

PASTORAL MESSAGE OF BISHOP OSAMU MIZOBE

Diocese of Takamatsu

In keeping with the Year of the Eucharist, Part II

The Meaning of the Lord' s Day

In the beginning let me remind you that here in the Takamatsu Diocese we have dedicated this year as “The Year of the Eucharist” , and we are doing all we can to deepen our understanding of the Mass and the Eucharist. This understanding is closely related to our main concern at this time, namely “Unity in the Diocese” . The sacrifice of the Mass is indeed the source of our unity. How we build our church community is inseparably linked to how we give meaning to the Mass in our lives. At this time let us reaffirm our conviction that the Sunday Mass in particular is the center and apex of our Christian lives.

I. How We Live the Lord' s Day Is of Utmost Importance to our Journeying Together as Church

Since I spoke at length about this topic in the first part of my pastoral message in June, I will not repeat here what I said at that time. All the Popes from the time of the Second Vatican Council have been very insistent about the importance of the Lord' s Day. Most recently in 1998, the late Pope John Paul II wrote an Apostolic Letter “Dies Domini” stressing the importance of the Sunday. In the documents of Vatican II it is stated that Christian people must come together as one people on the Lord' s Day.

Why must we stress the importance of the Lord' s Day? When the work of Creation was completed, God rested. After a week of toil, in thanksgiving that we too participate in the work of Creation, we also rest. Sunday is a good time to reflect on the week we have just completed. In the busy society in which we live, it is a privilege to have time at least once a week to take it easy. There are many people, however, for whom even that leisure is not available. I am sure that they too will agree that having such a day is important

for one' s development as a person, and as an opportunity to be open to relations with other people.

Why then are we asked to assemble on the Lord' s Day? If our day of rest is to be a day of reflection on the preceding week, could we not do that better at home? But we are encouraged to come to church and to celebrate the Sunday together. It is true that Sunday is the last day of the week, but in the Church it is the first day of a new week. We call Sunday "The Lord' s Day" because on that day we recall the Resurrection of Christ and his appearance to his disciples. Perhaps it would be more fitting to call Sunday "The Celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord" . Sunday is a celebration - a day full of joy. People always used to dress up on Sundays as a visible sign of celebration.

When people gather to celebrate together, there is always singing, dancing and a meal. People mix together in an atmosphere of conviviality. In the same way, baptized people come together on Sunday to express their joy. Together they relive the joy of the disciples of Jesus when they heard the good news of His Resurrection. Pope John Paul II called Sunday "Church Day" . He said, " It is important that the People of God come together to express fully the very identity of the Church." Every time we attend Sunday Mass we experience Church. That fact shows us how important the Sunday Mass is. We do not participate in the Mass out of a sense of duty, for our own personal consolation, or to meet our friends.

II. The Sunday Eucharist as the Center of Life in the Church

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states, "The Sunday celebration of the Lord' s Day and His Eucharist is at the heart of the Church' s life." (Catechism #2177) Pope John Paul II adds, "The ecclesial dimension intrinsic to the Eucharist is realized in every Eucharistic celebration. But it is expressed most especially on the day when the whole community come together to commemorate the Lord' s Resurrection." (Dies Domini #32) Furthermore, it is true that there is no other religious experience that can be compared to the celebration of the Eucharist.

It is important to come together as Church on Sunday. Even if there

is no priest available for Mass, the Christian people can come and pray together in a celebration of thanksgiving to God. At that gathering one can experience in a deep way communion with one's brothers and sisters. Having no Mass on Sunday does not mean that coming together as a community is without significance. In the days of persecution in Japan there were no priests, but the Christian people came together to pray. That is the reason why they were able to keep and pass on their faith for 300 years in spite of the fact that there were no priests.

Having said that, however, it goes without saying that coming together for Eucharist on the Lord's Day is the most fitting way to celebrate. These days, rather than use the expression "assist at Mass" we say "offer the Mass together". This last expression is filled with meaning. The Acts of the Apostles tell us about the early days of the Church. What was most important for the Christians at that time was to be of one heart at the breaking of the Bread.

"They (the early Christians) devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers." (Acts 2:42) It was because of this that the brotherly and sisterly love of the early Christians was deepened. By coming together on Sundays Christians experience Church. "Each community gathering all its members for the 'breaking of the bread' becomes the place where the mystery of the Church is concretely made present." (Dies Domini #34) When we offer the Mass together we pray for all people and for the Church spread throughout the world. We remember the people who are suffering in the world and offer sacrifice for them. More important than anything else is the fact that unity is born in the Church. That is because it is the true unity that comes from our communion in Christ. It is not unity based on friendship or love for those close to us, but rather unity in Faith.

III. The Need to Clarify the Importance of the Mass on the Lord's Day from a Pastoral Perspective

The Constitution of the Sacred Liturgy from Vatican II teaches us that "efforts must be made to encourage a sense of community within the parish, above all in the common celebration of the Sunday

Mass.” (#42) This quotation means the Sunday Mass is very important. It emphasizes that, even if certain groups exist, and even if there are several different convents of consecrated religious, the Sunday Mass in each respective parish must be given priority. (Instruction on Eucharistic Worship #26) “It is not advisable, therefore, to have special Masses for small groups on Sunday, the day set aside for the assembly of the Christian people. It is not just because it will create problems regarding the number of priests available for parish celebrations, but will contribute to the problem of promoting and safeguarding the unity and life of the Christian community.” (Directives for Masses for Special Groups #10) Based on the above teachings of the Church, I propose the following directives for the Diocese of Takamatsu:

1. Give priority to the Sunday Mass in order to promote unity in each parish.

There are many different groups in the Takamatsu Diocese. They are all groups whose objective is to promote unity in each parish. For that reason let us all make the decision to give importance to the Sunday Mass.

2. Be creative in making the Mass a celebration of that particular parish community.

There are many very small parishes in our diocese. Since it is possible, therefore, to establish a good family atmosphere, it would be good for each parish to use its ingenuity to find ways to foster the deepening of faith in this family atmosphere. There are many possibilities for such ingenuity in readings, homilies, hymns and ceremonial movements.

3. Give priority to the principal Mass of the Lord’ s Day

In a small diocese like ours there is no need to increase the number of Masses. It is important to put one’ s energy into making the principal Mass on Sunday a sign of unity in the parish. Each person should do his/her best to be present at that Mass and contribute to its vibrancy.

4. Make Masses available on Saturday or other days of the week for those people for whom attendance at Sunday Mass is impossible.

Not all Christians can attend Sunday Mass. For such people the

pastor responsible for the parish may provide a Saturday Mass or in some cases a Mass on another day of the week. This indicates the care and concern of the Church for people who are unable to come to church on Sunday. This is, however, a pastoral consideration and is not intended to minimize the importance of the Sunday. The way to answer this pastoral need is left up to the wise judgment of the pastor.

5. Masses for special groups must be held with the permission of the pastor.

There are many different groups in the diocese. Masses for youth, children, foreign people - different categories come to mind. All such Masses must be held under the direction of the pastor of the parish. Even if there is a Mass for such a special group, it does not mean that the importance of the principal Mass on Sunday can be ignored. It is better for such groups to think of ways to attend the Sunday Mass. Since we now have Collaborative Ministry in each area of the diocese, the leader of each group must consult the priests and parish councils involved in such plans.

6. Permission from the Bishop is required for experimentation in the liturgy, which is the responsibility of the Bishop

The liturgy is an important source of unity. Unity in the liturgy reflects unity in the Church. The Bishops' Conference of Japan strictly follows this principle. Here in the Diocese of Takamatsu, we too follow the directives of the Bishops' Conference. I encourage you to experiment with various kinds of liturgy, but I urge you to be sure to consult the Bishop before proceeding with such experimental liturgies.

IV. In Conclusion

By coming together every Sunday to pray and offer our celebration of the Eucharist, we deepen our meaning as Church. God works through the assembly and grants many graces to those gathered there. Church is born when the Christian people come together for a heartfelt celebration of the Lord's Day. The celebration of the Eucharist is not a time to run away from the worries and concerns of daily life, nor is it a time to be transported into ecstasy. Neither is it like

a club of like-minded friends who gather to show their love and friendship for one another. It is a celebration with Christ at its center. It is a time when living the Mass is the sacrifice we offer for all people in the world.

Let us take this opportunity to seriously think of ways to make the Sunday liturgy more meaningful. Some people understand at a deep level the meaning of the Mass and earnestly try to find ways to make it live in their daily lives. Other people have already experienced splendid liturgies. My hope is that people who have had such experiences will not keep them only for themselves but will take every opportunity they can to find means to share them with all the Christian people.

December 3, 2006

The First Sunday of Advent

Francis Xavier Osamu Mizobe

Bishop of the Diocese of Takamatsu