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The Twenty-first Sunday of the Year (C)

One of the precepts of the Catholic Church, one of the basic requirements to be a faithful Catholic, is to attend the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass every Sunday and holyday, though, undoubtedly, not all of us attended Mass on August 15th. This we all know and, having come to the Mass, most of us receive the Precious Body and Blood of the Lord at least once a week, but are we really aware of who it is that we eat?

Every week we are invited to the banquet of the Lamb; indeed, we are commanded to come as faithful followers of him who sacrificed himself for us. We come here, to the altar of the Lord, where "Christ is the food that is eaten and drunk."¹

Because it is Christ himself that we eat and drink we must come to the Mass prepared, with hearts ready to welcome him, and free of mortal sin. This is a most serious matter for each us of because, as Saint Paul admonishes us:

Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself" (I Corinthians 11:27-29).

¹ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 308A.6*, in Arthur A. Just, Jr., ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on the Scripture: New Testament III: Luke* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 230.

How, then, do we prepare to receive the Eucharist? First and foremost, we should come to the Mass with sufficient time to prepare our hearts and minds to welcome him, to spend in prayer before the Mass begins. We might well read the sacred readings before Mass begins to hear them more attentively when they are proclaimed and expounded upon. We should visit the Lord in the sacrament of Penance on a regular basis to be strengthened by his grace as we struggle against venial sin, and we should seek out a priest immediately when we are conscious of mortal sin and beg him to hear our confession.

Anyone who comes to the Mass conscious of a mortal sin that has not been confessed in kind and in number must not receive the Holy Eucharist, else they eat and drink judgment. Anyone who comes to the Mass as the procession begins - or, worse, after it has begun - ought not to receive the Holy Eucharist, because they have not come prepared. They have come to eat his Body and drink his Blood, but they have not come worthily. Do you not recognize who it is that you will receive? Where is your love for his Body and Blood? Anyone who truly loves the Lord Jesus Christ and seeks to follow him will come to the Mass ready to receive him and open to his grace, mercy and love.

Whenever we come to Mass unprepared to receive the Lord, to commune with him, we are his hidden enemies. We become those to whom the Lord will say, "I do not know where you are from" (Luke

13:25). In reply, we will say to him, "We ate and drank in your company and you taught in our streets" and he will answer us, "I do not know where you are from. Depart from me, all you evildoers" (Luke 13:26-27)! When we come to him unprepared we do not come in love and in this way we become his enemies who will be tossed out where "there will be wailing and grinding of teeth" (Luke 13:28).

Simply consider the irony of this situation. The Lord calls us to partake of his own Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity and, as Saint Augustine says, we

[do] not value [our] food very highly, and yet it was with reference to it that [we] said [we] belonged to Christ. Christ is the food that is eaten and drunk. Even Christ's enemies eat and drink him. The faithful know the lamb without spot on which they feed, if only they fed on it in such a way that they are not liable to punishment!

These words should not lead us to despair of God's mercy, but should inspire us to seek it all the more!

It is true that from time to time we are delayed in arriving at Mass early for legitimate reasons and for reasons out of our control and unforeseen, yet these surely do not occur every week, do they? No, of course not! If we are in the habit of arriving at Mass just in the nick of time, we must change our ways and demonstrate our love for the Lord and our desire to be in communion with him by preparing our hearts in a worthy manner. How many of us, if we were to meet the president of the

United States, would arrive with only moments to spare? Surely none of us would do so, and yet we somehow convince ourselves that it is okay to do so when the King of kings and the Lord of lords wishes to see us? This is ludicrous!

Even so, "strengthen your drooping hands and your weak knees. Make straight paths for your feet, that what is lame may not be disjoined but healed" (Hebrews 12:12-13). The Lord wants us to approach him worthily that we might be known by him and that he might be known by us, and for this reason the Lord says, "Some of these [men] I will take as priests" (Isaiah 66:21). He gives us his peace so that we might be healed and strengthened by his grace.

We must now ask the question: What is a priest? The priest is the one through whom the "mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time."² The priest is the one who does what the Lord tells him, this is why the priest is the one whom the Lord takes as his own. The priest is "set aside" for sacred service; he is given wholly to the Lord.

We know that "no one can give himself the mandate and the mission to proclaim the Gospel."³ He must be chosen and called by Christ, and he must respond generously, joyfully and

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1536.

³ CCC, 875.

lovingly. Indeed, "no one takes this honor upon himself but only when called by God, just as Aaron was" (Hebrews 5:4).

The priests of Jesus Christ are "truly 'slaves of Christ' (cf. Romans 1.1), in the image of him who freely took the 'form of a slave' for us (Philippians 2:7). Because the word and grace of which they are ministers are not their own, but are given to them by Christ for the sake of others, they must become the slaves of all."⁴ Priests become the slaves of all through the sacraments they administer and the doctrine that they teach.

Every man whom the Lord calls to be his priest, whom he takes to himself, is called in a personal way by the Lord who says, "You, follow me" (John 21:22). He calls them personally "in order to be a personal witness..., to bear personal responsibility before him who gives the mission, acting 'in his person' and for other persons."⁵

The primary mission, then, of the priest is to make present for all people in every age and place the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross in the Eucharistic celebration and to forgive sins in the name of Christ and of his Church. The Lord takes men to himself as priests to carry out his mission, so that his salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.

Let each of us, then, seek out his priests to receive the grace the Lord wishes to give us through them. Let us pray for

⁴ CCC 876.

⁵ CCC 878.

our priests, that they may be faithful servants of Christ and true imitators of him. Let us pray for our young men, that they hear the call of the Lord and respond generously to him, offering to him their lives and their love in service to God and men.

Through the service of his priests, we will each come to know the Lord, we will recognize him on whom we feed, and we will be known by him and welcomed into his heavenly kingdom where we will feast at the wedding banquet of the Lamb forever. Amen.