to Christ's own sacrifice, so that our receipt of the Lord's Body and Blood is an act of self-oblation. We do not only receive the graces God intends to give, but we also become the instruments of grace to a fallen world in need of God's love. Our love is united to Christ's love and then magnified.

Corpus Christi, then, is a perfect day for Stewardship Sunday. As we are reminded in the Sacrament of Holy Communion that Jesus gave us everything, we see, then, our only fitting response is to give Him everything back. The Church does not extract money from you any more by making you pay. Her method today is much more effective and fruitful. In letting us come to Mass for free, the Church lets us contemplate and answer this question for ourselves: How faithful to Jesus the Gift am I if I don't give as He gave?