

PASTORAL LETTER

FROM ARCHBISHOP KEVIN McDONALD
FOR THE FEAST OF CORPUS CHRISTI
SUNDAY, 14th JUNE 2009

My dear people,

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, one of the great feasts of the Church and one that is very central to our Catholic life and Catholic spirituality. Some of you, like me, will remember Blessed Sacrament processions which were such wonderful moments of celebration and witness to the truth that lies at the heart of our faith. That truth is the real and abiding presence of Jesus Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. It is a truth which shapes Catholic prayer and catholic culture in a very distinctive way. A Catholic spirituality will always be a Eucharistic spirituality. Our personal prayer is nourished by the Eucharist and also draws us back to the Eucharist. In a Catholic Church the sense of presence is palpable. It is a presence that invites a response and elicits a spirit of prayer. For this grace, we should always be grateful.

The readings for today open up the mystery of the Eucharist to us and help us to see it in the broad context of God's action and God's self-revelation in the world. In the beautiful passage from the Book of Exodus a communion sacrifice is described which is a prefiguring of the Eucharist and which helps us to understand its true meaning. God unites himself with his people who respond with a public declaration of their faith and commitment.

The commandments that God gives to his people in the Old Testament set out the way of life that constitutes a positive response to God's call. They remind us that, as Christians, our lives and worship are inextricably linked. Love of God and love of neighbour go hand in hand.

But the meaning of the Mass can be seen in its fullness only in God's revelation of himself in Jesus Christ. In fact, it is in the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus that we come to understand the mystery of God, and so understand the Eucharist. This central and characteristic act of Christian worship is not a service of praise that we invent or produce ourselves. It is quite simply the re-enactment and making present of the saving death of Jesus. In the Mass we are united with Christ in his self-offering to the Father. When we gather for Mass we express and celebrate our identity as members of the Body of Christ. We are one with Him in his suffering, dying and rising.

So as Christians we share in the very life of Christ and this is expressed most beautifully in our reception of the blood of Christ. Blood is a symbol of life and when the wine becomes the blood of Christ, it becomes the source of our life. We are empowered to live the life of Christ, to live a life of love. The second reading explains how this happens when it says that the blood of Christ "can purify our inner selves from dead actions so that we can do service to the living God."

This is very precious teaching. Sometimes we may be tempted to give up on the high ideals that the life of Christ puts before us. It is in the nature of Christian life that there will be struggle and at times, we will fall short. But the blood of Christ brings both forgiveness and a new start. We need constantly to resort to the source of life which is Christ and to believe that we will be empowered to live a new life.

So goodness and charity are not the fruits of our own efforts but the result of really allowing the grace of God to be the prime mover in our lives.

This, then, is the true meaning of the Eucharist: not our own creation but a gift that empowers us to live in love. Finally, it follows logically from what I have said that I should mention the Year of the Priesthood which Pope Benedict has proclaimed and which begins on June 19th. Without the priesthood, there can be no Eucharist and so this is an opportunity to thank God for our priests who lead us in worship and who give their lives for their people. We should also see this as an invitation to do all we can to encourage vocations to the priesthood and parishes have received materials and ideas to help with this. I invite all who are eligible for priestly training to really give it serious thought and consideration. There can be no better life than one that is centred on the celebration of Mass and consists entirely of service of God and of our fellow men and women. A priest is a bearer of life – eternal life. He has received a great gift and his life is a priceless gift to his people.

I end by inviting you all once more to the Diocesan celebration of the Eucharist which will take place at Aylesford very soon on 27 June. It will be part of our Diocesan celebration of the Year of St Paul and will be a wonderful opportunity to celebrate Mass as a Diocese.

With my blessing and appreciation of your fidelity,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "+ Kevin". The plus sign is a simple cross, and the name "Kevin" is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

+ Kevin McDonald
Archbishop of Southwark

Given in Southwark on
Sunday, 24 May 2009
The Ascension of Our Lord Jesus Christ