



HOW TO PARTICIPATE IN THE CELEBRATIONS OF HOLY WEEK, SUNDAY AND WEEKDAY MASS WHEN REMAINING AT HOME DURING THE COVID-19 CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

During this time of quarantine resulting from the Covid-19 Coronavirus pandemic, members of the Church are being asked to refrain from attending their places of worship. The pain of this requirement will be particularly felt during this coming Holy Week and on Easter Day.

Following the first live-streamed Sunday Mass on 22nd March from our Cathedral in Leeds, I received an Email with the following message from a mother of a family in our diocese: *"Please pass on my thanks to ...all those who made the livestreaming of Mass possible ...At first, my older children were unenthusiastic about gathering around the TV in the front room to watch Mass. However, as we settled down, lit our candle, and started joining in the responses, it became quite a powerful experience. It is good to be able to bring the liturgy into our home."*

I know that, similarly, many other Catholics are doing their best to join in the celebration of Sunday and weekday Mass, as well as the Liturgies of Holy Week, that are being live-streamed from our Cathedral and parish churches.

Others who do not have access to the internet and online media, are using their Missals, the Liturgy of the Hours or other devotional books of prayers to assist them to maintain their spiritual lives in union with the rhythm of the liturgical life of the Church.

I am aware that the faithful will want to participate as fully as they can at this time, particularly to pray for their families, friends, those who are sick and for all who care for the sick and dying. I am aware too that this new form of 'bringing the liturgy into our homes' is a challenge in terms of the way we participate; I hope therefore that the following reflections and suggestions may be of help with this.

The importance of the Liturgy

The most important aspect of all our Catholic worship and liturgy is that we celebrate the sacred rites not as individuals but as members of the one Body of Christ, the Church. It is important too that we do this even in these difficult times: *"For if we continue to love one another and to join in praising the Most Holy Trinity - all of us who are sons of God and form one family in Christ - we will be faithful to the deepest vocation of the Church"*¹. This is a profound reality even if, or when, our circumstances force us to be separated from the other members of the church by physical space or time.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §959

The word liturgy means a “*common work*” or a “*service in the name of/on behalf of the people*”². The ‘Mass’ or ‘Divine Liturgy’ is the common work of the Catholic Church. It is the official action of the Church, the participation of the People of God in the ‘work of God’. The liturgy is “*the source and summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; it is also the font from which all her power flows*”³.

For Catholics, both of the Western and Eastern liturgical traditions, the solemn gathering of the People of God for the praise and worship of the Most Holy Trinity is not an ‘optional extra’ to our personal spirituality or our individual life of prayer. No, the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice is, “*the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit*”⁴. The celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is central to our lives as Catholics and is why it is so painful for us now not to be able to gather together in our churches as a family.

We know that our churches are not just buildings; they are a ‘sacred space’, the House of God. Indeed, even within a church, there are separate dedicated spaces: the entrance hall or narthex which provides an area for the faithful to gather for visiting with each other both before and after the celebration of Mass; there is the main body of the church or ‘nave’ which is reserved for prayer, worship, and for making a ‘visit to the Lord’; and, there are chapels or devotional areas which honour the Blessed Virgin Mary, St Joseph and the Saints and Martyrs of the Church. The sanctuary though is the ‘Holy of Holies’, the place where the Eucharistic Sacrifice is offered on the altar and the table from which we are fed the “*one bread that provides the medicine of immortality, the antidote for death, and the food that makes us live for ever in Jesus Christ*”⁵.

How then should we pray and participate in the Mass at home?

Whether we are sharing in the celebration of the Mass through live-streaming or reading the sacred texts for the Liturgy of the Word and the prayers in our Missal, we should try to set apart an area of a room in our house that is given over to the Lord. This area does not have to be large; it simply needs to be the little ‘sanctuary’ of our home.

What should there be in this sanctuary? Pride of place should be given to a crucifix; this is the altar of our home, for “*Christ, our Lord and God, was once and for all to offer himself to God the Father by his death on the altar of the cross, to accomplish there an everlasting redemption.*”⁶ On Good Friday especially, we can spend some time in prayer before the crucifix, praying the Stations of the Cross, and at 3:00pm or thereabouts kissing the crucifix or touching it lovingly with our hand, recalling that it was at this hour⁷ that Our Lord and Saviour gave up His life for us and for the salvation of the world.

An icon or statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, should also be present. For as Our Lord hung dying upon the cross, nearby stood Mary his mother to whom he entrusted us as her children and she as our mother.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1069

³ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §10

⁴ *Ibid.*, §14

⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1405

⁶ *Ibid.*, §1366

⁷ Luke 23:44-46

Live-streamed Liturgies

We also have to learn how to differentiate when we participate in a liturgy on our computer or television screen from the experience of watching other live-streamed events, videos or programmes. In church we have learnt, often from our childhood, how to watch and participate in the sacred actions of the liturgy in a 'holy way'. Learning how to do this using the various forms of electronic media alone will be entirely new to most of us.

Part of this learning means being aware of how we might physically differentiate in our home the way in which we watch and participate in a live-streamed liturgy. This simple action, changing how we watch, can help us to make our spiritual participation more fruitful.

In the room where we will watch the liturgy, we must try to turn-off and to remove anything that is likely to distract us. We should as far as possible use the same bodily postures that we would adopt as if we were in the church itself; this will give us a sense of being united with the sacred actions that are taking place in the church.

For example, if possible we should stand at the opening to make the sign of the cross and for the penitential rite; join-in by making all the responses; sit down for the readings and stand for the Holy Gospel (and make the sign of the cross on our forehead, on our lips and over our heart); kneel or bow our heads for the Eucharistic Prayer and for the moment when we make a Spiritual Communion; and stand for the final prayer and the blessing.

We might also, provided we take care and it is safe to do so, light a candle for the duration of the celebration. The lighted candle, like those on the altar in the church, symbolizes that Christ is "*a light to enlighten the nations*"⁸, and that His brightness shines out in the Church and throughout the whole human family.

Whether we are taking part in a liturgy online or in person in a Church, our "*fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations*"⁹ requires us to foster both an internal and external participation. Our participation is not really about us 'doing things' in the liturgy but means that we need to engage both our minds and hearts in the celebration. We are body and spirit; the expression of our love for God therefore will always be manifest in our worship of Him, both in our words and our actions.

We should try to remember too, that often there can be many others who are also participating in the same liturgy that we are watching; sometimes hundreds and even thousands! It is not just us a case of us watching the priest or sacred ministers celebrating the liturgy remotely in the isolation of our home, we are joining other Catholics, sometimes from other countries around the world, to offer a period of time in prayer, worship and thanksgiving to God who is our loving and merciful Father.

⁸ Luke 2:32

⁹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, §14

Praying with the Word of God

For those who do not have access to the internet and online media, one of the ways we can unite our prayer with the celebration of the Mass and the liturgies of Holy Week is through the use of Sunday and Weekday Missals to read the Word of God in the Holy Scriptures as given in the Church's lectionary and to make an act of Spiritual Communion.

Although the offering of these prayers may be separated by physical space from where the sacred liturgy is being celebrated in a church, eternity breaks through into human life whenever Christians are united in prayer, especially when this prayer is offered at the same time and when they unite their intention to that of the sacred ministers celebrating the liturgy.

Our constant desire for the Lord

Deep in our hearts, we know though, that neither watching and participating in a live-streamed liturgical celebration nor uniting ourselves in prayer with that liturgy, can ever replace or be a substitute for that 'fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations' which our Holy Mother the Church calls us to strive for when we are personally present at the sacred liturgy celebrated within a church.

As members of the clergy and faithful, may our constant desire to be close to and receive the real presence of Christ in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and to experience His presence in the community of the faithful gathered visibly and physically as one, burn within our hearts each day until together we can return to our churches to assemble again as the Church.

Until that time, let us do all we can to remain united in faith, hope and love. Let us pray throughout this time of tribulation that God our Father will drive all pestilence from our world, relieve the pain of the sick, give strength to those who care for them, welcome into His peace those who have died and grant that we may all find comfort in His merciful love.

+ Marcus

✠ Marcus Stock
Bishop of Leeds

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