

# LET THE EUCHARIST CHANGE US

## – STATEMENT BY THE BISHOP –

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ

In April last year, Pope John Paul II launched a world-wide renewal of Catholic belief and practices in the Eucharist. He published an Encyclical letter to all Catholics, ‘The Eucharist in the Life of the Church’. The climax of this renewal will be a Synod of Bishops from every part of the world on the Eucharist, to be held in Rome next year.

More recently, Pope John Paul authorised the publication of a special Instruction (or practical teaching document) entitled *The Sacrament of Redemption* (or ‘Redemptionis Sacramentum’). This deals with abuses and practices that have crept into celebrations of the Mass over time. The problem is that these have, at least partially, obscured the meaning Christ intended when he instituted the Eucharist.

Fortunately, none of the abuses identified can be found in our Diocese. However, there are a few practices that will need to change. Some relate to Priests, others to other Eucharistic ministers and others again to schools. This statement, concerns *only those practices that relate to the congregation*.

### ***1. The meaning of the Eucharist intended by Jesus***

Our Lord, Jesus Christ, gave us the Eucharist during the Last Supper, the night before he offered his life on the cross to God the Father. We recall this as the Priest proclaims during the Eucharistic Prayer:

*While they were at supper, he took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread, and gave it to his disciples, saying: ‘Take this, all of you, and eat it: this is my body which will be given up for you’.*

*In the same way, he took the cup, filled with wine. He gave you thanks, and giving the cup to his disciples said: ‘Take this, all of you, and drink from it: this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven. Do this in memory of me’.*

During each Mass, as the Priest proclaims these words over the bread and wine, Jesus, with the Holy Spirit, changes these into his Body and Blood. What still appear to our eyes to be bread and wine, really are bread and wine no longer. They are the Body and the Blood of the Lord<sup>1</sup>.

*What is Jesus doing during the Mass?*

While all Catholics believe that Jesus is present under the appearances of bread and wine, not all realise what he is doing. During each Eucharist, Jesus is doing three things. These are essential elements of what we now call ‘the Paschal Mystery’.

First, Jesus is offering himself to God the Father in sacrifice, just as he did on Calvary.

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1353, 1377, 1413

Second, Jesus is calling all present to join him in this act of self-offering. He calls them to offer their own lives too to God the Father. The Eucharist, therefore, is not simply something that Jesus does through the Priest. It is something that we do together with Jesus. That is why the Second Vatican Council called people to a full, conscious and active participation in Jesus' offering.

Finally, Jesus is offering the power of his Resurrection to each person who is responding to this call. We draw upon this power to the extent that we have joined him by offering our lives, as he offers his, to God the Father.

This is the power that can change our lives gradually, but radically. Since the power of Christ's Resurrection conquered death, the greatest of all human limitations, no personal temptation, human weakness or failing, or any other sign of human sinfulness, is beyond its strength. To St Paul, the greatest thing about being a Christian is that we can '*know Christ and the power of his Resurrection*'<sup>2</sup>.

*How radical are the possibilities of this power for our lives?*

To the extent that someone draws on the power of Christ's Resurrection, gradually they find this power changing them. For example, they find themselves *rising daily* above selfishness, to love; resentments, to forgive; hurts, to be self-giving; and jealousies, to accept people.

They find themselves better able to *rise above* temptations against justice, chastity, compassion and truthfulness. They experience guidance in times of confusion, consolation in sickness, deeper joy in times of difficulty, and inner strength in the face of trials.

Just think what possibilities the power of Christ's Resurrection offers married and family life. Think of the struggles it can help us *rise above* in relation to our children, friends, work colleagues, and fellow parishioners, especially those we find it hard to love.

Finally, think of the inner peace the power of Christ's Resurrection offers those who draw upon it to *rise above* dominating emotions, bad habits and the attitudes that make it hard to follow formed conscience. These are a few examples of the radical possibilities the Eucharist offers our daily lives.

In the early centuries of the Church, helping believers to develop their personalities by drawing on the fruits of the Eucharist, along with those of Baptism and Confirmation, was a major priority for Bishops, Priests and all involved in catechesis<sup>3</sup>.

They took seriously the ideas that the Christian should be 'a new creation', living a 'new humanity', a 'new life'<sup>4</sup>

Helping believers to develop 'Christ-like' personalities needs to be a major priority also today. The failure over later centuries to relate the basic experiences Jesus offers through the Eucharist to people's lives is a major reason why so many people in more recent times have given up going to Mass.

My first question, therefore, to each of you is: '*Where in your daily life do you most need the power of the Resurrection today?*'

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<sup>2</sup> Philippians 3:10

<sup>3</sup> *General Directory for Catechesis* 33, 64; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1265, 1227

<sup>4</sup> Galatians 6:15; 2 Corinthians 5:17 and Romans 6:4

*What do we need to do during each Mass?*

Jesus is present during each Eucharist, offering himself in sacrifice to God the Father. To draw upon the power of his Resurrection, we need to join him by offering our own lives with his.

To the extent that each of us does this, Christ unites our offering — and our prayers — *to his*. During each Eucharist, worshippers need to offer God the Father<sup>5</sup>:

*... their works, prayers, apostolic undertakings, family and married lives, daily work (or routines), relaxation of mind and body... even the hardships of life if patiently born — all of these become spiritual sacrifice acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. In the celebration of the Eucharist, these may most fittingly be offered to the Father along with the Body of the Lord.*

For me, preparation for the Eucharist is among the most important parts of my day. What am I going to offer from my life to unite myself with Jesus' offering of himself? What of my work, my daily routines, my ministry, my projects? What of the temptations, challenges, pressures and anxieties that I face? And what am I going to offer from my relationships, including all to whom I am called to minister, especially the troubled, the sick, the suffering, those who have asked for my prayers.

These are the kinds of questions each of us needs to ask before a Mass. The answers will differ for young and old, married and single, sick and carers, employers and employees — and so on. These answers form the path that leads to the deep joy, consolation and hope that comes with the power of Christ's Resurrection.

My second question, therefore, to each of you is: *'What are you offering of your life with Jesus to God the Father in this Mass?'*

To fail to prepare for celebrations of the Eucharist in this way makes it very difficult for us to recognise the presence of Christ, and what he is doing. It makes it difficult also for us to join him by offering our lives to God the Father.

In some parishes and Mass centres across the Diocese, commentators or musicians invite people, before Mass begins, to calm themselves and focus upon the meaning of what is about to happen. This can only enhance people's capacity to truly enter into the Eucharist by uniting themselves to what Jesus is doing.

*Jesus makes our prayers his*

Catholics have always recognised the Mass as a supreme act of worship of God. It is the greatest and most powerful of prayers. This is because Catholics know the Mass is the prayer of Jesus, the Son of God. They know too that if they bring their prayers, their needs and the needs of others as part of their self-offering to God the Father, Jesus makes their prayers his own.

Again this requires preparation before the Eucharist. My third question to you each of you, therefore, is: *'What offerings, needs, petitions, thanks and praise, are you bringing to this Mass, so that Jesus will make them his?'*

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<sup>5</sup> *Vatican II: Constitution on the Church 34*

## ***2. One act of worship in two parts***

To appreciate why the document *The Sacrament of Redemption* seeks to stop some of the practices that have crept into celebrations of the Eucharist, we need to remember that every Eucharistic celebration comprises two parts. These are:

- the Liturgy of the Word
- the Liturgy of the Eucharistic Sacrifice.

Together, these make Christ present — his life, death and Resurrection. It is through:

- the Liturgy of the Word that we are called to live like Christ, and to convert from whatever in our lives is contrary to his teachings
- the Liturgy of the Eucharistic Sacrifice that we are called to die to what is not Christ-like in our thoughts, words and actions, so as to draw on the power of his Resurrection.

The sacrifice of the Mass concludes when the celebrant and con-celebrating Priests receive Holy Communion.

## ***3. Practices we need to change***

*The Sacrament of Redemption* calls for changes to a variety of practices that have crept into celebrations across the world of the two parts of the Eucharist. The following are relevant to our Diocese.

### *Liturgy of the Word*

- (i) Proclaiming the scriptures during Mass is a most sacred task. It should never be taken for granted. If the Scriptures are not proclaimed carefully and clearly, and people cannot hear or understand them; Christ's purpose is difficult to achieve.

It is crucial, therefore, that readers at Mass prepare carefully and never go to the lectern unprepared. Let them always proclaim the scriptures clearly so that everyone can hear.

- (ii) To achieve Christ's purpose, readings during this Liturgy should only be from the Word of God. This is not the place for non-scriptural poems or readings.
- (iii) The homily during the Liturgy of the Word should be given only by an Ordained Minister of the Word - the Celebrant, another Priest or a Deacon.
- (iv) The homily, drawing on the scripture readings, should relate the mysteries of the faith and the norms of the Christian life to the lives of the congregation. The homily during the Funeral Mass should relate the scripture readings to what is being experienced by the bereaved within the grieving of their hearts.

In funeral Masses, therefore, eulogies should never be given during the Liturgy of the Word, but either after the Post Communion Prayer or at the cemetery.

### *The Eucharistic Sacrifice*

- (v) The Eucharistic Prayer is the prayer of sacrifice. Christ himself prays this as it is proclaimed by the Priest<sup>6</sup>.

Being a prayer of the whole Church, no one has the right to change or modify a Eucharistic Prayer. This means that the congregation should not say any part of the Eucharistic Prayer, but only proclaim the Acclamation after the Consecration, and the final Amen.

### **4. Receiving Holy Communion**

Receiving Jesus in Holy Communion completes our participation in the Eucharist. The celebrant receives Holy Communion first to complete the sacrifice. After this, Communion is received by the Deacon, others on the sanctuary and the congregation.

Holy Communion always brings special blessings, whether we receive it during a Mass, or apart from Mass. It is important to recall these blessings.

Like the Mass, the spiritual blessings flowing from Holy Communion can also change aspects of the lives of those who receive it gradually, but radically. Again, this depends upon the extent to which they offer their lives to God the Father — even if outside the Eucharist.

Holy Communion deepens the intimacy of our personal relationship with Jesus<sup>7</sup>. Again, our personalities gradually change to the extent we allow his influence to deepen in our lives.

First, Jesus nourishes the spiritual within us<sup>8</sup>. This includes human qualities that are ours because we have been created in the image and likeness of God, such as love, goodness, mercy and justice. Then there are the spiritual gifts we received through Baptism and Confirmation, the Sacrament of Marriage, and the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

Second, Jesus forgives venial sins, heals the spiritual damage they cause, and strengthens us against temptations to sin again — especially to commit mortal sin<sup>9</sup>. Our personalities, especially our potential for goodness, are strengthened, and the chains of our human weaknesses weaken.

Third, Christ strengthens his love within us<sup>10</sup>. Our capacity to love God and neighbour grows stronger. Increasingly we can keep the Commandments as Jesus taught them, and overcome temptations to do wrong.

Fourth, as Jesus draws each of us closer to himself through Holy Communion, he draws us closer also at a deeper spiritual level to each other. This is the way he deepens the sense of Christian community among us.<sup>11</sup> This includes deepening the bond between spouses, families and friends.

This is the foundation that changes parishes into vibrant Christian communities. However, if parishioners fail to unite themselves to Christ, a parish's community will be superficial. It will lack a sense of Christian mission, an unfailing sign that a parish is also a Christian community.

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<sup>6</sup> *Catechism* 1548

<sup>7</sup> *Catechism* 1391

<sup>8</sup> *Catechism* 1392

<sup>9</sup> *Catechism* 1393-1395

<sup>10</sup> *Catechism* 13941

<sup>11</sup> *Catechism* 1396

Finally, as the influence of Christ grows in those drawn closer to him through Holy Communion, so do his basic attitudes. These include commitment to the poor and needy, and a deepening desire to Christian unity<sup>12</sup>.

My final questions to each of you, therefore, are: ‘*Which of the blessings of Holy Communion are you praying for most today?*’ and ‘*How focussed are you on the One you are receiving?*’

From these brief points, it is obvious that Holy Communion can affect those who receive it prayerfully, conscious of what Holy Communion means and what Christ seeks to do in those who receive it with meaning. With this in mind, we turn again to *The Sacrament of Redemption*.

### ***5. Practices we need to change***

- (i) The Communion Rite, which begins with the Lord’s Prayer, is meant to focus our attention on the union with Christ that brings about the blessings of Holy Communion.

The Sign of Peace, an optional element in the Communion Rite, should not hold up unduly the Eucharistic celebration. It should not change the focus from Christ, who unites us to each other as a human community. It should be made only to ‘those who are nearest’. Priests too should no longer offer the Sign of Peace to people outside the sanctuary, except in special situations such as to offer this Sign to grieving relatives at a funeral.

- (ii) When receiving Holy Communion, we need to acknowledge the One we are about to receive — Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is recommended, therefore, that all approaching to receive Holy Communion show some sign of reverence — such as a bow or a genuflection. Let receiving Holy Communion *never* become a matter of routine for us.
- (iii) Jesus gave his Body to the Apostles during the Last Supper — they *received* it. The Apostles did not give the Body of the Lord to themselves.

In the same way, Holy Communion should be given by the celebrant, another Priest or another minister of Holy Communion. No one should take Holy Communion for themselves.

- (iv) During the Last Supper, Jesus gave the cup to his disciples, telling them to ‘take and drink’. In the same way, those wishing to receive the Blood of the Lord should take the cup given to them, and drink from it.

Receiving the Blood of the Lord during Holy Communion is not strictly necessary, for the Risen Christ is fully present, Body and Blood, soul and divinity, in the consecrated Bread. And, indeed, sometimes it is not practical to offer Holy Communion during a Mass under the appearances of *both* bread and wine.

- (v) One practice that is no longer permitted is ‘intinction’, where people dip the Host into the cup of the Blood of the Lord. This practice has already been stopped in other dioceses. It was never introduced into this diocese, but crept in through people from elsewhere.

Widespread experience is that sometimes drops of the Blood of the Lord are splashed accidentally on people’s clothing, as well as on the floor. Also, often people dip their fingers into the precious blood, and this is a risk to hygiene.

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<sup>12</sup> *Catechism* 1397-1398

Intinction can be less hygienic than drinking from the cup. After drinking from the cup, the Chalice is wiped with a purificator, whereas whatever is left from the person's fingers remains after intinction.

From now on, those wishing to receive Holy Communion under the appearances of both bread and wine should only do so by receiving the Body of the Lord from the Priest, and drinking from the cup.

### *Conclusion*

People often do not like change. Change is always more difficult if we focus upon the practice being changed, rather than *the reason* for the change.

Let us all keep in mind the purpose of these changes to the celebration of the Eucharist. This is that our celebrations of the Mass achieve first and foremost the intentions of the Lord.

Let each of us renew our efforts to offer our daily lives fully with the Lord in each Eucharist. May we all experience the personal change that is possible for all who draw on the power of Christ's Resurrection for their daily lives.

Bishop Gerard J Holohan  
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