

PASTORAL MESSAGE OF BISHOP OSAMU MIZOBE

Diocese of Takamatsu

In Keeping with the Year of the Eucharist-- Communal Celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice

Last year was officially designated as the Year of the Eucharist in the universal Church. For people all over the world there were many opportunities to deepen their understanding of and fervor towards the Eucharist. Here in the Diocese of Takamatsu, for various reasons, we were unable to make last year a special commemorative year, but one year later we have allocated this year as “The Year of the Eucharist”.

In order to understand the Eucharist, we have to first grasp the meaning of the Mass – the Celebration of Thanksgiving. My intention is to foster understanding of the meaning of the Eucharist by explaining the Mass, and then to illustrate how the Eucharist gives life to our faith. In relation to our life of faith, it is essential to speak also about the importance of the Lord’s Day. This will be the topic of another message at a later date this year.

There are three main parts in the Mass: Liturgy of the Word, Liturgy of the Eucharist and Communion Rite. When we put the three parts together, it is important to say that the Mass is “A Communal Celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice”. If you have a fixed idea that Mass is celebrated by the priest alone, I would ask that you make the change to the conviction that we celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice together. This means that all of us take part actively in all three parts of the Mass. How can we take part actively in the Mass, and experience the celebration of the Eucharistic Sacrifice communally?

The scope of this message does not allow me to speak in detail about all three parts of the Mass. For that reason I will concentrate on the Liturgy of the Eucharist. That does not mean that the other two parts are not important. On another occasion I will certainly find an opportunity to speak about them.

1. The Holy Spirit Descends on the Altar and Fills the Assembly with Grace
Bread and wine are brought to the altar. The celebrant prays the preface that speaks to us of God’s plan of salvation, the “Holy, Holy” is

sung, and we enter into the central part of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. I will use Eucharistic Prayer II to explain this part of the Mass. The celebrant extends his hands over the bread and wine and prays. "Let your Spirit come upon these gifts to make them holy..." This prayer is called "epiklesi" in Greek and is an invocation asking for the intervention of the Holy Spirit. The assembly prays to the Holy Spirit, and the action of the laying of hands during the invocation is the sign that the Holy Spirit has come down on the altar. The celebrant continues, "... that they may become for us the body and blood of our Lord, Jesus Christ." We do not pray that the coming of the Holy Spirit will make us righteous, or that our faith will be strengthened. We pray that the Holy Spirit will fill our altar with grace and that the bread and wine will become the Body and Blood of Christ.

This action teaches us two things: the Holy Spirit comes among us during the Mass and, through the words of the celebrant, the Holy Spirit changes the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ. Do we truly believe that? At that moment the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Christ. Is it not true that we follow the ceremony taking place at the altar like an attendee at a theater production? After the Consecration we sing the "Memorial Acclamation" (In Japanese, "The Mystery of our Faith"). Yes, the Mass is a mystery. If we do not have faith, we neither understand the meaning of the Mass, nor partake of its graces. As we follow the ceremonial prayers and gestures of the Mass, whether we think that it is all meaningless, or whether we realize the greatness of what is happening, is the forked road of whether we have faith or not. The Holy Spirit speaks to us from the altar: "This is the Body of Christ. This is the Blood of Christ Do you believe?"

2. The Mass is a Sacrifice

The Consecration of the wine is completed with the words, "Do this in memory of me". In Greek "in memory" is translated as "anamnesis". What are we remembering? When we hear the words "of me", is it enough to bring the memory of Jesus to our minds? Is it enough to recall that Jesus and his disciples partook of the Last Supper together? The first words used in the Consecration of the Bread are as follows:

“Before he was given up to death, a death he freely accepted, he took bread and gave you thanks. He broke the bread, gave it to his disciples and said ...” At present the Bishops’ Conference of Japan has submitted a new translation of the Eucharistic Prayer to Rome. In the new translation we have returned to the word “saku”(tear or rend) instead of the word “waru”(divide, cut) that is used at present. The word “saku” is so graphic that some people dislike it, but there is a great deal of meaning in the use of that word. In the word “saku” we find expression of the fact that Jesus gave himself up to death as a sacrifice for us. The bread and wine are signs of Jesus who gave himself completely up to death for us.

This leads us to an understanding of the words that follow: “This is my body which will be given up for you.” That is what the Mass is. It is celebrated in memory of Jesus who gave himself up to death and was broken for us. At the consecration of the wine, we hear “this is the cup of my blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant. It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven.” Because of the blood Jesus shed for us, the sins of mankind are forgiven and we are brought to new life. What we are remembering is not an event that took place in the past. We remember that now on the altar Jesus is given over to death and gives himself completely to the Father. The Mass is the sacrifice that our Lord Jesus Christ offered for all of us.

God the Father listens to the prayer of his beloved son Jesus from the cross – the prayer that Jesus gave his life for. In Japanese the expression “ooku no hito no tame ni”(for many people) should really read “for all people”: people who are suffering in war-torn countries, children who are being abused, women who are being battered, people who are old and facing death – God gives the grace that each person needs at the time. All of these needs are answered because Jesus through his death continues to earnestly intercede for us.

There is another meaning in the words “Do this in memory...” Here at this moment the body and blood of Jesus is being offered. We, too, offer ourselves as a sacrifice at the same time. It may be a poor and small sacrifice, but God our Father accepts our sacrifice and listens to us. We are all sinners full of faults and failings, but by offering ourselves with Jesus, our prayers are heard. “In memory of his death

and resurrection, we offer you, Father, this life-giving bread, this saving cup. We thank you for counting us worthy to stand in your presence and serve you.” This is the prayer we say after the Consecration and at that time the glory of the Risen Jesus envelops us.

When we think about what has been said up to now, we realize that it is not enough to be a mere observer at Mass. Before we enter the church we come with a specific intention to pray for. We pray for our families, for people suffering in the world, for people who have lost sight of the meaning of life. We come to Mass with a particular intention to pray for and during the Mass we offer that prayer in union with Jesus. It is also good to make our Mass a time of thanksgiving. In that way the fullness of God’s grace permeates our world. Where we live there is only a handful of Christian people. Rather than being sad about that fact, it is more important to value the Mass that our small group celebrates together. When we offer ourselves at Mass, God grants us more than we can ever imagine, and turns us towards new life. The fruit of all our missionary work comes from God. Our role is to intercede for people by praying for them. We are not the ones who do the work. It is God working in us and through us. We are simply the instruments that God uses.

There are people who say that they cannot help in the mission of the Church because they have grown old. Is that true? By offering one’s ill health or aging in union with the sacrifice of Jesus, the world receives great blessings. We could bring peace to Iraq by such an offering of our sacrifices. A young person struggling with his/her life plans could receive new life. In faraway Africa children could be born. The Mass we offer in union with Christ is the greatest gift the people of the world can receive. For that reason, when the celebrant prays “We offer you”, then we, too, must unite with that prayer by offering ourselves to God.

From all that I have explained above, there is only one thing to be said. The Mass is offered for the whole world, and is universal by nature. It is not only a question of being steeped in a pleasant and grateful feeling. The Mass is not an opportunity to deepen friendships nor is it a vehicle for catechesis. We must not forget that the Mass is a prayer in which we earnestly present ourselves as a sacrifice in union

with Christ.

3. Why Do We Need Priests in the Catholic Church?

It is necessary to speak about the role of the ordained priest with regard to the sacraments. That is what makes the Catholic Church catholic. When we speak of priesthood, there are two elements to be considered – the priestly vocation of the Christian people, and the vocation of the ordained priest as minister of the sacraments. Through the Sacrament of Baptism all Christian people participate in the priesthood. They proclaim the word of God, and take part in liturgical celebrations by singing, serving at the altar and reading. Often they serve as ministers of the Eucharist and as leaders in liturgical celebrations. They also baptize people, are witnesses at weddings, and preside over the prayers at wakes. However, the administration of the sacraments is the sole responsibility of the ordained priest.

Many responsibilities are given to the Christian people. They are principally responsible for the administration of the parish and for making the parish vibrant and active. We believe that it is very important for the Christian people in our diocese to be given opportunities for formation. In a parish where the priestly role of the Christian people is understood and practiced, both the liturgy and missionary zeal of the parish become very vigorous. Solid vocations to the priesthood are also born in a fervent church community. We come to realize that it is a natural phenomenon for vocations to be born in our church and that this is the true face of the church. If there are no vocations from our churches, then we have to take a second look at the makeup of our parish and make whatever changes are necessary. In other words, if we find ourselves without priests, as long as we think that we can bring priests here from other places, our diocese will never be able to become independent.

The most important role of the ordained priest is to administer the sacraments. This is an area where the Catholic Church is fundamentally different from Protestant churches. How he celebrates Mass and how he administers the Sacrament of Reconciliation are very important issues in the life of an ordained priest. The Christian people must not look upon the priest as the administrator of the church

property or the person who does all the odd jobs around the church. What the priest must give his all to above everything else is the celebration of Mass. When we recall that at the time of the laying on of hands the Holy Spirit comes upon the altar, we realize how important the role of the priest is. The priest proclaims the Word of God and gives Christ's heart and body to the people. How we can make the Mass a dignified celebration where all the people can offer themselves as a sacrifice is a question we all need to ask ourselves. I am not saying that we need a large number of priests. Even if there are only a few priests, my hope is that the sacraments will be important to them, that they will respect liturgical celebrations and that they will call our people to an even deeper spirituality.

Conclusion

"Through him, with him, in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, almighty Father, for ever and ever. Amen" Let us sing with all our heart this song of praise that marks the end of the Eucharistic Prayer. The parish Mass is the offering of all the people who are its members. This takes precedence over any other liturgical celebration. During the Sunday Mass in union with Christ we praise the Holy Trinity, and when we sing the above words "in Praise of God", we celebrate the unity of the Church.

I wish to speak briefly about the Communion Rite. When the celebrant holds the Eucharist up before each of us and says, "The Body of Christ", we answer "Amen". That is not just a ceremonial gesture. The "amen" is the expression of my personal faith. The "amen" I say means "This is the Body of Christ". Let us answer "Amen" in a strong and firm voice. By receiving the Eucharist, we become one with Christ, and in communion with our companions in faith, who receive the same Eucharist, we build a church that is one.

Receiving the Eucharist is not something we do as a routine act but rather an act that is done with conviction. Christ loved us so much that he gave up his life for us. In the same way, when we receive the Eucharist, we promise that we will love others and live for them.

The Eucharist remains on the altar after the Mass is over. Whenever we visit the church, the Lord is there. Paying visits to the Blessed Sacrament

has fallen into disuse, but when we call into the church, let us not forget to take a few minutes to pray to the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. I also encourage you to continue in your parishes the practice of processions in honor of the Blessed Sacrament and other devotions.

In sending this message regarding “The Year of the Eucharist” I have tried to explain what the Mass is and what the Eucharist is. There are many areas I have not touched upon. I sincerely wish that this year we will use every opportunity in our parishes and in our diocese as a whole to deepen our understanding of the Eucharist. I hope you will use this message in your parish assemblies so that you may all be able to achieve that depth.

June 18, 2006 Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ

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