



## Office of the Bishop

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Dear Clergy, Religious and Faithful of the Diocese of Antigonish, (Pastoral Letter 16 / 2020)

On Sunday, we celebrate the feast of Corpus Christi, the feast of the Body and Blood of Christ and if not for this COVID -19 pandemic, we would have been celebrating our Diocesan Eucharistic Congress; it seems an opportune time to provide some reflection on the Eucharist.

This feast of Corpus Christi reminds us just how connected we are to Christ and to one another. We are 'One Body in this One Lord' as the hymn reminds us. If the early Christians had been asked to create a banner about the Eucharist, what words would they have chosen? I think they would have chosen "One Bread, One Body, One Church". Certainly, they realized that the Body of the Eucharist creates the Body of the Church. For the first seven hundred years of Christianity, the Eucharist was understood in the context of unity and community. This is evident in the theology of the early Church. The Eucharist is the New Passover of the Christian community. The Jewish Passover celebrated God's saving work in the Exodus from Egypt. In the Christian Passover, the Eucharist celebrates Christ's saving work at Calvary and Easter.

The emphasis upon unity and community is evident in the liturgy of the early Church. For the first few hundred years, the celebration of the Eucharist took place at home in a communal, yet family setting. When the liturgy moved to the church building, the Bishop gathered people around him in a communal atmosphere. The liturgies emphasized sharing and participating. The Church stressed community by the sending of a piece of consecrated bread from the Bishop's Mass to the local parish churches so that a sense of unity was preserved in the community of believers. This custom established by the Pope became known as the *fermentum* practice meaning leavening. This is the origin of the expression to be *in communion* with each other, and such communion was considered essential to Christianity in the 2nd-century writings of St. Ignatius of Antioch and St. Irenaeus. The term *fermentum* was probably a reference to the Eucharist as the leaven of the Christian life, and as the instrument by which Christians spread throughout the world were united in the one Body of Christ as a leaven to the world.

The context of unity and community dominated the meaning of Eucharist. Today, this rite of commingling consists of placing a small particle of the consecrated Bread into the chalice as the priest says a quiet prayer, "May the mingling of the body and blood of Christ bring us to eternal life." When the priest does this, it is also an ancient symbol of our union with the bishop and the church universal.

The celebration of the Eucharist unites us in mind and heart; at least it should if we receive it with the right attitude. Since Jesus shares Himself with us, we share ourselves with one another. It is a sacrament of solidarity with one another and with our world. The Church Fathers loved to preach on 1 Corinthians 11 in which St. Paul corrects the people at house liturgies for being selfish and not sharing their food with each other. Like St. Paul, the Church Fathers pointed out that such an absence of caring and sharing denies the very meaning of Eucharist. St Paul reminds us in the second reading of this year's feast, "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." St. Paul encourages us by painting a picture of the kind of life we are called to live in union with one another. In Ephesians 4:2, we find five of the greatest words of our Christian faith where St. Paul advises us to "bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness, and patience". He says, "Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit, by the peace that binds you together." It is St. Paul's urgent plea that the members of the one Church should preserve 'the sacred oneness'; this unity and peace should characterize the true Church.

According to the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium* 3, as often as the Eucharist is celebrated the unity of all believers who form one body in Christ is both expressed and brought about. In other words, the Eucharist is both the sign and the source of two kinds of unity: our unity with Christ and our unity with each other. This means that we are to work to become the community to which Christ calls us. It means reaching out to others with genuine concern and not just to those in our own local community but also to our extended family around the world.

Nourished by the Eucharist we can overcome any differences between us, because we are united to each other. All differences of time and place, **race and colour**, politics and philosophies become irrelevant when we realize that we are one with each other because we eat together from the same loaf of Bread. Thus the Bread that makes us one, becomes through our work, Bread for the world. We reach out in compassion to heal and to feed the multitudes.

Thus, the Body of Christ in the Eucharist is what builds up the Body of Christ on earth, the Church. As we reflect upon the Eucharist, may we understand more clearly, as did the early Christians, the vision of the unity between Eucharist and Church and how one builds up the other. One Bread, One Body, One Church.

Bishop Wayne Kirkpatrick  
Diocese of Antigonish