



APP STATEMENT ON THE EUCHARIST – October 10, 2021

As the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops work on a statement on the Eucharist triggered by calls for Catholic publicly elected officials to be banned from receiving Holy Communion, we, the Association of Pittsburgh Priests want to offer a public statement for reflection and call upon all Catholics to embrace the call for “union” that is offered in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is the miraculous true presence of Christ that differentiates our Church and our faith from all others. And as food for the fullness of life, we are to become what we eat, becoming an ever-more Christ-like presence in our needy world. Our Church must choose whether to use the infinite power of the Eucharist to include and welcome or as a justification for excluding all who don’t fit neatly into the “worthy and eligible” box.

What would Jesus do and what did Jesus say?

The Great Physician came not for the well, but for the sick. Jesus said that he came for the one sheep who went astray, and rejoiced moreover finding that one than over the other 99 who remained in the fold. *“Let him who is without sin cast the first stone.... Woman, does no one condemn you? Then neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more.”*

What did Jesus say about the Eucharist?

“I am the Bread of Life.” After he performed the miracle of multiplying the loaves and the fish, the people followed Jesus to the other side of the lake. They wanted more. Jesus offered them more than the all-you-can-eat meal they were seeking. Jesus invited all of them to eat of his flesh and drink of his blood. He invited all to eternal life. He did not impose limitations or restrictions based on their lifestyle or marital status. All were welcomed and all were fed.

The woman at the well was an outsider in every way – a Samaritan, a woman, and living in sin. Yet Jesus offered her living water. *“Whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst.”* Again, Jesus says, *“whoever.”* Not “whoever meets certain criteria of worthiness.”

The Spirit and the Letter of the Law

Rules about proper preparation to receive the Eucharist emerged for mostly positive reasons. This immeasurable grace, this matchless sacrifice must be treated with the utmost honor and respect. At some point, though, the balance tipped toward the rules and worthiness and away from the healing, the living water, and eternal life. In many predominantly Catholic countries, large numbers of the faithful who attend Mass on any given Sunday do not receive the Eucharist because they do not perceive themselves to be in a “state of grace.” The true sweet spot is to approach the Eucharist with awe and respect in a state of NEED – need for the healing and strength from the Body and Blood of Christ.

Active vs. Passive, Outward vs. Inward focus:

Achieving a state of grace and working toward a strong personal relationship with Christ is foundational and exceedingly important. But it is only Step 1. Step 2 is to go forth, strengthened by the Eucharist, to be the Body

of Christ, to be Jesus with skin on for others. The word Mass itself comes from *missa*, our going forth into the world at the end of each Mass to become the Body of Christ for each other.

A Unifying or a Dividing Force?

Belief in and reverence for the True Presence in the Body and Blood of Christ could have immeasurable power to unify the Church. Instead, many Church “leaders” are co-opting the Eucharist as a weapon to further their personal aims: to make the catholic (meaning universal) Church an exclusive club only open to those whose lifestyles and values fit neatly within the small box they have defined as acceptable. In the Big Tent that our Church could be, this is one tiny corner. This is driving Catholics away in droves, as we watch our Church shrink and wither. The parallels to the Pharisees and Sadducees who place burdens too heavy to bear on others while praising themselves for their matchless righteousness are too many to mention. We imagine Jesus looking down and crying bitter tears as He watches His beloved sheep, His brothers and sisters, who so wish to come to Him for living water and the Bread of Life, being turned away due to man-made, not God-made, rules about their unworthiness to receive His Body and Blood.

All of our bishops carry a staff patterned after a shepherd’s crook. They need to remember their call to shepherd all of the sheep under their care, not only the ones who toe the line, never venturing from the fold and always fitting perfectly into the narrowly-defined corner of acceptability. The bishops and clergy need to put their trust in the power of the Eucharist to convert hearts and souls, not in their own worldly power to impose rules within the man-made structures and conventions of the Church. If we truly believe in this transformative power of the Eucharist, it should be our shared goal as Catholics to strengthen as many people as possible with it, thereby growing and expanding our Church, not shrinking it. It is very hard for us to sincerely say the words, “Lord I am not worthy,” if I am also secretly adding, “but I am less unworthy than others.”

Jesus gave us all this prayer: “*Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread*”. Which human beings should ever legislate against God’s response to this humble prayer?

We ask all Bishops to use their influence to make whatever statement comes from the USCCB a pastoral one, centered on unity – inclusion of all the bishops, in line with recent statements from Pope Francis and the Vatican, calling all Catholics to a deeper appreciation of the mystery of this Sacrament. What a tragedy if the already polarized Church receive another polarized document on the very Sacrament that can bring us together!

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Mission Statement: The Association of Pittsburgh Priests is a diocesan-wide organization of ordained and non-ordained women and men who act on our baptismal call to be priests and prophets. Our mission, rooted in the Gospel and the Spirit of Vatican II, is to carry out a ministry of justice and renewal in ourselves, the Church and the world.