

The Eucharist: "It is the Lord!"

A pastoral letter on the Holy Eucharist

by Archbishop Thomas Collins

I: "It is the Lord!"

Each of the Gospels ends with a description of the appearances of the risen Lord to his disciples. They had seen him suffer and die, and now they experienced his glorious presence, not simply as he was before, but radiantly transformed. Their excitement and joy were expressed by St. Peter as he jumped out of the boat and ran to meet Jesus, when the beloved disciple saw him on the shore and said: "It is the Lord!" (John 21:1-8).

We need to catch the excitement of the early Christians, reflected not only in the Gospels but also throughout the Acts of the Apostles, and in the breathless opening of the first letter of John: "We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life - this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us - we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. We are writing these things so that your joy may be complete" (1 John 1:1-4).

Our faith can become stale. It must be constantly refreshed by the experience of an encounter with the risen Lord. That opportunity is open to us every time we celebrate the Eucharist.

Although Jesus has now returned to the Father, and no longer appears in risen glory amongst us, in the Eucharist he comes to us less dramatically, but just as really, as he did to the first disciples after the resurrection, in experiences so awesome as to turn their lives around. Each time we celebrate the Eucharist we meet the risen Lord, and we do so most solemnly each Sunday, when we all gather to celebrate the day of his resurrection.

What a shame it is that the Eucharist itself is for many a stale experience, in which routine and passivity deaden awareness of the many splendoured reality that God invites us to enter into. How can we change that?

The account in chapter 24 of the Gospel of Luke of the appearance of the risen Lord to the disciples on the road to Emmaus reminds us of the place of the Eucharist in our journey on the road of Christian discipleship. The disciples are weary, confused, and afraid, as disciples can be when they have experienced the cross, and the desolation of the journey through this vale of tears, but are not truly aware of the resurrection.

Jesus comes up to them, quietly. This is so typical of Our Lord, in our lives, and in the Eucharist. He comes into our midst as a friend, inviting us to recognize him freely, but not overwhelming us. What could be more insignificant in appearance (so easily missed) than the Host, which seems to be no more than a tiny wafer of ritual bread? Yet it is the Lord Jesus, coming unobtrusively, as on the road to Emmaus, inviting our response in faith.

He begins to speak to them of the way in which the Old Testament Scriptures had foreshadowed his actions in their midst. The proclamation and explanation of the Scriptures has always been essential to the celebration of the Eucharist, in which we encounter the risen Lord both at the Table of the Word and at the Table of the Bread of Life. The Scriptures are light for our path.

Then Jesus takes the bread, says the blessing, breaks it, and gives it to them, and in this Eucharistic action they recognize him. It is the Lord. Each time Jesus celebrates the Eucharist for us, he invites us to recognize him. He does not compel us to do so, through spectacular miracles. Instead, he gently invites us. Even those who saw his miracles did not really recognize him at the depth of awareness to which he invites us, and which we can experience through his gentle coming in the Eucharist, as at Emmaus.

It is because he comes so quietly, so delicately respectful of our freedom to respond in faith, that we can miss him in the Eucharist. Too often we yearn for the glitzy religious experience, and miss the life-giving encounter so repeatedly offered, as rhythmically and as unspectacularly in Mass after Mass, as the regular, and boring, beating of our heart. That quiet, steady rhythm gives life.

In the Eucharist we are joined sacramentally to the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. The effect of recognizing him "in the breaking of the bread" is action. The disciples do not linger at Emmaus. They hurry back to Jerusalem to proclaim that they have seen the Lord. The Christian is not expected to linger at the Eucharist. It is an encounter with Jesus, in Word and Sacrament, which sends the Christian out to witness. We come to Mass so that we may go back into the life of discipleship renewed by the encounter with our risen Saviour, and made ready for action in his service.

II: Seven facets of the Eucharistic mystery

The Eucharist always eludes our efforts to understand it, for it is a mystery of God. The divine mysteries are not puzzles that we can solve with enough time and effort; they are aspects of the very life and action of God, which we frail creatures, in principle, cannot master.

But God wills that we enter into the divine mysteries, and constantly be enriched by them. They are like an infinite gold mine, never exhausted, daily enriching us. We can attain true, though always imperfect, insights into what we encounter in the Eucharist.

As we gaze into the mystery of the Eucharist, it is helpful to distinguish several facets, like those of a diamond. Each, in turn, will help us gain some limited but sure awareness of the reality of the Eucharist.

1) The Eucharist is a sacrament

In a sacrament God comes among us in a visible way, acting divinely on our human level.

The perfect sacrament is Jesus: the second person of the Blessed Trinity actually takes on our human nature, and lives our life as it is meant to be lived. He is "Emmanuel" - God with us, quietly entering into our life, and inviting us to respond in faith. Through this sacramental approach God respects our human freedom, for we can choose not to respond. Many walked away from Jesus.

The Church is a sacrament. Down through the ages, God is with us through the human family of faith established by Jesus, and sent out on its mission at Pentecost. Within the life of the Church, God touches us directly through the seven sacraments, in which earthly signs communicate divine life.

The Eucharist is the Blessed Sacrament. Bread and wine, common food, utterly ordinary and insignificant, are transformed by an act of God, through the words of the priest, who is ordained to take the part of Jesus. They become the Body and Blood of Christ. "It is the Lord." He comes quietly, in a visible way, gently inviting our response of faith.

2) The Eucharist is a participation in the sacrifice of Christ

Jesus offered himself on Calvary in generous, unselfish love, in the midst of evil -- giving and not counting the cost.

In each celebration of the Eucharist, Christ allows us to experience the life flowing from the one sacrifice of Calvary.

We, the baptized, through the sacramental sacrifice of the Mass, are joined to the one sacrifice of Jesus, and are invited to live daily in the generous self-giving spirit of the Lord whom we receive in Holy Communion.

3) The Eucharist is an act of thanksgiving

"Eucharist" means "thanksgiving," and in the celebration of each Eucharist we express to God our duty of thanks for all that he has given us, and especially the new life we have received through Jesus. We join in the great prayer of thanks that Jesus has given to his disciples.

4) The Eucharist is an experience of communion

Communion means "union with." Certainly we are in union with Jesus in the Eucharist, as we listen attentively to the Word of God, and as we actually receive Jesus, in a sacramental way, in Communion.

At Mass, as well, we are gathered as a liturgical assembly, to worship God. Each individual member of each particular small community which celebrates the Eucharist is invited, especially through the Sign of Peace, to be in communion with each other member. How does our life outside the Eucharistic celebration harmonize with what we express within it?

We also reach outward geographically, through prayers for the bishop and the pope, and through the prayer of the faithful, realizing that our small communities must have a relationship of communion with the wider Church, and, indeed, with the wider world in all of its needs.

We also become aware in the Eucharist of our union with all in the family of faith who have gone before us, with the whole communion of saints. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith" (Hebrews 12:1).

Look around the church, at any celebration of the Mass. Here we are, the people of the local parish community, gathered with our priest to celebrate the Eucharist. Sometimes the Eucharistic celebration is simple, as at daily Mass in a small parish community. Sometimes it is more formal, as at a Mass celebrated in St. Peter's by the pope. But whatever the visible grandeur of the earthly celebration, every Mass is celebrated in the context of heaven. At Mass, listen to all of the references to the angels and saints, to the whole heavenly court of God. We need to situate our daily struggle in the context of the unseen world, of the communion of saints. Then we will have the spiritual perspective that can lead us to act rightly.

5) The Eucharist is a sacred meal

Our ordinary meals not only allow us to be nourished physically; they are also occasions when we strengthen our relationship with one another. In the Bible, meals take on a deeper meaning, and are often signs of our love for one another, and of God's love for us. The Passover meal, in particular, is of great importance. To express the fulfillment of our human destiny the Scriptures use the image of the heavenly banquet at the end of time, or, in the Apocalypse, of the wedding feast of the Lamb of God. The Eucharist itself arises out of the Last Supper. We should be conscious of the symbolism of a sacred meal when we celebrate the Eucharist, always aware that it is not simply an ordinary meal, but an act of God.

6) The Eucharist is an experience of the real presence of Christ

Jesus Christ, our Risen Saviour, is present to us whenever we celebrate the Eucharist. As always, he is present in our brothers and sisters in Christ, but in an especially significant way as the Church, the body of Christ on earth, gathers to celebrate the Eucharist. He is present to us visually through art, and is present through the priest, who is ordained to act in the person of Christ. He is present to us through the proclamation of the Word of God.

Until Christ comes in glory, there is no more intense way of experiencing his presence than receiving him in Holy Communion. This is not "holy bread" that reminds us of Jesus. This is Jesus, sacramentally present to be with us on our journey.

7) The Eucharist is an invitation to mission

We are given the Eucharist for a purpose, that we may be perfected as disciples of Jesus. That leads us, strengthened through our contact with the source of our life in Christ, to be engaged effectively in our mission of service. Action must flow out of adoration. We do not cling to the Lord, but are sent out on our mission, which we received at Baptism.

Throughout our life, we constantly return to be guided by the Word of God, and to be given new life by the Eucharist. It is noteworthy that in the Gospel of John, at the point in the description of the Last Supper where we would expect a reference to the words of institution ("This is my body" "This is my blood"), the evangelist instead reminds us that Jesus gave us an example of humble service: the washing of feet (John 13:1-20). That is intentional. Practical service of others is the way in which we show that we truly appreciate the Lord whom we receive in Holy Communion.

III: Preparation for the Eucharist

When people say "I don't get anything out of Mass", the obvious question is: "What are you putting into your preparation for Mass?" The Eucharist is the source and summit of our life in Christ. Each of us needs to prepare carefully, especially for the Sunday Eucharist.

How should we prepare for Mass? The most important way to do that is by living as faithful disciples of Jesus, day by day. We ask God's forgiveness for our sins, and regularly receive the liberating graces of the sacrament of Reconciliation. We ask God to help us to grow in a life of virtue, centred on love of God and neighbour. Each day we spend some time in prayer, and seek to live rightly. That is the best way to prepare for Mass.

We also prepare by seriously seeking to understand the wording of the prayers of Mass, and the meaning of the liturgical actions.

It is vitally important that we prepare to hear the word of God. One excellent idea is to spend a little time before Mass prayerfully reflecting on the biblical readings of the day (there are many excellent Missals and missalettes available). Those who proclaim the Word of God should take special care to do that. It is good if a parish Bible study group gathers in the preceding week to study the Scriptures that will be heard at the Eucharist. Parishes may wish to print the references to next Sunday's Mass readings (and, in fact, those for the weekdays as well) in the bulletin of the preceding Sunday.

Even if it is not possible to be present at Mass every day, I can prayerfully reflect on the Mass readings of the day, at home. How much time do I spend gazing into a TV tube, or a computer screen? To what purpose? Can I find at least 15 minutes every day for the reading of the Word of God, in a spirit of attentive devotion?

If we regularly pray and study the Sacred Scriptures, and especially the Gospels, we will appreciate the Word of God at Mass. An ancient Christian tradition, called *Lectio Divina* (sacred reading), allows us to prayerfully encounter the Lord in the slow, meditative reading of God's Word. In our archdiocese, one form of this takes place at seven in the evening, the first Sunday of the month, from September to June, at St. Joseph's Basilica.

Those who are more publicly engaged in the action of the Mass need to prepare spiritually so that whatever they do is done with loving devotion, whether it is reading, welcoming, leading music, serving at the altar, caring for the children, or acting as the priestly celebrant.

An important aspect of preparation is the way in which we use the time between our arrival in church and the beginning of Mass. We should warmly greet our fellow parishioners, and any visitors, but as we take our places in the church we all need a time for quiet prayer, for reading of the Scripture passages soon to be proclaimed, and for establishing a transition between the busy world of distractions from which we come and the world of special attentiveness to the presence of God.

When we leave a superhighway, we need an off ramp on which we can slow down. It is the same thing whenever we enter into conscious awareness of God's presence in prayer. God is always present to us, but we are not always present to God, and so whenever we pray we need to slow down and prepare our hearts and minds to receive the Lord.

IV: Participation in the Eucharist

I once heard someone say: "We need to have more participation at Mass, but there are not enough activities to go around, and so most of the congregation is not able to participate."

It is true: there are obvious roles at Mass, and we need to strive to involve many parishioners in them. It is especially valuable if young people are asked to contribute their gifts in hospitality, reading, music ministry, and so on.

We should, however, look more deeply at what participation in the Eucharist means.

Participation certainly means engaged attentiveness. Prayerful preparation for Mass by reading the Scripture texts ahead of time, and by becoming disposed to the presence of God, allows each of us truly to participate at a deep level, even if not engaged in some obvious role.

The most fundamental way in which each of us participates is by consciously bringing to the celebration of the Eucharist our baptismal sharing in the priesthood of Jesus, day by day.

To be a priest is to reconcile humanity to God. This is what Jesus did through his life, and through his suffering, death, and resurrection. I suggest reading the Letter to the Hebrews, which deals with this.

Through Baptism we are called to imitate Jesus, and to share his priestly role of reconciliation in this world. We do that by daily making present to those around us the generous personal love which we see in our great High Priest, Jesus, in his sacrifice on the cross and in the pattern of his whole life leading up to that.

Faithfulness to our mission as disciples allows us to participate authentically in the celebration of the Eucharist, which does not stand apart, cut off from who we are. At Mass we offer our cares and joys as the priest offers up the bread and wine. We bring our whole life to the Eucharist, and are then sent back to the daily struggle, strengthened by our encounter with Jesus through Word and Sacrament. This is the experience of our baptismal priesthood.

When I show compassion and generosity throughout the week, I am enhancing my deep participation at Sunday Mass. When I live selfishly, I diminish my real participation at Mass.

As baptized disciples, we all represent Christ to others in our daily activities. That is the baptismal priesthood. But Jesus has also given us the ordained priesthood, so that we may indeed hear the Word rightly, and so that he can enter our lives through the sacraments. The ordained priesthood is at the service of the baptismal priesthood, to guide and strengthen us in our life of discipleship.

Through ordination, Jesus calls some of the baptized to represent him in the celebration of the sacraments, in the shepherding of his community, and in the proclamation of the Gospel. When we get ensnared in sin, Jesus frees us through the action of the priest who absolves us in the sacrament of Reconciliation. When we are sick, the priest anoints us in the Sacrament of the Sick to keep us close to Jesus. Baptism and Confirmation start us on our journey of faith. When Jesus celebrates the Eucharist through the action of one of his ordained priests, we are joined to him, and strengthened by him through word and sacrament.

The baptismal sharing in the priesthood of Christ and the ordained sharing are complementary. The priest participates at Mass in a most obvious way, as the one who presides over the community in the name of Jesus, who preaches the Gospel, and who takes the role of Jesus in the celebration of the Eucharist. Through the words and actions of the ordained priest, Jesus transforms the bread and wine into his Body and Blood, to give us life. But all of us participate at Mass, in the particular way of sharing in Christ's priesthood to which God has called us.

V: Celebration of the Eucharist

1. The spirit of Eucharistic celebration

As we celebrate the Eucharist, we should be actively attentive to the divine mystery in which we participate. Much of what we do in our life accustoms us to an attitude of passivity, as when we sit and watch TV. But at Mass, we are called to be engaged in the event.

There are many particular things which we can do during the Mass - listen attentively to the Word of God, sing with all our hearts, give generously for the needs of the community, take a role of service within the celebration, and so on. The more we are attentive to these roles, the better. We should do all that we can to enhance the celebration of the liturgy.

We need to realize, however, that unlike most other things in life, the Mass fundamentally is not something that we do. It is an action of God. We become part of something that is greater than we are, and which takes us back through time to the death and resurrection of Jesus and forward to the Second Coming.

When someone says at the end of Mass, "That was a wonderful celebration," we know what is meant. The same is true if someone says the reverse. The person felt either spiritually rewarded, or not. But both comments touch only the surface of the Eucharist. We legitimately seek to enhance the liturgical experience, but, no matter what, the Eucharist is always primarily an action of God. It is not simply there to provide us with a pleasing spiritual experience.

2. Entry into the Eucharistic mystery

As we enter the church, and bless ourselves with the holy water, sign of our Baptism, we cross a boundary into a sacred place where we can rediscover divine perspective and receive the guidance and strength we need to navigate through life.

The central part of the church is called the "nave" (from the Latin word for ship). We are sailing along through the stormy seas, in the ship of the Church. Around the walls we traditionally place the Stations of the Cross: they represent the path of Christ to Calvary, and on to the resurrection, the very path we are called to follow throughout our lives as disciples. We look towards the sanctuary, where the altar represents Christ, and where the splendid vestments of the priest represent the glory towards which we are headed, and which is in fact the unseen context of our earthly struggle.

We begin the Mass with the sign of the cross. In the name of the Blessed Trinity, we trace on our bodies the cross of Christ who showed us how to live in the image and likeness of the one God, three divine persons in relationships of generous love.

So often we fail to live thus, and so we acknowledge our sins and God's mercy through the penitential rite. The opening prayer centres our thoughts on the meaning of the Eucharistic action, and at times of festivity we offer our praises to God in the Gloria. Now we are ready to be attentive to the Lord who speaks to us in the Word of God.

3. The Liturgy of the Word

The readings from the Bible at Mass are a light for our path in life. I suggest that before each reading we say, silently in our hearts, the prayer of the young Samuel: "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening" (1 Samuel 3:10).

On Sundays, we have a rich selection of biblical passages. First, God speaks to us through the Old Testament Reading, which is chosen because it touches on a theme found in the Gospel of the day. As there is a great plan to history, seen in the Old and New Testaments, so God has a plan for the life of each of us, and attention to the readings will help us to discover it.

Next we pray one of the Psalms. Though sometimes their terms are a bit unfamiliar (a good reason to do some Bible study), the Psalms reveal to us the action of God in our own human condition as well as they did for those who first prayed them long ago.

The Second Reading, unlike the first, does not relate to the Gospel, but gives us a portion of a New Testament book, usually a letter of St. Paul. These letters are always challenging to us, and provide material for serious reflection for the rest of the week.

In the Gospel we directly hear of the words and deeds of Jesus. At solemn celebrations of the Eucharist we have a procession with the Gospel book, with candles. We incense the book as a sign of reverence for the Lord. The Gospel is the foundation for our life of discipleship. Each day we should read a portion of the Gospels, for in them we find most directly the message of Christ.

The homily is meant to relate the Scripture readings to our present situation. The homilist should prepare through study, and reflection, but most of all through prayer and through a daily life of service. Each homily should give us one simple practical point to help us be better disciples.

A good exercise for all of us in the congregation: read the Scripture passages ahead of time, and if possible discuss them in the family, or in some Bible study group. What points would you stress in communicating these readings to another person?

We profess our faith, the common faith of the whole Church, and so remember that we are part of something far greater than what can be seen by looking around our local church.

The prayer of the faithful also reminds us to see our local situation within a wider perspective. We should pray for the members of the parish community in which we live, and for their needs. Prayer is an act of charity, in which we show our love for others. We should also pray for the needs of the diocese and the Church throughout the world.

4. The Liturgy of the Eucharist

We take up the collection. Our practical gift helps the local parish, and those in need, and makes possible the work of the whole Church. How much should a person give? Consider the needs of the Church, locally, in the diocese, and around the world. The work of the Church is made possible because of the collection at Mass. It is a serious responsibility of all members of the Church to give generously, as it is also a serious responsibility of those who manage the funds of the Church to do so frugally and effectively, as trustees of the people of God.

The priest offers up the bread and wine. As he does so, think of all your cares and problems and offer them up to God at the same time. In return, the Lord gives us himself.

In ancient times, water was always mixed with wine, as a practical measure, and this is done at Mass as well. But it has taken on a spiritual significance expressed by the beautiful prayer the priest says: "By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity."

Now we approach the centre of the Eucharist. The Preface reminds us of the theme of the season, and also of the fact that we are participating in a reality which goes far beyond what our human eyes can detect. We join together with the angels and the saints as God comes into our midst.

There are several Eucharistic prayers, though each has the same basic structure, related to the three persons of the Trinity, as is evident in the conclusion: "through (Christ), with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honour is yours, almighty Father, forever and ever. Amen."

The whole Eucharistic Prayer is addressed to Our Father in heaven. The priest extends his hands over the offerings, and invokes the Holy Spirit. Acting in the person of Christ, he recounts the institution of the Eucharist, and the bread and wine are transformed by God, and become, in fact, the Body and Blood of Christ. We, in our ordinary life, are now linked to the suffering, death and resurrection of the Lord. We are sent, in the Spirit, to bring the new life in Christ to the world in which we live.

In the Eucharistic Prayer we call to mind the angels and saints, and pray for the local bishop and for the pope, a reminder that our particular local community is necessarily linked to the wider Church, in the diocese and throughout the world. We need to be conscious of this universal perspective, or we can become disconnected, a cozy little community off on our own. Warm and homey celebration is to be prized, but needs to be balanced with the life-giving context of the whole Church of Christ.

After the majestic closing lines of the Eucharistic Prayer, we recite the Our Father, which contains within it the secret of holiness: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done."

We wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ, who will come to us at the end of time, and at the moment of our death, but who will be no stranger then, for we meet him at every Mass.

Before we receive the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, we offer each other the sign of peace. This is not meant to be a meaningless greeting (like "Have a nice day"). We offer to the person beside us a sign of the peace of Christ, which unites us. If we are not at peace with any person in the community, we should remedy that before receiving Communion, and the simple sign of peace reflects this (though it is not necessary to work one's way through the congregation to make peace with a particular person.) There should be a solemn prayerfulness to the sign of peace; it is not a time for chaos.

We approach to receive the Lord. We hear the words: "The Body of Christ;" "The Blood of Christ." Our response of "Amen" signifies that we are personally ready this day to receive Communion. There are many reasons why one might not be ready, and so we should organize the reception of Communion in such a way that anyone can discreetly refrain from coming forward.

Our "Amen" also means that we do not think that we are about to receive "holy bread" or "blessed bread." Instead, we acknowledge that this is the Lord Jesus himself, body and blood, soul and divinity, sacramentally present under the appearances of bread and wine.

It is good to show a sign of reverence before receiving Communion. I suggest a bow. In our hearts we might say: "My Lord and my God."

Finally, our "Amen" means that we have committed ourselves to be disciples of Jesus in the community that celebrates this Eucharist.

By receiving Communion, I profess that I accept the whole faith of the Catholic Church, that I intend to participate fully in the life of the Church, and that I acknowledge the apostolic authority of the local bishop and of the pope.

The significance of this becomes most obvious at the Easter Vigil, when those who have joined the Church through Baptism or the Profession of Faith, often after a long spiritual journey, receive Communion, and so complete the process of entry into the Catholic Christian faith community. In effect, receiving Communion is the way in which a person fully becomes a Catholic Christian.

Jesus did not will that we simply relate to him one by one. The act of receiving Communion is a profound affirmation not only of a personal and individual relationship with Jesus, but of a relationship with the faith community, which is the fundamental context for our discipleship.

This is why it is our general principle that only those who are Catholic Christians receive Communion in the Catholic Church. Others are most welcome to join with us in prayer, and we deeply appreciate the goodness and fidelity that they show in their lives. But, basically, for someone who is not a Catholic Christian to receive Communion at Mass would be to profess by action a faith identity that does not correspond to what that person in conscience accepts.

We all pray for that day when all Christians will be united in faith, and will be able to celebrate the Eucharist together. We are not there yet, but we are already united in Baptism,

and in many elements of faith, and so we can pray together, and work together for the coming of the kingdom in many ways.

If they wish to do so, those who do not receive Communion, for whatever reason, may come forward for a prayer or blessing, or they may wish to stay in their place. We welcome them most sincerely to our celebration.

After Communion, we should spend some time in quiet prayer and adoration. There should be a period of silence to allow for this.

Those who handle the Eucharist should always do so reverently, in an unhurried manner, without a lot of distracting commotion. It should always be evident that they are profoundly aware that they are handling not bread and wine, but the Body and Blood of Christ.

5) Go, in the peace of Christ

With a final prayer and blessing, we are sent forth on our mission: "Go in peace, to love and serve the Lord." We come together, to be strengthened by our encounter with the Lord in Word and Sacrament, so that we may go and put our faith into action.

Our final hymn should be filled with a spirit of lively energy, sending us out into the continuing struggle.

It is an excellent idea if, after Mass, the parishioners spend a few moments in prayer before leaving. It is also good if, after that, the community can gather for Christian fellowship. Some communities have a meal, or a time for coffee and conversation. This is a fine idea, but we should try to arrange this so that both before and after Mass the actual worship area may be a place for silent prayer.

We leave the Mass, enlightened and strengthened for our mission as disciples.

VI: Some roles at the celebration of the Eucharist

1) Disciple

We are the baptized. Discipleship is the basic role of each of us at Mass. We bring to the celebration a spirit of attentiveness to the Word of God, which we recognize as the needed light for our path. As we come from the daily struggle, we acknowledge our need for the spiritual life that we receive in Communion.

The last time we receive Communion, it is called "viaticum," which means "food for the journey" (i.e. the final journey through death to eternal life). But each Communion is "viaticum," for our earthly journey as a disciple of Jesus. As disciples we share, through Baptism, in the priesthood of Christ, and so join our daily sacrifice, through our imitation of

Christ, to the sacrifice of the Mass, by which we are linked to the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

2) Priest

Through the words and actions of the disciple who has been ordained to the priesthood, Christ teaches us and allows us to participate in the sacrifice of the Eucharist. It is the mission of the priest to be a supple instrument of God's grace, a transparent lens through which the light of Christ shines without obstruction, and so we pray that the frail humans who are called to the priesthood will be truly holy. But priests come and go. They are interchangeable. It is Christ who celebrates all of the sacraments.

The priest at Mass also has a role of presiding over the assembly of disciples, and of leading them in prayer as their spiritual shepherd, but his role is far more than that. He is ordained to preach the Gospel, and in the sacraments to act in the person of Christ, to be used by Christ as an instrument of grace.

We all have the responsibility and the privilege of helping discover those in our midst whom the Lord may be calling to the priesthood. Pray that they respond to the call, and encourage them to do so. Let me know who they are.

3) Deacon

The office of deacon, a most ancient element of the sacrament of Holy Orders, is mainly oriented towards making present in the community Christ's mission as servant. So the deacon is ordained to help within the parish and the wider community, to visit the sick, to perform administrative work, to teach, to engage in chaplaincy and social service, and to perform other such tasks. At the Eucharist, the deacon proclaims the Gospel, is an ordinary minister of Communion, prepares the gifts and helps at the altar. He also may be commissioned to preach.

4) Reader

The reader is called to proclaim the Word of God clearly and effectively. A page of print does its job properly when we cannot remember its particular design, but only the content of the words upon it; similarly, the reader proclaims the Word of God properly when the assembled disciples think not of the reader, but only of the sacred text. The spirit of John the Baptist is a guide: "He must increase; I must decrease." (John 3:30)

Practically, he or she needs to proclaim the Word so that it may be heard. This requires some training in projection, in emphasis, in pacing of the reading, and so on. It also requires that the parish be sure that the sound system is sufficient. Most importantly, the reader needs to speak not only to the ears but to the hearts of the assembled disciples, and so should prayerfully read the passage beforehand, and, if possible, join in a discussion of the Mass readings in the week leading up to Sunday.

5) Server

The server has a noble but unobtrusive role at Mass, to assist priest and congregation so that they may more fully enter into the awesome mystery of the Eucharist. The servers should spend time in prayer before the celebration, to prepare inwardly for their mission. They should see that all that is needed is ready, so that there is no distraction during Mass as people rush around trying to find something.

During Mass they should quietly go about their work, in a prayerful spirit, aware of the details of their tasks, but mostly aware of the whole reality in which they play an important role. In training servers, it is important to be sure that they are taught the whole structure of the celebration and its spiritual significance.

6) Extraordinary minister of the Eucharist

What a privilege it is to distribute the Body and Blood of Christ to his disciples. A person who assists the priest in this mission needs to approach it with a spirit of profound reverence. All of us disciples should be sure that our lives outside of the celebration are in harmony with the Lord whom we receive at Communion, but this is especially obvious in the case of those who help in distributing the Eucharist. An old ordination prayer has meaning for all who exercise this office: "Imitate what you touch."

When we handle the Blessed Sacrament we need to do so with an intense awareness of the real presence of our Lord, an awareness arising out of a spirit of recollected prayer. The genuflections, the reverent pace, the careful handling of the Eucharist - none of these things are needed by God. They are needed by us, for we easily miss the awesome reality of our Eucharistic Lord, so dulled is our consciousness. At the heart of each should be the words of Thomas: "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28).

The same spirit is essential in parishioners who are commissioned to bring Communion to those who cannot be present at Mass. Once the Mass is over, go directly to the one to whom Communion is brought, and spend each moment on the journey in a spirit of recollected adoration.

7) Musician

Those who help all of us to praise the Lord through music are also instruments of God's grace. Often in the New Testament the most profound expressions of faith are passages originally meant to be sung. Within the first century of the Church, the pagan governor Pliny wrote to the emperor about the Christians gathering to sing hymns to Christ as to God. Music touches the emotions, and helps to dispose us to the presence of God. At times musicians can serve the disciples by playing their musical instruments, or by singing, while the congregation listens, but this always must be done not as a performance but as an aid to prayer.

It is important, however, that the whole congregation join in song, especially in those parts of the Eucharist which are meant to be sung. If this is done well, it transforms the

experience of the Eucharist, and also is a way of reaching out to those who have drifted away from the practice of the faith. Good music and good preaching are two basic elements of a Eucharistic celebration that evangelizes. It is also important to select the hymns carefully, giving at least as much attention to the content of the text sung as to the beauty of the music.

8) Minister of hospitality and service

Our parishes should be a welcoming home to all. The parishioners who greet those who enter the church, and give them practical help, are messengers of the welcoming love of the local family of faith. Those who take up the collection help with a basic part of the Mass: the practical sacrificial offering of the assembled disciples. It is interesting that the collection is mentioned in the earliest references to the Mass. Parishioners can also help in strengthening the parish community after the celebration of the Eucharist, in various ways. It is a wonderful idea to have a social gathering connected to the Sunday Eucharist.

9) Catechist

Those who help with the RCIA, or who lead a children's liturgy, perform a great service to the parish community. They help those who are not yet ready to participate fully in the Eucharist to deepen their faith, and to prepare for their full participation.

VII: Living the Eucharist

1) The Day of the Lord

The Sunday Eucharist should be the high point in our week as disciples of Christ, for on that day we celebrate the resurrection of the Lord.

During the week, as we live out our baptismal priesthood through faithful discipleship, we prepare to meet our risen Saviour at Sunday Mass. At the same time, as each day goes by, we realize our frailty, and our need for the grace that we receive at the Eucharist. By becoming conscious of the quality of Christian life that we bring to the Eucharist, we humbly prepare for the Day of the Lord.

Sunday is a time to stop, look and listen. We need to have a break from the daily rush of activity, a time to be with family, to be with God. In fact, the busier we are, the more we need Sabbath time every day, and certainly at least once a week. Unfortunately, in our society Sunday is often a day no different from the others, and so the Christian is even more impelled to make it stand out, as much as possible, as an oasis of spiritual refreshment in the desert of busyness.

As we leave the Sunday Eucharist, we enter into the week that lies ahead. In the Scriptures we have received light for our path. In our association with our fellow disciples we have

been strengthened in our consciousness that we are one in a family of faith that supports us. We have seen our particular struggles and joys in the context of the whole communion of saints, and so gain the perspective we need in order rightly to live as disciples of Jesus in this passing world. In the experience of the Eucharist we have been brought back to the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and forward to the Second Coming: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again." The Sunday Eucharist allows us to get our priorities straight, and strengthens us to be more faithful disciples.

There is no substitute for the Holy Eucharist on the Day of the Lord. We need to do all that we can to make sure that all of the disciples in our archdiocese have ready access to the Eucharist itself on Sunday.

2) Community

As Christians, we are a Eucharistic community. The day before he suffered, Jesus gathered his disciples together and gave them the Eucharist. Through the Eucharist, until he comes in glory, Christians can be united to Jesus, and to each other. At the Eucharist we are conscious of the local parish, the diocese, the Church through the world, and the whole communion of saints. The Eucharist situates us as disciples, in the communion of the Church.

We need to make the way we live with others outside the celebration of the Eucharist an extension of the ordered community of love that we are called to be at the Eucharist.

How can the hand that receives our Lord Jesus himself in Communion be used later to strike another person, or to grasp at possessions? How can the tongue that receives Our Lord Jesus himself in Communion be used later to destroy the reputation of another, or to lie?

We ask God's grace that our life outside the church may be brought into harmony with the Lord whom we encounter in Word and Sacrament in the Eucharist. This should be our resolve as we look forward to next Sunday's Mass, and as we leave this Sunday's.

For all of us, the parish needs to be a centre of prayer, of instruction in faith and of practical charity. When we come to the celebration of the Eucharist, we bring with us the whole experience of the life of the parish.

Our parish community is a family of faith. Its members are varied in so many ways, though united in faith. We do not choose our fellow parishioners, but work together as disciples of Jesus.

Newcomers and visitors to our parish Sunday Eucharist should receive a genuine welcome, as brothers and sisters in Christ. And it should not stop there. As the letter of St. James reminds us, true religion means caring for those who are in need.

We also need to reach out to our fellow Catholics who do not practise the faith. How can we rest content, when so many of them do not join in the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist, or in the other aspects of the life of our parish community?

Some are not with us because they have become caught up in the illusions of materialism. If so, we need to be sure that we are living the Gospel with integrity, so that our lives are an invitation to faith.

Some are not with us because (perhaps through misunderstanding) they feel that they cannot accept particular elements of the faith. If so, we need to reach out with sensitivity, combining clarity with charity, though we cannot adjust the message of the Gospel so that it is pleasing to all.

Some are not with us because they have experienced, or feel they have experienced, our shortcomings as individuals or as a community. If so, we need to ask honestly what we can do to change.

We derive guidance and strength from the Eucharist, so that our journey of life may bring us, in due time, to our goal. As St. Augustine said, "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." The Liturgy of the Word shows us the path ahead. The Liturgy of the Eucharist allows us to enter in a profound way into the loving sacrifice of Christ, so that we can make that present in our daily lives.

3) Adoration

"It is the Lord!" The celebration of the Eucharist is many things, but it is certainly and most profoundly an encounter with Jesus, our Risen Saviour. We do not receive holy bread, or blessed bread, nor do we gather to talk about Jesus and to share bread and wine.

"It is the Lord!" When we receive Communion, we receive Jesus, our Lord and our God. Therefore we approach the Eucharist in a spirit of reverent adoration. We also most fittingly spend time in adoration in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, reserved in the tabernacle to be brought to the sick. We can pray anywhere, but there is no more fitting place to pray on earth than in the sacramental presence of the Lord. There we are profoundly struck with the awesome mystery of God's grace.

When we pray in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament we extend in contemplation the mystery we celebrate in the Eucharist. We bring before the Lord all of our cares and troubles, and prepare ourselves for the next time we receive Jesus in Communion.

Extended prayer before the Blessed Sacrament is an expression of the ancient tradition of vigil: offering time before the Lord. Our lives are made up of time, and the way we spend it is the surest measure of our priorities. In Gethsemane, when Jesus "returned to his disciples he found them asleep. He said to Peter: "So you could not keep watch with me for one hour?" (Matthew 26:40). In the Gospels, Jesus himself keeps vigil before the Heavenly Father (e.g., Mark 1:35; Luke 6:12).

As we enter a Catholic church, we look to the sanctuary lamp which burns before the tabernacle, a sign of the light of Christ and of our prayer of vigil before the Lord. We should be sure to instruct our children concerning the real presence of the Lord, and the prayer of Eucharistic adoration. When we explain gestures such as genuflection, we help them to deepen their Eucharistic awareness.

We can easily forget the awesome reality of the presence of Christ, since the way in which he comes is, as always, so unobtrusive. To counter this forgetfulness, we should have in all of our parishes not only the opportunity to pray in adoration before the tabernacle, but also occasions for more explicit expressions of awareness of the Eucharistic presence, such as Exposition, Holy Hours and Benediction. These can fruitfully be joined with another marvellous aspect of our tradition of prayer, the celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours.

During such times of prayer, I suggest that we especially pray to God for two intentions: 1) that our families may be strengthened; and 2) that those who are being called to the priesthood and religious life will respond to that call.

During our period of vigil before the Blessed Sacrament, we should spend most of the time in silent prayer. It is good to read from the Scriptures, either aloud or silently, and perhaps to pray the rosary, or litanies, or prayers of adoration. Perhaps say the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Or the prayer of Samuel: "Speak, Lord. Your servant is listening." Or: "Maranatha! Come, Lord Jesus." It is good to sing a Eucharistic hymn, preferably one of the richly meaningful ones from the Christian tradition. Those of St. Thomas Aquinas are especially profound.

Time in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament is so important for us all that it should not be an occasion for promoting private revelations, apparitions, or locutions, or any particular devotions. An extended time of Eucharistic vigil most fittingly either begins or ends with the actual celebration of the Eucharist.

4) Action

The Eucharist always leads to action. We do not linger, simply enjoying the presence of Jesus. The Lord comes into our midst so that we can be strengthened for our mission as disciples. This is the rhythm of the Christian life: we come to the celebration of the Eucharist (or to the prayer of Eucharistic vigil), only to go back into our life of discipleship. From the struggles of that life we then return to the Eucharist, to be sent back out again. The Eucharist should ready us for our personal lives as disciples, and also for the mission of social justice. How can we blithely receive Jesus in the church, and not show love and justice to him, present in our brothers and sisters whom we meet day by day?

As we try to live with greater Christian integrity, so that, by God's grace, what we are in our daily lives is more and more consistent with what we celebrate at the Eucharist, we can benefit from the checklist of Christian discipleship: See, Judge, Act.

See: What is the situation in which I live day by day? What are the practical needs of those around me? Who is suffering? What is really happening in my life?

Judge: What does Jesus want me to do? What do I learn at the Eucharist about the mission of the disciple? How can I put into practice the words of Sacred Scripture that I hear at the Eucharist? How can I help to make the world of my daily life more harmonious with the Lord whom I receive at the Eucharist?

Act: How can I, and my parish community, do one practical thing to make our world be more in harmony with the Gospel? How can we consistently and effectively act so as to bring the light of Christ into our society? How can we, guided and strengthened by the Eucharist, make of our society a culture of life, not a culture of death? How in practice can we make the message of the Gospel effective in the world?

VIII: Hurrying to Jerusalem

The disciples at Emmaus hurried back to Jerusalem, once they had recognized Jesus "in the breaking of the bread." Their hearts had burned within them as he spoke his word to them, and now they hastened to share the Good News.

We are passing through this world. It is not our home. During our short time here, we are like travellers staying at a hotel, getting ready to check out. It is wise not to become too attached to this life, nor to set our priorities in terms of the values of our society. Each of us has a brief time in this world, and in the perspective of eternity there is not much difference between a life of 20 years and one of 90.

Too easily we can get trapped in illusion, slaves of selfishness and of the values of a world that is passing away. Our challenge as Christians is to live to the full while we are here, loving God and loving neighbour. That is what ultimately matters.

Through the Eucharist, God frees us from illusion, and brings us into contact with reality: the unseen world of divine providence and grace, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God. The Liturgy of the Word shows us the path ahead. The Liturgy of the Eucharist connects us to the source of eternal life.

We are homeward bound, hurrying to the heavenly Jerusalem, the fulfillment of the kingdom of God, which we have already begun to experience, during our brief stay on earth, through the celebration of the Eucharist.

"In your mercy keep us free from sin, and protect us from all anxiety, as we wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ."

Come, Lord Jesus.

Thomas Collins
Archbishop of Edmonton

The pastoral letter was written while His Eminence, Thomas Cardinal Collins, was Archbishop of Edmonton.