

BELONG MORE DEEPLY

In the beauty of this Advent and Christmas season, our hearts are filled with joy because of what we celebrate: the birth of Jesus from Mary His Mother in the Bethlehem stable as Joseph kept watch and angels sang “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests”. There are two groups whose coming to the Bethlehem stable commands our attention. First are the shepherds in the fields so near the manger of Jesus. Hearing the message of the angel, they respond with open hearts and ready wills: “Let us go to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place which the Lord has made known to us”. They found Jesus and they entered with grateful hearts into the warmth of the company of Mary and Joseph glorifying God for the gift of His Son.

The other group came from afar. The three Magi saw a star and wondered what it might mean. They had to search and ask “Where is the newborn King of the Jews?” They were strangers just as the shepherds were neighbors. They came from afar. The shepherds were there by the side of Mary and Joseph. Yet near or far, they all were longing to see Jesus, to know the newborn King, to worship Him and offer Him their gifts.

In a certain sense these two groups represent so many who are Catholics today. How blessed we are if we are among those who, like the shepherds, have come quickly to Jesus and regularly pay homage to Him by our active participation of mind and heart in the Sunday celebration of Mass. Yet we have also many of our brothers and sisters who are still searching for Him, may be longing to know Him better but, for one reason or other, they cannot find their way to the manger of Sunday Mass. Like the Magi they want to discover the newborn King in their lives and have already followed His star by baptism and some closeness to Jesus. But for many different reasons or circumstances, they are not with us at the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist, the holy sacrifice of the Mass.

This letter is addressed to everyone but especially to you who, like the shepherds, gather weekly at the manger, your parish Church, to participate in offering to God the greatest act of worship anyone can ever make: The celebration of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. There we hear God’s Word, we offer the gifts of bread and wine, and are one in mind and heart with the priest as he proclaims the Eucharistic prayer that brings Jesus to us in His Body, in His blood. This is the sacrament that unites us with Him and with one another as we are nourished by the communion which makes us the one Body of Christ.

To you, first of all, I have come with good news that we soon will have a gift to open up our hearts and renew our faith as we celebrate the Eucharist. After forty years of using the First Edition of the Roman Missal since Vatican Council Two, our Holy Father Pope Benedict has given us a new English translation of the **Third Typical Edition of the Roman Missal. This new translation will begin to be used next year on the First Sunday of Advent, November 26 and 27, 2011.**

There is always a risk when we face something new. We may not want to change. We may not think it all that necessary. “Why bother?” some will ask. “I am satisfied enough with what we have”, others will say. “Here we go again” can also be heard. But that is not right. That is not true. I am writing to you to tell you that, as your bishop who has been involved in this whole process, this new translation is beautiful. It is a faithful reflection of what the Church is praying around the world. It is Catholic and universal. It is faithful and for the faithful. It invites us into the mystery of God’s love. It can open the hearts of us all. It can make us ever more one. No matter who we are, rich or poor, young or old, priest or religious, layperson or bishop, active or less so, this is the Mass that will make it possible for us all **TO BELONG MORE DEEPLY.**

For the past eight years, teams of experts in liturgy, theology, literature, languages and pastoral practice have been working to produce the best translation possible for use in our country and almost all the other countries where English is the principal language for the celebration of Mass and the sacraments. There are many reasons why this was necessary. First, we want the Church in our country to celebrate the same Mass with the same prayers as the rest of the Catholic world. Second, the new third edition has many more feasts of saints who have been recently canonized and many new Votive Masses like the special Mass for the Unborn. Third, we are able to have the fruit of the labor of so many experts who have produced prayers in our own language that will resound in our hearts and open up our minds to a deeper appreciation and living out of the Mass we celebrate. We will have the opportunity for new music that will allow us to enter more deeply into the mystery we proclaim. As St. Augustine wrote, “when you sing, you pray twice”. The Mass of the new Roman Missal invites us to embrace it in all its richness and **belong more deeply.**

In this Advent and Christmas season when we are caught up in all the festivities, you who come regularly to Mass know how blessed we are to be together in celebrating the Eucharist which Pope John Paul II called “the most precious gift Jesus left His Church”. As

your bishop I want to thank you for your faithfulness to Sunday Mass, a fidelity that you can pass on to your children and grandchildren. You live by God’s Word proclaimed and preached every Sunday. You and all the members of your parish present with you in your local parish Church become ever more fully one when you unite your hearts and whole person with the priest in proclaiming the Eucharistic prayer, “Dying you destroyed our death, rising you restored our life, Lord Jesus Come in Glory”. As the priest concludes “Through Him, with Him and in Him”, your **AMEN** carries the gift of Christ’s priestly sacrifice to heaven. Our common proclamation of the Our Father prepares us to be united with Him and one another as we all share in the Body and Blood of our Savior.

The New Missal, I believe, is the moment the Lord has given us to renew our celebration of Sunday Mass, to draw us more closely into the life of Christ and build up His Body, the Church, for the witness we are invited to make to the world. That witness is shaped by our celebration of Mass and follows from our participation in the Mass. In fact, the very name, **Missal**, come from the Latin words by which we conclude our celebration. “Ite, Missa est”. “Go: for now you are sent”. Yes, we are sent into the world to show by our lives of faith and hope and charity that Jesus is alive. He lives in us. As Peter proclaimed 2000 years ago in the Jerusalem Temple that first Easter: “we are the witnesses; we and the Holy Spirit”.

To give witness we have to belong. We have to be part of what we believe. That is not an abstraction or a theory or a philosophy. We believe in a person, Jesus Christ. He is at the center of our lives because He alone has saved us. And He, on the night before He died, gave us His Body, His Blood and told us “to do this in memory of Me”. As Paul says, “every time we eat His body and drink His blood, we proclaim His death until He comes again”.

The faith we share, Pope Benedict tells us, is “essentially a Eucharistic faith” given to us by the Lord as the fruit of His death on the cross. It is the most wondrous act the Church has. It deserves then that we participate in it with the kind of “active participation” that the Second Vatican Council and Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI have taught us. That means we all have a part, and we all are integral to the Sunday celebration. And when we come to Mass we enter not just a sacred place, our parish church. We enter into this mystery of salvation. We come together to enter into God’s action and to join our offering to Christ’s offering to the Father. We have come to be together as one body and become ever more deeply one, belonging ever more deeply to the Lord and to one another. The intimacy of the

life we share in the Eucharist is even deeper and more intimate than the bond of love between a husband and wife or the bond of love that binds families together.

How can I say that? Think for a moment who is the source of love? God! For God is love. We love one another with true hearts but we can never love one another as much as God loves us. We can only seek to grow ever more in love with Him and with one another. And the best place to do this is Sunday Mass. The most privileged place where we encounter God’s love is this weekly encounter, this special meeting of us all with the Lord of life and love, Jesus Christ. Here we always experience Him. Here we always **belong more deeply**.

Once we have experienced that love, we know that we have to respond. There is no one of us who does not have the invitation personally from Him to belong more deeply. That’s what happens when we realize how much He loves us. He wants us to want Him. He wants us to share with Him what He wants to share with us: His life in our lives, our lives in His life. To belong more deeply is His invitation to all of us without exception. As your bishop I am constantly called to belong more deeply. For me it means being sure to have the proper mind and heart as I come to celebrate Mass. Before I arrive, I owe it to Him and to you to prepare my homily with prayer and study. Every priest wants to do that. You have every reason to ask and expect that we prepare ourselves so that we can lead the Body of Christ to an ever deeper celebration of the action that provides us with the Body and Blood of Christ.

Each one of us then is called to prepare himself or herself for the Sunday celebration of Mass. It is not always easy for you, the good men and women of our Diocese, the families that have to make a real effort to be at Sunday Mass. There are so many other demands on your time, on your children’s time, and on the little bit of leisure time society allows us as persons and as families. From the depths of my heart I thank you. My brother priests too thank you for your faithfulness to Sunday Mass, for the example you give your children, for the witness you give your neighbors, especially those who belong but still need to know what you and I know: **we all are called to belong more deeply to the Lord and to His Church. All of us belong but none of us ever reaches the point that we can stop and say “enough. I belong enough”.** No, we all are invited, wherever we are on the journey of life, our pilgrimage on earth, we all are invited with all the differences of background and culture that does not divide but enriches us. We all are invited to move forward as best each of us can, at the pace each of us can. But we are all called to know that we can all

belong more deeply than we did yesterday or do today, because we all can belong more deeply tomorrow and all the tomorrows of our lives. The measure is God’s infinite love expressed by Jesus on the cross with a love “even to the end”. And that love can expand our hearts. That love embraces us and stirs us to embrace Him and one another in the celebration of Sunday Mass.

And that brings us back to the new Roman Missal which we will begin using one year from now, on the weekend of November 26-27, 2011.

What will you find? It is the same Mass which the Church always has celebrated but we have a translation that makes our celebration in our country much more in conformity with the same Mass celebrated throughout the world. There will be some new words, most of them to be found in the prayers of the Mass that are proclaimed or sung by the priest. Not many, but some new responses or prayers will have to be learned by us all. One example of this is that the response to “The Lord be with you” will now be “And with your Spirit” which is the response in the Roman Missal and in every other language.

What is being asked of you? First and foremost I ask that everyone in our diocese, lay person, consecrated men and women, deacons, priests and bishops all greet the new Missal with joy and high expectations, that we make it our own and we use this opportunity to belong more deeply by making this a time of renewal of spirit and deepening of our love for the Eucharist. Let the words of the prayers sink into your hearts. Meditate on them and discover the rich beauty of the mystery we celebrate. We pray what we believe and we believe what we pray. And there is no better way to deepen our faith than to pray with understanding and thus let our understanding be shaped by our prayer.

How are we going to get ready? Already we have formed a Steering Committee led by the Chancellor, and the heads of the Diocesan offices of Worship and of Faith Formation. In turn they have gathered a wider committee of persons representing all the parts of our Diocese to take the lead in helping us understand the Missal, pass on the news, get the spirit and belong more deeply. In the months ahead, there will be workshops for our parish staffs, our teachers in the schools, for liturgical leaders and musicians, for those involved in catechesis and faith formation, for deacons and priests. Watch for these opportunities for education and formation that will be offered through the Diocese and through the parish, and take advantage of them to learn more about the Mass so that you can belong more deeply.

This will go on from now through the first half of the New Year. For example, we are having a special convocation of all the priests on Friday, February 25, 2011 with the new Missal as our centerpiece. The priests and those who work with them will be preparing themselves to bring this before the parishioners once we all have celebrated the Sacred Triduum and the Easter season together.

On Pentecost Sunday afternoon I will preside at a Pentecost Mass in the new auditorium of Saint Anthony High School with all the priests and representatives from all our parishes. The purpose of this Mass is to invoke the Holy Spirit on our Diocese as we all open our hearts to implement the new Missal. This is the most important single event we will have! Why do I say this? I say it because learning the new phrases and getting used to the changes in some of the prayers is not anywhere near as important as opening our hearts to the movement of the Holy Spirit and letting the Spirit guide us into a joyful welcome of the Missal. In that way we make this a new moment of experiencing God’s love and bearing witness to our life of faith. Let this new moment renew our enthusiasm and open our lives to being ever more filled with the graces that come from celebrating the Mass with all our hearts and minds and voices!

I keep thinking of St. Augustine’s invitation to sing aloud your “Alleluia” as we go forth on the pilgrimage of life. I am inviting you, like St. Leo the Great, “to recognize your dignity, O Christian”, for you are sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus. I want to remind you who you are and whose you are. I want us all to be so filled with the gift of the Spirit that we in our Diocese will experience a great spiritual renewal which will be the fruit of the greatest action the People of God can perform: the celebration of Mass. The Eucharist is the source and summit of our lives as Christians, as the Body of Christ, His Church, this great community of communion!

While the vision is one I hope stirs your hearts and quickens your spirit, we also must be aware that this is not our doing but God’s who has sent His Son to take away our sins and who calls us into His own wonderful light. We are never worthy of His love and we need always to be humble and grateful. We know that we are all sinners in need of forgiveness and reconciliation. We have lived through much and we need constantly to give thanks for the reconciling love that has taken away our sins through the sacrament of penance. We should all regularly have recourse to the sacrament of reconciliation. In fact we must so do if

we are aware of any serious or mortal sin which objectively must be forgiven before we can approach the Lord to receive Holy Communion.

Part of this renewal must also be reconciliation with one another and with the Church who is the mother of us all and the only place where we can find true forgiveness and full reconciliation. I am asking that we all include prayers that acknowledge our own failings and the failings that have marred the life of the Church. I have composed a prayer that I hope will be used by us all for a specific time from the first of the year through Lent as another way to prepare ourselves to have hearts that are mended by Christ’s healing love, hearts that then will welcome one another in a true kiss of peace.

To all of you whom I call my “fellow shepherds”, you who gather every Sunday with me and my brother priests around the altar, I offer my deepest gratitude for who you are. You have my prayers, my affection and my love. If we, shepherds who gather at the manger-altars of our parish churches every Sunday, find our lives renewed and given new spirit and new strength by the celebration of Mass with the new Missal, then we will also have the spirit to give greater witness to our brothers and sisters who belong but not yet belong as deeply as you and I. I am thinking of all those magi, those wise men and women, who are members of the Body of Christ who belong to Him but for one reason or another are still searching to follow a star that will lead them to the Bethlehem of Sunday Mass.

Once you and I have internalized our celebration of Mass and belong more deeply to Christ through it, then we can set forth from Mass to go in peace and bring to them the witness of our life with an invitation to them to “Come and see” where Jesus lives, to “taste and eat” the Bread of life, “to enter into Mass” with new hope and discover the experience of a joy that is ours, a joy that can be equally theirs as we all together seek to belong more deeply to Him and to one another.

That means that in 2012, our Church will begin a great mission of witness inviting one and all to re-discover Jesus by re-discovering Him in Sunday celebrations of Mass. At that time we will take the fruits of our celebrations and use them to be ever more fervent witnesses to our brothers and sisters, the magi who are searching to find Jesus in their own lives. The shepherds and magi will come to know one another and recognize that we all are one at the manger meetings of Jesus through the Eucharist. Surrounded by Mary and Joseph, the angels and saints we will sing our praise to God: “Glory to God in the Highest and peace to all of us

and all humankind”. What a joy that will be! How strong will be our faith! How warm will be our hope! How fervent will be our charity! How deeply will we belong!

Let me close with my dear friend, St. Augustine of Hippo: *So now, my brothers and sisters, let us sing Alleluia. Sing as travelers sing along the road: but keep on walking. What do I mean by walking? I mean press on from good to better. Some may go from bad to worse. But if you press on, you keep on walking. Go forward then in virtue, in true faith and right conduct. Sing up and keep on walking!*”

May God fill you with His blessings in this holy season and may we all belong more deeply to Him who wanted so much to belong to us and with us that He “became flesh and dwelt among us. We have seen His Glory, the glory as the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.”

+William Murphy

Bishop of Rockville Centre

Gaudete Sunday

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