

Stay with us Lord

Homilies for the Year of the Eucharist

The 50th anniversary of the Diocese of Orlando will be celebrated
beginning on the First Sunday of Advent,
December 3, 2017,
through the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe,
November 25, 2018.

The theme of this Jubilee Year will be the Eucharist
with our Scripture focus taken from Luke 24:29, “Stay with us, Lord.”

Year of the Eucharist: Jubilee Year of the Diocese of Orlando

Homilies to promote understanding of the Eucharist

Advent Homilies on the Structure of the Mass

1. Gathering to greet the Lord.
2. Listening to the Word.
3. Obeying the Lord's command.
4. Receiving and learning to give.

Holy Thursday

1. Understanding what we remember.
2. Renewing our Eucharistic faith.

Corpus Christi

1. The real presence.
2. A substantial meal.

A catechesis on the Eucharist: John Chapter 6 in the year of Saint Mark

1. The feeding of the five thousand in John's version.
2. The essential food of the Christian community.
3. Food for the journey.
4. The family meal at the Lord's table.
5. Deciding for the Lord.

Christ the King - closing the year of the Eucharist

“Be watchful! Be alert!” (13:33)

On this first day of a new Church Year, Jesus tells us: “Be watchful! Be alert!” We are already watchful for Christmas, preparing to remember Christ’s first coming. But the Gospel is about the long term: are we even now watching for the second coming of Christ? Jesus says that it will be unexpected, like “the lord of the house” returning from a long journey, and warns “May he not come suddenly and find you sleeping”. So Advent each year is about the first coming of Christ in the stable and his second coming at the end of time. Be aware, though, that this is a special year. Throughout this liturgical year we will celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the creation of the Diocese of Orlando, and the Bishop has asked us to make it a “Year of the Eucharist”. That’s an encouragement this Advent to be especially watchful and alert to the way Jesus comes in a more hidden but no less miraculous fashion every time we celebrate Mass. Instead of taking the Mass for granted, let’s use this holy season to understand the wonderful gift of the Eucharist more deeply and through it learn to love the Lord even more. On each of these four Sundays of Advent I’m going to be preaching about a different part of the Mass, starting today with the Introductory Rites.

The Introductory Rites prepare us for what will follow, they set the tone, but they are very brief because the Church assumes that you have actually begun your preparation long before the music of the opening hymn starts - for example by using the opportunity to go to confession if you are aware of serious sin. As Mass approaches you might think about what you are going to wear. I know we are informal in Florida, but church is not a place for clothing which is scruffy or suggestive. You may have forgotten that there are still rules about fasting. We don’t eat or drink for an hour before communion as a sign of respect. The only exception is for people who are sick. In the old days people had to fast from midnight so we have it very easy - you’d practically have to be eating in the parking lot to break the rule - but please don’t arrive at the church door with a giant Starbucks’ latte in your hands. What I think is even more important is to have a sense of what happens when you walk through the church door. When you enter a synagogue you cover your head; entering a mosque you take off your shoes. The church is our holy place, the house of God. The ministers of hospitality will greet you at the door, but once you’ve passed the threshold our traditional sign of respect is to be silent, to use the time before Mass to begin a conversation with God and prepare our minds to receive his blessing. I know people find that very hard, but

with practice silence is enriching; and it's also a matter of courtesy to those around us who want to pray. For the same reasons, try to arrive in time for Mass. It's good for you; it's good for everyone else.

Once the Mass has begun the priest greets you "The Lord be with you" and you reply "And with your Spirit". Those words are meant to highlight that this greeting is not a "Good Morning" but is a kind of prayer that the Lord will uphold the spirit of your priest so that he will serve you well as he leads worship. Then, rather briefly, we acknowledge our sins. There's a note of realism in that about who we are but it's balanced by our reaching out for the mercy of God through Jesus Christ: "Lord, have mercy; Christ, have mercy; Lord, have mercy" - because we know that Jesus in his compassion wants to gather us in this place where we can find healing and strength. And our preparation ends, except in Advent and Lent, with the singing of the "Glory to God" which is an affirmation of our trust in God's goodness: "We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you, we give you thanks...you take away the sins of the world". God has called us into his house and we can stand here because Jesus has brought us forgiveness.

So we come on the Lord's day and enter into the Lord's house first with reverence; then with respect for those around us, the members of our community who are also children of God; then with humility that the Lord has called us to be here; and finally with joy and confidence, because God is good and we are here to receive his gifts. The first words of Jesus to us for this liturgical year are "Be watchful!" In this season of Advent we are to be awake and watchful for the coming of the child Jesus in the flesh and his coming as our judge at the end of time. But let us be watchful and alert at the beginning of every Mass, from the moment we enter the church. Let us make the Introductory Rites what they are meant to be: a time of serious preparation, a weekly Advent, because today in this Mass, in every Mass, the Lord will come.

“The beginning of the gospel” (1:1)

This Advent we have begun the fiftieth year of the Diocese of Orlando and we are celebrating it by keeping a “Year of the Eucharist”. In keeping with that aim, we want to reflect on the way Jesus comes to us not just at Christmas but Sunday by Sunday in the Mass. Last week I spoke about the first part, the Introductory Rites. This week we will look at the Liturgy of the Word, the second part of the Mass - and there, perhaps, we have a problem. When young people, and sometimes people who are not so young, say that the Mass is boring, they are usually thinking about this second part which is the longest section of the Mass. It’s called the Liturgy of the Word and that’s exactly what it is: words, words, and more words - and people are not so good at listening to words these days. Sixty years ago a family would sit around the radio to listen to the news, or a show, or even a baseball game. Now they want to see it all. And yet, when you think about it, video without words cannot keep you entertained for very long - you pretty soon grow out of watching cartoons. Communication with words, with language, is one of God’s great gifts: it brings people close like nothing else; human growth through education depends on words; and reading is still a joy, even if you now do it on some electronic device.

No wonder the Church gives such prominence to the word, and most especially the Scriptures. For us the Bible is the word of God, one of the principal ways in which God communicates with us and is present to us; and that means it’s worth listening to. Of course Protestants will say that Catholics don’t really know the Bible, but that’s not true historically and it should not be true in the present age. It was the Catholic Church which selected the books which we now call the Scriptures, choosing some and rejecting others to form what is called the Canon of Scripture, the accepted collection of books which are described as “inspired”, by which we mean the books through which God is felt to speak to us. It was the Catholic Church which preserved the Bible, praying with it, preaching about it, writing commentaries on it, and making it available through the hands of monks who painstakingly made copies. And then it was a tragedy that at the Reformation, fifteen hundred years into the two thousand year history of the Church, those who broke away from the Catholic Church began to treat the Bible as if it was something they had invented. It seemed like a divorce settlement - they got the Scriptures, we got the Mass. Of course the Mass contained the Liturgy of the Word so Catholics continued to hear the Bible, but because those readings were in Latin not so many people understood what they were hearing.

All that changed just over fifty years ago; in fact, just before the Orlando Diocese got going. Our generation has been privileged to have readings in English, and we have also been exposed to a much greater part of the Scriptures. In the old Latin Mass only 1% of the Old Testament and 16.5% of the New Testament was read at Mass. In the revision of the Second Vatican Council, 13.5% of the Old Testament and 71.5% of the New Testament are read. This was made possible by having three readings on Sundays instead of two, and by organizing them in a three-year Sunday cycle, and a two-year cycle on weekdays. We probably hear more of the Bible than in many Protestant churches where the pastor simply chooses the passages he likes. The Catholic Church makes sure we get the comforting words but it wants us to hear the challenging ones as well.

Typically we have a reading from the Old Testament, a reading from the New Testament letters, and then the Gospel; and it's the Gospel which is the most important - that's why we stand up for it. All the Scriptures are valuable, but the four Gospels contain the life and words of Jesus Christ. Today we heard the opening verse of Saint Mark: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Son of God". We believe Mark was the first person to use that word "gospel" and by it he didn't mean a book of stories, or a biography; he meant "good news" - and it's good news because Jesus is the Son of God, come into this world to heal and save us. What's more, if you take the trouble to spend time with the Scriptures and grow to love them, you will find there is good news everywhere. Even obscure passages of the Old Testament are good news because they are like sign posts, directing us to the fulfillment of all God's promises in Jesus. After the readings you have the homily, and hopefully that, too, will show you the face of Jesus Christ as it opens up the Gospel reading and applies it to our lives. On Sundays we recite the Creed, which is a kind of summary of the work of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit which we find spelt out fully in the Scriptures; and we say "I believe" rather than "we believe" to remind ourselves that all this great history is because God loves each one of us. Finally the Liturgy of the Word concludes with the petitions, as we ask God now to listen to us and to extend his blessings through us to the whole world.

Words, words, words. There's no doubt that the Liturgy of the Word is a challenge for people who have lost the habit of listening. That's why it's good to prepare yourself by looking at the readings in advance. In fact the bulletin always contains the Bible references for the readings of the following Sunday. In these words, week after week, Jesus wants to communicate to us. Let us be attentive to his voice, so that we can discover the word of life and the good news of salvation.

“To testify to the light” (1:7)

There is a dispute among sociologists about whether the Baby Boomers or the Millennials most deserve the title of the “Me Generation”. For earlier generations the world was felt to revolve around the family, or the Church, or the nation, but for many people in the last sixty years it seems that it’s “all about me” - and the selfie photo, posted on Facebook, is the emblem of that self-centeredness. I don’t think John the Baptist, the man “sent from God”, would have understood such people. In the Gospel, when they tried to put him at the center of attention, he protested loudly: “I am not the Christ”. He is only there to make straight the way of the Lord, to testify to the light of Jesus; and we need to borrow something of his attitude if we are going to understand the third part of the Mass.

In the Introductory Rites, it’s true, there is a bit about us because we acknowledge our sins; in the Liturgy of the Word we rightly try to apply the Scriptures to ourselves; but when we come to the third and central part of the Mass, the Eucharistic Prayer, it can no longer be “all about me”. It’s got to be “all about Jesus”. Of course we begin this section by bringing up our gifts, the bread and wine, and also the money which keeps the church going. We are in those gifts, they represent our lives, but we bring them to the altar not so that they can stay the same, but so that they can be transformed. In fact the two ideas which are at the forefront of this part of the Mass are related to what Jesus has done for us: firstly sacrifice and then transformation or consecration.

Once the gifts are ready I ask for your prayers and you reply: “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands for the praise and glory of his name, for our good and the good of all his holy Church”. Hopefully the whole Mass praises God and does us good, but here for the first time we say that it will be done through “the sacrifice” and the language of sacrifice is something we hear all through this part. Just think of the third Eucharistic Prayer which is the one most often used on Sundays. After the Preface, which provides a link to the particular season of the Church Year, and the Holy, Holy, Holy, the priest begins to pray alone but on your behalf, noting that God has brought us together “so that from the rising of the sun to its setting a pure sacrifice may be offered to your name”. Later he says “We offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice” and he asks God “Look, we pray, upon the oblation of your Church and recognize the sacrificial Victim by whose death you willed to reconcile us to yourself”. And the priest makes clear

that this sacrifice is not just for the benefit of Christians; he prays “May this Sacrifice of our reconciliation, we pray, O Lord, advance the peace and salvation of all the world”.

This sacrifice is the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross, a death he entered into willingly for us and which he foresaw so clearly that he provided a way in which we could remember it for all time. On “the day before he was to suffer”, “on the night he was betrayed”, Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his disciples. “Take this all of you...for this is my Body which will be given up for you”; and with the cup “Take this all of you...for this is the chalice of my Blood ...Do this in memory of me”. Jesus commanded us to reenact the last supper, to celebrate Mass, as his chosen way for us to remember his loving sacrifice of himself for us. When I hold up the host and the chalice you should see Jesus on the Cross, and in a sense we are holding them up to God the Father also, asking him to remember the offering of his Son on our behalf.

No wonder a bell is often rung at that point to draw your attention. But what you have to understand is that this is not just an empty memory, a history lesson, because as we proclaim the Death of the Lord we also profess his Resurrection. The bread and wine are transformed to become the living Body and Blood of Christ. The life of Christ is here in the Mass to consecrate us, too, to transform us into the living Body of Christ, God’s chosen ones. And so we pray: “Grant that we, who are nourished by the Body and Blood of your Son and filled with his Holy Spirit, may become one body, one spirit in Christ”; and we ask for God’s blessing on the Church, the world and even on the dead as we pray “Gather to yourself all your children scattered throughout the world”.

Jesus commanded his disciples “Do this in memory of me” and the people of God’s holy Catholic Church have been doing “this”, celebrating Mass Sunday by Sunday, ever since. God knows how many things you have to do each week; in fact you probably never get to the end of the “to do” list; but on Sunday do not forget to do what Jesus asked us to do. When we bring bread and wine for consecration, when we offer “this holy and living sacrifice”, we make present the whole mystery of faith - we release again the power of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We make it all about him, because “through him, and with him, and in him” we receive God’s gift of salvation and we discover how to give ourselves.

“Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord” (1: 38)

For three weeks of Advent we have looked at different sections of the Mass, trying to improve our understanding of what we say and do in the hour which should be the heart of our week. It’s an appropriate thing to do in this “Year of the Eucharist” through which we are celebrating the fifty year history of our Diocese. Now, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, on the Eve of Christmas, I want to speak about the last part of the Mass - or I should really say the last two parts, because there is the Communion Rite and then the Concluding Rites.

In the time of the Latin Mass most people did not go to communion regularly, in spite of the encouragement of the Council of Trent in 1551 and of Pope Saint Pius X in 1905. Many people probably felt unworthy, others were happy just to be in church and pray, and it may be true that the priests of the past considered it a nuisance to have people lining up for communion - after all, there were no lay Ministers of the Eucharist in those days. Obviously there are times when our awareness of sin will keep us from receiving, but that should not be normal. The Church describes regular communion as “the more perfect form of participation” in the Mass, and prefers that communion should be in both kinds when possible. Remember, though, that the Communion Rite begins immediately the Eucharistic Prayer has ended. As I said last week, that prayer is the celebration and commemoration of the Cross and Resurrection in such a profound way that they become present; and the power of that prayer means we can experience communion in a number of ways. First, the offering of the living sacrifice of Jesus Christ has brought us into communion with God the Father and so “we dare to say” the Lord’s own prayer, the Our Father. Second, the sacrifice of the Mass makes it possible for us to exchange the sign of peace. Often children think the sign of peace is a gesture to show that they will be nicer to their siblings and will try to respect their parents more, and then - as a consequence - God will forgive them. But that’s the wrong way around. Jesus gives us the peace of God’s forgiveness and the Mass makes it present, just as the priest declares: “The peace of the Lord be with you always”; and because of what Jesus has done for us, because he has made peace for us, we can give each other the sign of peace - we are sharing Christ’s peace. As the Missal explains: “All offer one another a sign that expresses peace, communion, and charity”. And finally, at peace with God our Father and with those around us, we are ready for communion in the deepest and holiest sense.

I wonder if you have noticed that there is a slight shift in the Mass at this point. Up to now all our prayers have been addressed to God the Father through Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Now for just a moment we speak directly to Jesus and ask Him to make us ready to receive his life within us. We say “Lamb of God, you take away the sins of the world, have mercy on us”; and “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed”. We cannot really prepare ourselves for communion; that happens through the mercy and word of Jesus. The Missal describes our coming to communion as a procession - an expression of our unity - and the repetition of the Communion Chant as we wait is another sign of “the spiritual union of the communicants”. And then, just before the moment of receiving, we should make some sign of reverence to the presence of Jesus, usually a bow of the head; and we reaffirm our recognition of the presence when we say “Amen” to the priest or minister. This is the Body of Christ.

Communion is the completion of the Mass in the sense that it is the high point of our personal communion with Jesus Christ and with all who share Christ’s Body and Blood with us. But it is not the end of the Mass. First, a prayer after communion reminds us that the Mass is an anticipation of heaven, and heaven is where our journey should end. For example, we have prayed to God several times in this Advent season “that, through our partaking in this mystery, you may teach us to judge wisely the things of earth and hold firm to the things of heaven”. But in the meantime we live here on earth and as Christians we have a responsibility to bring to earth the Kingdom of God. So after the blessing we are dismissed. We go in peace because we are strengthened by communion but we are also challenged to use the graces we have received on this first day of the week in the days which follow; we are given a mission. On Sundays we often hear the dismissals: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord” and “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life”. And our last words are always “Thanks be to God”.

In the Gospel today we contemplated Mary saying “Yes” to the plan of God. In each Mass we, too, are overshadowed by the power of the Most High and asked to become God’s partners in the work of salvation. We, too, are the servants of the Lord. May it be done to us according to his word.

“What I am doing, you do not understand now,
but you will understand later” (13: 7)

They say that hindsight is 20/20 - when we look back on something we can see its real meaning. We who have gathered tonight can laugh at Peter when we see him protesting to Jesus: “You will never wash my feet”. We know, as Peter did not, that for Jesus the washing of the feet was a last gesture of love for his disciples. We know, as Peter did not, that this is not just any supper but the Last Supper. We know, as this confident Peter did not, that before the dawn of the next day he would even deny knowing Jesus. And ultimately, of course, we know that in spite of everything the risen Jesus will reaffirm Peter as the head of the disciples, the head of the Church. No wonder Jesus said “What I am doing, you do not understand now, but you will understand later”. Peter’s understanding of who Jesus was and what he was doing came very gradually.

Here we are “later”, much later, with all the benefits of hindsight, but I wonder if we really understand what happened at the Last Supper. I wonder if we really understand what happens at every Mass. Bishop Noonan, I suspect, wanted to make this year a “Year of the Eucharist” for our Diocese precisely because we need to understand more.

Let’s start with the earliest account of the Last Supper from Saint Paul, the account we heard in the second reading: “that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, ‘This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’. In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying ‘This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’”. “Do this in remembrance of me” Jesus tells us - and how much we have to remember.

First of all we are remembering the events of that Last Supper which was the first Eucharist; and in a way, by celebrating on this Thursday evening, we are even reenacting what happened. We, too, will break bread and pour out wine. Here, too, the feet of twelve disciples will be washed. You could even say that in each one of us there is a reflection of those who sat at that table: something of the faithful disciple and something of the traitor. And yet on that night Jesus did not try to sort out the good from the bad. He simply demonstrated his love for all and gave his command “Love one another as I have loved you”.

However, when we celebrate Mass we are not just remembering the Thursday night of that first Holy Week. The Jesus of the next day, the Jesus of Good Friday, is also here. Jesus is present in his broken body and poured out blood: as Saint Paul says “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes”. We proclaim the death of the Lord - when the priest holds up the host and the chalice for all to see he is holding up Jesus on the Cross, and we rejoice in his free gift of salvation. Understand, then, that we remember the death of Jesus at Mass; but understand as well that we remember the resurrection. When we “eat this bread and drink the cup” we are not eating our Lord’s dead body. No, it is the Jesus of Easter Sunday that we receive, the risen Jesus, fully alive and giving his life to us.

Tonight we especially remember the Last Supper, and yet tonight as at every Mass we still remember the whole mystery of Jesus. And we do more than remember because Jesus promises that when we bless the bread and wine as he did, he is truly present. In the sacrament of the Eucharist he will be with us here in this church, and not only tonight but until the end of time.

Each year, in every parish of the Diocese, there are First Communion programs. When we instruct the children we want them to understand at least that one great truth: that when they receive the Eucharist they receive Jesus himself. But it takes a lifetime to understand the depth of this great mystery, the depth of the love of Jesus for you and me. Let’s take a lifetime to get to know him, until at his side we can look back with true 20/20 vision and understand all he has done for us. Tonight once again he gives us the living bread for our journey and once again, through him, and with him, and in him, we give thanks to the almighty and eternal God. Yes, tonight - even “on the night he was betrayed” - it is right “always and everywhere to give you thanks”.

“He loved them to the end” (13: 1)

This night is full of so many beautiful themes that you are running a risk in coming to Mass. This could be a very long homily. At the beginning of Mass we received the three oils which were blessed by the Bishop at the Chrism Mass yesterday, recalling how each of them brings special blessings to the Church. In the Gospel we have just heard how Jesus washed the feet of his twelve disciples at the last supper, and in a few moments we will do the same thing for twelve of our parishioners. We remember that Jesus instituted the priesthood at the last supper, which is why the priests of the diocese renewed their commitment to the priestly life yesterday. Later tonight we will watch and pray as Jesus prayed in Gethsemane before his arrest. And in the meantime we do what we do every day: we celebrate the mystery of the Lord’s Body and Blood – but on Holy Thursday as if we, too, were present in the upper room on the very night on which he was betrayed.

The sacramental oils, the foot-washing, the priesthood, Jesus in the garden, the Eucharist. What marvels the Church places before us tonight. In fact so overloaded is this celebration that we need to have a completely separate feast, Corpus Christi, just to think about the gift of the Eucharist in more detail. But all these marvels have one thing in common. They are all ways in which Jesus is present for us, ways in which Jesus becomes real to us, ways in which he stays with us. That is the nature of our Catholic faith. We believe with all Christians that Jesus lives in the pages of the Scriptures, but we also believe much more: we believe that Jesus is still alive in his holy people, the Church.

You who are here tonight know that the priests of our Diocese are fairly traditional, not much given to gimmicks. But tonight I don’t want just to preach to you. I want you to state your faith. In this fiftieth year of our Diocese, as we celebrate the “Year of the Eucharist”, it’s appropriate for us to make an affirmation of our Eucharistic faith. So I want you to respond to three questions, respond with a strong “I do”, like the response you will make when you renew your baptismal promises in three days’ time at Easter. So here goes....

Do you believe that the eternal Son of God became a human being and walked on this earth? (“I do”)

Do you believe that Jesus founded the Church so that his life would still be available to all people, in every age? (“I do”)

Do you believe that, on the night before he died, Jesus instituted the Eucharist so that he could be wholly and entirely present for us until the end of time? (“I do”)

This is our faith. This is the vision of Jesus as he sits at the table of the last supper. As we heard in the Gospel: “Jesus knew that the hour had come to pass from this world to the Father. He loved his own in the world and he loved them to the end”. He loved his disciples as he washed their feet. He loved them and the disciples to come as he gave his life on the Cross. He loves us still as he gives us his Body and Blood. He loves us to the end and for ever.

“This is my body” (14: 22)

Last Sunday, on the Feast of the Trinity, the Gospel ended with some of the most memorable words of Jesus: “Know that I am with you always, until the end of the world”. And that’s what we are also here to celebrate today. The same Jesus who ascended into heaven and now sits at the right hand of the Father is still with us; he is with us always. In fact Jesus is with us in many different ways: it is he who acts when a priest absolves from sin, or baptizes, or anoints; it is his voice we hear in the words of Scripture; and he is present here in you, the members of the Church who make up his Body. But today, on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ, we think about the supreme way in which Jesus becomes present among us. “This is my body”, he said to his disciples at the table of the last supper; “This is my blood” - and we know that when a priest repeats those words at the altar Jesus is present to us again in the fullest way. These days, when most of us go to communion frequently, there’s a risk of taking this amazing gift for granted. So sometimes it’s good to be reminded that this presence is not symbolic, we do not receive a piece of holy bread; we receive Jesus himself.

Such a reminder came in October 1995 when Pope Saint John Paul II was visiting Baltimore. At the end of the day the plan was for him to greet the seminarians on the steps of St. Mary’s seminary, but the Pope asked first to go inside to make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament, to pray in front of the tabernacle. The security personnel went ahead to sweep the building, using special dogs which were trained to locate living people in collapsed buildings following disasters. The dogs quickly moved through the empty halls, offices and classrooms; there was no trace of human presence; everyone was outside as they had been told to be. But then the dogs were sent into the chapel where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved – the place where the Pope intended to pray. Upon reaching the tabernacle the dogs sniffed and whined and pointed, refusing to leave. They were convinced that they had found someone there. And we Catholics know they were right. There in the tabernacle they had discovered a real Person, our living Lord.

When are we going to discover and take seriously that tremendous gift of the presence of Jesus, present not only at Mass but present to us always in the tabernacle? Let’s try to expand our understanding in this “Year of the Eucharist”. It’s true that the tabernacle has a practical purpose: it allows us to store the consecrated hosts which remain at the end of Mass, and means that we always have

hosts available to be taken to the sick and homebound. But the tabernacle in a Catholic church should also be a special focus for private prayer. At various times in the fifty-year history of our Diocese churches were built with the tabernacle almost hidden away, with the result that it was difficult for a visitor to find it. Ideally the tabernacle should be at the heart of the church, close to the altar, so that the presence of Christ reigns over the whole gathering space, making it the house of God. Realizing the truth of that, a number of our parishes have now moved their tabernacles into a more worthy place. I also want to mention that each week we have a special opportunity to pray in the presence of Jesus. Every (day of the week) the Blessed Sacrament is exposed for adoration from (time) until (time). During those hours there are always people there praying, and yet those adorers of the Sacrament make up a tiny percentage of the weekend congregation. Of course most people are at work and often children are in school. But now it's vacation time. Why not bring your children to church to pray, to be in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. We all need to discover the beauty of a deep conversation with Jesus, to spend some time with him.

You are invited, too, to join the Diocesan Corpus Christi procession tomorrow evening/tonight, starting after the evening Mass at about (time) at the Basilica Shrine of Mary, Queen of the Universe. It's a reminder to us that the presence of Jesus should not only be at the center of our churches but also at the center of our world. As the traffic roars past on I-4 and the shoppers make their last purchases at Orlando Premium Outlets, there will be Jesus and his people, asking for God the Father's blessing on them all.

This is what Pope Saint John Paul II had to say about the mystery of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament: "The Church and the world have great need of Eucharistic adoration. Jesus waits for us in the sacrament of love. Let us be generous with our time in going to meet Him in adoration and contemplation full of faith. May our adoration never cease".

“This is my body” (14: 22)

Apparently the level of our language is declining. A recent report gave the example of the famous debates between Abraham Lincoln and Senator Stephen Douglas in 1858; back then they used vocabulary and grammatical forms of about twelfth grade level. Now, a hundred and sixty years later, it seems that our representatives are only using seventh grade language - we've all been “dumbed down”. We use short sound bites instead of complex sentences; we use a limited range of words; and when people try to use more sophisticated words they often get the meaning wrong. Luckily for us Catholics, the Church takes us in the opposite direction, especially in the language used for the prayers of the Mass. In the new translation of the Missal introduced in 2011 the sentences are longer, closer to the structure of the original Latin, and we have even been introduced to some new words - words which we certainly don't use every day.

I know that many of you have noticed it when we recite the Creed. We used to say that Jesus is “one in Being with the Father”. Now we say he is “consubstantial with the Father”, a literal translation of the word in the Latin version. What does a complicated word like that mean? As your priest I feel I have a duty to explain, and especially today on the Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ - a feast which is associated with a similar complex word: Transubstantiation. Here are two special “Church words”, and each of them is connected to the idea of “substance” or “substantial”. What does the Church want us to understand?

These days if we say that someone is a substantial person we are usually saying in a polite way that they are overweight, or perhaps suggesting that they are wealthy. But in the language of classical philosophy, which became the language of the Church, “substance” refers to our deepest reality, the essence of who we are. In the course of our lifetime our body changes - we are a baby, a child, a mature adult, an old person; we may be healthy or sick - but through all those changes we remain the same person. As middle aged men discover, you can change your hairstyle, get a tan and buy a snazzy sports car, but you are still essentially the same. The things on the surface are what the philosophers would call “accidents”, and they change all the time; but at the substantial level we do not change. Like us, Jesus grew and changed, but he was and is “consubstantial with the Father”. That is a way of saying that he has the same substance as the Father; at the deepest level He is God.

When Jesus was in the manger he was God; when he was tired and weary he was God; even when he was on the Cross, he was God. Remember that. Believe it.

Today, though, on this Feast of Corpus Christi, we are concerned with another substance word: Transubstantiation. That's a strange word because, as I said, our substance, our reality, does not change. But words with "trans" in them are all about change: translate, transport, transform. Transubstantiation expresses the idea that in the Eucharist an extraordinary miracle happens. Although the appearance of bread and wine does not change, the substance, the reality, does. In a few minutes we will bring bread and wine to the altar. When we have consecrated them, that is when we have prayed the Lord's own words over them, they will still look like bread and wine; they will feel and smell and taste like bread and wine. But, the Church tells us, our senses are deceived. Although the surface appearance is the same, the substance has changed. As we heard in the Gospel, Jesus told his disciples "This is my Body"; "This is my Blood". That is the reality we receive in communion, not just human food but food for eternal life.

We believe Jesus is consubstantial with the Father - that is, he is much more than he appeared when he was on the earth. He was fully divine, the only Son of God. And today when we use the word transubstantiation to describe the miracle of the Mass, we are actually professing our belief in the simple words of Jesus at the last Supper. After the words of consecration, the bread and wine on the altar are much more than they appear. They are the Body and Blood, soul and divinity, of Jesus Christ, worthy not only of our respect but of our adoration. Indeed, in the past Christians have given their lives rather than see the sacrament desecrated.

Don't be frightened of these theological words. Each of them protects the great truth that God wants to come close to us. Both through the Incarnation and through the Mass God is among us. God does not change but in Jesus God makes himself available to us to change us and lift us up. That is the good news we proclaim in this "Year of the Eucharist". That truth, surely, is worth more than a sound bite.

“He himself knew what he was going to do” (6: 6)

The Gospel story of the miraculous feeding of the five thousand, which we’ve just heard, is recorded in every Gospel. In fact it’s the only miracle of Jesus, apart from the resurrection itself, which is found in each one of the Gospels. That means it must have been something which stuck in the memories not just of some but of all the first Christians, something that was very important to them. One reason for that is that the miracle of the feeding was an anticipation of the Eucharist, the great mystery which the first Christians, just like us, celebrated every week in obedience to the Lord’s command. When they remembered how Jesus took the loaves, blessed them and gave them out to the multitude, they would have realized how they, too, were witnesses to a miracle, the repetition of the miracle of the Last Supper when Jesus took bread, blessed it, broke it and gave it so that his people could always receive his Body.

So each Gospel writer made sure to include this miracle in their story of Jesus, but as they wrote it down inevitably some of the details varied. Today we have heard Saint John’s version because John, the last of the Gospel writers, follows the story of the feeding with an extended meditation on the deeper meaning of the bread which Jesus gives us. Over the next four weeks we will be hearing all of that reflection on the Bread of Life, the whole of John Chapter 6. But first let’s take note of some of the unique features in John’s account of the miracle.

One thing is that in John’s version it’s Jesus who raises the problem of the hungry crowd, not the disciples like in the other Gospels. Jesus looks at the “large crowd” and says to Philip “Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?” And John explains “He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do”. Jesus knew what he was going to do: he knew that it wasn’t a question of finding a baker’s shop; instead he himself had the solution - the power to perform a miracle. But there’s one thing that holds the miracle back. How much do you know about Mathematics? I can tell you it was never my strong area, but I know that if you multiply a number, even a big number, by zero, you get zero, you get nothing. Now we know that God created the universe from nothing, but Jesus, as the Son of God on earth, chooses to limit himself by this mathematical law. He needs something to start...and here it is: “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish”. It’s not much - in fact the disciple Andrew thinks it’s a waste of time to mention it - and John in a way makes it seem even less by adding the detail

that these were barley loaves. Barley was the food of the poor, a low quality grain that was more often used as animal feed. But that is the starting point that Jesus needs. He takes the loaves, gives thanks and distributes them, and they prove to be more than the multitude can eat. No one is left hungry.

Jesus does indeed know what he is going to do, and he is prepared to use the least and the poorest to do it. And that, of course, is Good News for us who have come to church today to offer ourselves to God. When the bread and wine is brought to the altar to be consecrated those gifts represent our lives, and in truth it is a poor offering for Almighty God. Not many of us are wise, not many of us are wealthy, not many of us are powerful or influential. Most of us, if we are honest, know that we are the barley people. You'd think that God could transform this world without us. He could; but he won't. Jesus wants our offering. He has faith in us. He knows that in spite of our poverty there is good in us, the spark of divine life; he knows that each one of us has something worthwhile to offer. Yes, he wants to take us, bless us and use us to transform the world. Never say that you have no talents, nothing to offer in ministry. The Lord who used a boy's lunchbox can use our poverty as well if we will only place it in his hands; he will gladly multiply our small gifts in his service.

Finally, before we come to the Eucharist, let us return to that question of Jesus which is the start of the miracle: "Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?" On that day no food was bought at any store but Jesus fed the multitude. And let us be aware that Jesus is still feeding the multitude, feeding every generation with the bread of life; and that bread was bought with a great price. "Where can we buy enough?" Jesus asked, and he answered that question himself on the Cross. No doubt that seemed a poor and ugly thing to many people. But by offering himself on the Cross Jesus has bought all the forgiveness, all the mercy, all the grace the world will ever need; and through the Eucharist He has made that mercy and grace available to us. There is enough for us and enough for every person until the end of time. Let us never undervalue this food, the bread of life bought at a great price, and given to you and me today.

“Whoever comes to me will never hunger” (6:35)

Last weekend we heard the story of the feeding of the five thousand and we heard it in the version of Saint John. The Church deliberately chooses that version every three years because in Saint John the miracle is followed by a long explanation from Jesus about what feeding his people means. We call it “the Bread of Life discourse”; it takes up the whole of Chapter 6 of Saint John; and we will actually be hearing most of it stretched out over the next four Sundays - all the Sundays of August. You can see that it’s the perfect opportunity for priests to do some catechesis on the Eucharist, and this year, of course, these Gospel readings coincide with the fiftieth anniversary of the Diocese of Orlando which Bishop Noonan has declared a “Year of the Eucharist”. It’s pure coincidence, but I think we should also recognize it as a grace of God.

As I said, we have four weeks so we don’t have to examine every aspect of the Eucharist today, and anyway it is a mystery whose meaning is infinite. For twenty centuries Christians have spoken and written about the Mass and there is still more to say, more to discover. Today let us concentrate on just one aspect, the fact that Jesus chooses to communicate with us, to stay with us and give his grace to us, through the medium of food. It didn’t have to be that way. In many religions worshippers gather to pray and listen to their scriptures, just as we do in the first part of the Mass. But Jesus communicated his compassion and power to the crowd when He fed the five thousand and he communicated his love to his disciples when he took bread and wine at the Last Supper; and on that second occasion he told them “Do this in memory of me”. The use of food is not accidental.

Today, through the words of the Gospel, Jesus explains to us why his food is so special and so central to the Christian life. He makes a contrast between our ordinary food and the food he gives: “Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you”. The food we eat every day never completely satisfies us. We baby boomers were usually told by our mothers “Eat more!”, as if somehow they expected us to fade away and disappear before their eyes. Now we know that eating more and more is a quick road to diabetes and heart disease; but even if we eat sparingly and sensibly, we are still going to die. That’s why we need the special food of Jesus which gradually builds eternal life in us. Jesus explains: “My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from

heaven and gives life to the world”. We know that this “bread from heaven”, this “bread of God”, is Jesus himself. He made that clear to his disciples at the Last Supper; he makes it clear to us in the words of every Mass. And it is this food which is Jesus which alone can satisfy us and nourish the life of Jesus in us until it becomes eternal life. That’s why the Catholic Church gives us the obligation to attend Sunday Mass. Yes, Sunday Mass is not a suggestion or a recommendation (or a requirement to get a discount at Catholic school). It’s an obligation because it’s a matter of life and death. Jesus chooses to communicate his life to us through the Eucharist, and this is where we can receive him.

Sunday Mass also brings us into contact with a community of believers. It’s true that you can receive Holy Communion on your own when you are sick, but that receiving in isolation is not the norm. Food, even the most holy food, is better in company, and there’s no company better than the People of God. There’s a great proverb in the Old Testament: “Better is a dish of vegetables where love is, than a fattened ox served with hatred” (Proverbs 15: 17); or, in a slightly more modern translation: “Better to have a dish of vegetables where there is love than juicy steaks where there is hate”. To eat alone, without love, makes the experience much poorer. No wonder the Israelites in the first reading looked back to the times when they sat by their “fleshpots” and shared food. You know the truth of this from your own families. Sometimes you may have to grab some fast food and eat alone. It’s just fuel to keep you going; you can hardly call it a meal, certainly not a “happy meal”. But it’s an entirely different experience when the whole family sits down and eats together; even though the food may be simple, the moment is rich - and it’s a fact that children of families who eat together do better in school than their peers, are healthier and are less likely to develop problems later in life.

At the end of today’s section of the discourse we heard how the people said to Jesus “Sir, give us this bread always”. Jesus did not ignore their request. He provided the Eucharist so that the bread of life is always available for us, and through it he brings us into communion with himself and with each other. Why on earth would you try to do without it?

“I am the bread of life” (6:48)

We are now in the third week of hearing Gospel readings from John Chapter 6, and we're in the second week of hearing sections of the “Bread of Life discourse”. Every three years the Church presents us with this part of the Gospel to help us reflect on the amazing gift of the Eucharist. Last week we thought about the fact that it is the essential food for nourishing the life of Christ in us. This week we begin to understand more as the first reading sheds light on the Gospel for us.

The first readings at Mass usually come from the Old Testament, written long before the time of Jesus, but the Church brings certain passages to our attention because they seem to foreshadow, to anticipate, what Jesus said and did. That's very clearly the case today. The prophet Elijah was near despair because no one would listen to him. Journeying through the desert he cried out: “This is enough, O Lord! Take my life!” and he threw himself down under a tree and fell asleep, completely exhausted. Twice he was woken by an angel who showed him bread and water and ordered him “Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you”. Obediently Elijah got up, and ate and drank; and the reading concludes “strengthened by that food, he walked forty days and forty nights to the mountain of God”.

“Strengthened by that food” the man without hope, the man who was finished, was able to journey on. And I'm sure you can make the connection. For us the Eucharist is the miraculous food provided by God to give us the strength to carry on. How often a priest sees the truth of that. I see women with scarves or hats at Mass, and know this is no fashion statement - they are undergoing the cruel regime of chemotherapy; I know they are often exhausted but they are here faithfully week after week. I see the husband here to pray for his sick wife or the mother who prays for her son. I see the mother and father whose baby died at birth; their spirits are broken, yet in the midst of their pain they know they want to have Mass offered and be able to receive communion. I see men suddenly appear at daily Mass, at a time when most people are at work, and know they are desperately praying for a job. Like Elijah, these people have understood that the journey will be too long for them without God's help; and they find that help in the Eucharist, “the living bread that came down from heaven”.

Give thanks to God if this moment is not a moment of crisis for you and your family, but do not make the mistake of thinking you can do without the Eucharist. We are all on a journey and we all need the bread of life to keep on walking. Saint Thomas Aquinas called the Eucharist “esca viatorum”, travelers’ food, the food for those who are “in via”, on the way; and when we give someone the last rites we call their last communion “viaticum”, food for the way, food for the last few steps of the journey. But I also like another ancient title of the Eucharist which even more emphasizes the idea that the Eucharist gives us strength to keep walking. It’s been called “panis fortium”, the bread of the strong. This bread, which Jesus tells us “is my flesh for the life of the world”, does more than get us through the difficult times; it is the daily bread we need in the ordinary times. In the strength of this food we Christians become the world’s strong men and women. Do you ever wonder how some people can be involved in half a dozen ministries? I think you will find that they are people who are faithful to the Eucharist. And all of us should be aware when we go to communion that we are like soldiers collecting our rations. Jesus gives us himself as our marching food, the food we need for the next stage of the journey in the week ahead.

So (wouldn’t you know it?) even here in church food goes with exercise. Imagine making up a packed lunch to go on a hike: a sandwich, an energy bar, a bottle of water. You know that at the top of the trail it will all taste marvelous. But if it rains and you’re stuck at home and have to eat your snack on the couch, it doesn’t taste the same. Hiking food is for hikers, and the Eucharist, the bread of life, is for those who live their faith. That’s why at the end of Mass the priest commands you to go out. It’s time for exercise. In communion you have received the bread of the strong. Then you must “Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life”.

“Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him” (6: 56)

You must have seen those tourist guides to Orlando and noticed that half the pages are given over to advertising places to eat. What an amazing variety of food is available here. You can have steaks or sushi or seafood. You can choose food of a dozen or more nationalities: Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese or Japanese, Mexican, Colombian, Cuban or Puerto Rican, Lebanese or Indian, German, Italian, Polish, Spanish and even Irish – to say nothing of the fast food franchises and those amazing places where you can apparently eat all you want for \$4.99. Food is enormously important in our lives and it should probably be no surprise that every reading today mentions food. In the first the figure of Wisdom calls out “Come, eat of my food, and drink of the wine I have mixed”. In the second St. Paul rather spoils the party mood by saying “Do not get drunk on wine, in which lies debauchery”. And then in the Gospel we hear the third section of the “Bread of Life discourse” where Jesus tells us “I am the living bread that came down from heaven...For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink”.

Two weeks ago we reflected on the fact that the fact that the Eucharist is essential food for Christians; last week we recognized the Eucharist as “the traveler’s food”, enabling us to complete our journey, and “the bread of the strong”, nourishing us to give ourselves in ministry. Those ideas are present in today’s Gospel as well, but this week I want to concentrate on another aspect of the Eucharist: when we come to Mass we are not just individuals collecting our rations; we are invited to a meal, to gather around a table. Think about it. The Bible is full of meals, and the Mass has its origins in the Passover meal of the Jews which Jesus shared with his disciples at what we call “the Last Supper”. It’s not difficult to see that the second part of the Mass still has the outline of a meal: the table is laid by the children, in this case the altar servers; the food is brought to the table and then the blessing is said; the blessed food is served and consumed; and finally Father (note this - the man of the house!) does the washing up.

Any good meal requires careful preparation. So how has the food for this meal been prepared? At first sight it looks embarrassingly easy. The sacristans open up a pack of hosts and pour some wine into a jug. It’s not exactly Master Chef. But our faith always asks us to look deeper, to look beyond the obvious. Instead of seeing the Mass as a fast food operation, wouldn’t it be more true to say that the broken body we receive in communion, the poured out blood, actually took three hours to

prepare, the three hours of our Lord's sweat and agony on the Cross. This is not a cheap meal. And we could say that it took 33 years to prepare, the lifetime of Jesus on earth, plus the nine months when he developed in the Blessed Mother's womb. Or perhaps, if we are to recognize the full significance of this meal, we should say that God, with patient love, has been preparing it for us from all eternity.

A meal is worth preparing carefully because it brings people together. That's why it's so important to preserve the tradition of sitting down together for family meals. Recent research is clear: kids who sit down to dine with their folks are healthier, happier and better students. The Mass is our family meal, designed to bring us together as a community. If a moody teenager refuses to sit down but grabs some food from the table and then goes to sit in front of the T.V. on their own, you get angry. And the Church is displeased if someone comes in at the last minute and goes to communion; such people have not fulfilled their obligation. But understand, too, that the Mass is more than the gathering of our own little, local community. Here, in a sense, we meet with the whole universal Church, which is why we always pray for the Pope and the Bishops. And, although we do not see them, we should have a strong sense that the angels and saints are present at every Mass. Most importantly, of course, the Eucharist is designed to be an encounter with Jesus Christ our Lord. When you come to communion the priest does not feed you silently; he says "the Body of Christ", and he expects you to reply "Amen". That "Amen" is full of meaning. It says, "Yes, Jesus, I see you; I recognize your presence; I need you; I love you". And in turn Jesus fulfills the promise he makes in today's Gospel: "Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me and I in him". This meeting with Jesus remains as we go out to resume our daily life.

Today, as we should do every week of our lives, we come together for the family meal at the Lord's table. Believe it or not, people will miss you if you fail to turn up because you belong here. Today you will eat the true food and true drink, in which you will meet with Jesus. Eat and drink, so that Jesus remains in you and you remain in him.

“Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (6:68)

For the last four weeks the Church has provided a summer school on the Eucharist by interrupting the readings from Saint Mark’s Gospel and instead giving us Gospel readings from John Chapter 6. First, a month ago, we heard John’s version of the feeding of the five thousand; then, for the last three weeks, we have heard the reflection or discourse of Jesus after the miracle. He explains that he has true bread to give; that he himself is this bread of life; that when we eat his flesh and drink his blood we can receive life - and we concluded last week with the words “whoever eats this bread will live forever”.

Today, in the last Gospel from John 6, we see the reaction to the words of Jesus - and not the reaction of his enemies who were always looking for ways to disagree with him, but the reaction of his own disciples. It’s as if they feel Jesus has gone too far in this talk of feeding on him; and they murmur to each other “This saying is hard; who can accept it?” Jesus understands they are shocked - and they will be much more shocked when they see him hanging on the Cross - and he tries to encourage them to see that his words are “Spirit and life”, that there is beauty and joy beyond what appears ugly and strange. But He also understands that his way is demanding, that among those who had crowded to join him at first there were those “who would not believe” and those who would even betray him. And Saint John does not hide what happened next: “As a result of this, many of his disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied him”.

How tragic that is! These were disciples, people who had followed Jesus for a time and heard his words of Spirit and life, but now they turn their backs on him. And sadly that is not just an isolated moment from two thousand years ago. We Catholics are the largest Christian denomination in the United States, but the second largest group of Christians, or at least of nominal Christians, is lapsed Catholics, people who were disciples of Jesus but no longer accompany him. Even here in the Diocese of Orlando, a Diocese which is strong and growing, we know there are many more baptized Catholics in the community than those like you who come to church regularly. Some of them will appear at Christmas and Easter; others are Catholics in name only, no longer walking in the way of Christ, unknown to us until their family asks for a priest to say some prayers for them at the funeral home.

That's why the key theme of today's readings is decision: not drifting through life but consciously deciding for the things of God or not. You hear that theme of decision in the first reading, where Joshua tells the new arrivals in the promised land that they are free "to serve the Lord" who has saved them or to follow the local gods. And he encourages them by announcing his own decision: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord". If you are here today, hearing the Gospel, hearing my words, and receiving Jesus, the Bread of Life, I hope it's because you can also make that claim: "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord". And we should be encouraged ourselves by the Gospel. The choice to abandon Jesus is not the only decision we hear about. Jesus turns to the twelve and asks them "Do you also want to leave?" and Peter speaks for himself, for the other disciples and hopefully also for us when he says "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life"; and he makes a wonderful statement of faith: "We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God".

Today, after a month with Saint John Chapter 6, we leave behind Jesus's long discourse on the Bread of Life. And we should realize that every time Jesus speaks to us in the Gospels, He is not just communicating information. He requires a response, a decision. These readings reminded me of a hymn, which was originally a longer poem written by the American writer James Russell Lowell (1819-1891):

Once to every man and nation,
Comes the moment to decide,
In the strife of truth with falsehood,
For the good or evil side.

We, too, have to make a decision. Shall we return to our former way of life and no longer accompany Jesus, or shall we commit ourselves even more faithfully to following Him. Let us not turn back; let us not become part of that second largest denomination of ex-Catholics. This is the moment to decide; and let us have the humility to say "Master, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life".

“My kingdom does not belong to this world”.

This is the last Sunday of the liturgical year which we started in Advent 2017 and today we close the “Year of the Eucharist” which has been the focus of the Orlando Diocese’s celebration of its fiftieth anniversary. It was a year when most of the Sunday Gospel readings came from Mark’s Gospel, but today - as on several special occasions in the last year - we heard from John; and as so often in Saint John’s Gospel we get an expansion of Mark’s minimalist account, in this case an expansion of the scene where Jesus is questioned by Pontius Pilate. Both scenes have in common the fact that Jesus neither affirms nor denies that he is a King. He avoids a direct answer to Pilate’s question because he knows his kingship does not fit into any of the presuppositions or categories the Roman Governor might have. And in Saint John’s version of the meeting Jesus explains: “My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here”.

This Feast of Christ the King was actually created in 1925 when new political movements were trying to take the place of Christianity. The communist dictator Joseph Stalin asked how many divisions the Pope had, knowing that he had no more fighting men than Jesus did, and implying that the Catholic faith was powerless. He closed churches and executed priests, hoping to destroy the image of Holy Russia for ever. But we know that it was communism which eventually collapsed while the Church continues. Adolf Hitler thought he could manipulate the Church, but his Third Reich - the kingdom which he expected to last a thousand years - came to an end in a mere twelve. From the beginning people have tried to destroy the kingdom of Christ, or diminish its influence, or ignore it. In 1925 Pope Pius XI noted that many of the problems of the age resulted from “the fact that the majority of men had thrust Jesus Christ and his holy law out of their lives”; and I wonder whether the current age is any different. People often speak of America as a Christian country; they refer to the Christian principles of the founding fathers; and many politicians of all parties still end their speeches with “God bless America”. But how true is it that the United States and the Kingdom of Christ walk hand in hand? Why would the citizens of a Christian country allow the killing of twenty four hundred children every day? Why would they suffer the diseases of overindulgence while their neighbors go hungry? Why would they tolerate corruption in politics, infidelity in marriage, and violence in their streets?

Many of us are sad to see America changing, but Jesus warns us “My kingdom does not belong to this world...my kingdom is not here”. The rulers of this world have always been prepared to use Christianity when it suits them but we cannot entrust our faith and values to their safe-keeping. We cannot expect our children to breathe in respect, and decency and charity from the air, from the general atmosphere in American society. Quite the contrary. Politicians, educators and the media have chosen a different way, and we find ourselves as the odd ones out. And if you think about it, that was bound to happen. Societies change, their customs go in and out of fashion, so we cannot rely on them. No - we have to take responsibility; we have to preserve and teach the values that matter to us, the eternal and universal values of Jesus Christ. Bishop Noonan’s choice to have a “Year of the Eucharist” is a reminder of where we must find the center of our lives. If you are here at Mass today, if you bring your children to Faith Formation week by week, or make the sacrifice to have them in Catholic school, you are more courageous than you may realize. To do that in these days is not to follow the crowd but to make a real choice about the way you will raise your family.

The words of Jesus in the Gospel today are also a reminder that this world is not everything. He tells us his kingdom “is not here” because his rule will only be completely fulfilled in heaven. Through the ages Christians have been described as travelers and pilgrims, people who should never settle down in this world because our homeland is in heaven. By rights Jesus Christ is ruler of this world, we acknowledge him today as King of the Universe, but even when he was on earth people rejected him. We have to choose. Let us follow him, let us try to live in faith, hope and love even now, even in a country which often seems to be rejecting him; let us turn to the Eucharist again and again to receive the travelers’ food which only he can give. And let us trust that beyond this world we are called to the eternal joys of the kingdom of heaven.