

HOMILY OF HIS EMINENCE CARDINAL CHRISTOPHE PIERRE
APOSTOLIC NUNCIO TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
HOLY MASS FOR THE 4TH SUNDAY OF LENT & CLOSING OF 40 HOURS DEVOTION
BASILICA OF THE NATIONAL SHRINE OF THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION
WASHINGTON, D.C. – MARCH 9, 2024

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Greetings to all. I convey to everyone who is participating in this Mass, both here present and through the media, the assurance of the Holy Father's spiritual closeness and affection.

We have come to the end of this "Forty Hours" devotion. For the last two days, hundreds of people have come to this Basilica to "keep watch" with Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. In doing so, they have experienced what Pope Francis spoke of when he said:

"Contemplating Jesus, staying before him, adoring him in the Eucharist: it is not wasting time, but giving meaning to time.... It is rediscovering the course of life in the simplicity of a silence that nourishes the heart."¹

This evening we also begin the Church's celebration of "Laetare Sunday", which calls us to rejoice in the midst of this penitential season. As the Entrance Antiphon of this Mass exhorts: "Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all who love her. Be joyful, all who were in mourning; exult and be satisfied at her consoling breast."² By these words, the prophet Isaiah was reminding God's people that, in spite of their infidelity and the exile that it caused, God was redeeming them and bringing them back home.

We, the people of the new covenant, must also be able to rejoice in the midst of our "exile" from heaven, as we "mourn and weep in this valley of tears", and as we make this annual Lenten journey toward the celebration of Christ's Paschal Mystery. We must be joyful, because to do so is to share in the clear vision of Jesus.

¹ Pope Francis, Angelus Address on the Solemnity of the Epiphany, 6 January 2024.

² Cf. *Isaiah* 66:10-11.

As Scripture says: “For the sake of the joy that lay before him, he endured the cross, despising its shame.”³

“The joy that lay before him.” To what does this refer? The resurrection, certainly. But how does the event of Christ’s resurrection continue to provide joy for us, even as we journey through this “valley of tears”? This question finds an answer in the Eucharist. **The Eucharist contains the fullness of joy that Christ has won for us by his incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection.** Thus, if we open ourselves to all the dimensions of the mystery of the Eucharist, we will experience the joy of the Gospel as a gift that we receive together with the whole Church.

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Herein, though, lies a challenge, even for us who have deep devotion to the Eucharist. The challenge is to perceive and live the Eucharist in *all its dimensions*. Listen to what Pope John Paul II wrote in 2004, in his final Apostolic Letter, which inaugurated the “Year of the Eucharist”. He said:

“It is important that no dimension of this sacrament should be neglected. We are constantly tempted to reduce the Eucharist to our own dimensions, while in reality *it is we who must open ourselves up to the dimensions of the Mystery.*”⁴

The Eucharist has multiple dimensions: meal, sacrifice, memorial of the Paschal Mystery, and real presence. None of these aspects should be excluded. To approach the Eucharist without regard for its *sacredness* – for the fact that it “transcends” other earthly realities – would certainly be an error. Yet we would also be in error if we were to avoid the fact that Jesus has indeed come to us in the form of bread – food to be eaten! As Christ is both human and divine, so the Eucharist is both *transcendent* – beyond us – and at the same time *immanent* – God-here-with-us. We adore the sacrament because we adore Christ as God. But we *eat* the sacrament because this God has become flesh, and has made his flesh our food. In our approach to the Eucharist – and in our *living* of the Eucharist – we must constantly reconcile ourselves to both of these fundamental traits. Only if we

³ *Hebrews* 12:2.

⁴ Pope St. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, 7 October 2004, 14.

recognize the Eucharist in its *incarnational* dimension – as the living presence of Christ with us and with his Church – will our worship build us up as the Body which is the Church. And it is only by walking as one Body in Christ that our mission of evangelization can be effective.

Falling short of this truth, we risk treating the Eucharist like a precious jewel: something to admire for its beauty and to display with pride, but which in the end is simply a beautiful object. To be sure, the Eucharist is the greatest of treasures! But more than an “object”, Christ who is present in the sacrament is a personal *subject*! He is the sacred One who has assumed our flesh and become our food – who by doing so has made the decision to be with his people and walk with them, to form them into his living Body.

An image to help us understand this comes from the Gospel passage of the Transfiguration which we heard two Sundays ago at Mass. Peter, overwhelmed by the glorious appearance of Jesus and the presence of Moses and Elijah, proposed setting up tents for them. But he didn’t know what he was saying.⁵ It was perhaps understandable that, given this vision of glory, Peter thought they had finally reached that place where the Lord was to “remain”. But that was not the Lord’s plan. It was not the reason for which Jesus had given Peter and the two other disciples this vision. Instead of remaining on that mountain, Peter, James and John were to descend with Jesus and continue the journey to Jerusalem which would culminate in the Lord’s passion, death, and resurrection. This vision of Christ’s glory was not yet heaven itself. Rather, it was meant to strengthen the hope of the disciples in view of the scandal of the cross.

This is how it is when we experience the consoling time with Jesus in adoration. In the silence of that contemplation, we are inwardly comforted with the reminder that Jesus is risen and with us. And so, strengthened by that affirmation we can accompany the incarnate, crucified, and risen Lord into our mission, ready to endure the difficulties.

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⁵ Mark 9:5-6.

Brothers and sisters, as we conclude our 40 Hours devotion by this Mass and Eucharistic procession, let us allow the mystery of the Lord's presence with us to shape our entire lives as Christians. Let us practice the "remembrance" which our Jewish ancestors learned in their exile from Jerusalem. In our "exile", we have a Gift greater than they possessed: Jesus is present to us in the Eucharist. He awaits our worship, time spent in adoration. He feeds us with his own body and blood. And he accompanies us as we go forth in mission, together as Church: to spread the good news of salvation with joy.