

Archdiocese of St. Louis  
Eucharistic Congress  
June 24, 2011  
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Last January, I met up with a large group of young people from the Archdiocese of Omaha – 6 busloads of them – at the March for Life in Washington, D.C. The night before the march, they had arranged to join the youth of the Diocese of Arlington for an evening of prayer, preaching and music. There were over 3,000 who participated. We celebrated Mass with Bishop Paul Loverde. The Mass was followed by a concert of religious music that engaged the young people and gave them a chance to burn off some of their considerable energy. The music was arranged so that it became more reflective. Meditations began to accompany the music – all leading to what was to come next, a time of Eucharistic Adoration.

As the music softened and the musicians receded to the background, I had the privilege of exposing the Blessed Sacrament at the altar on the stage of the auditorium and leading a holy hour. We sang traditional hymns, prayed silently and listened to a homily preached by a newly ordained priest. While he preached, I left my kneeler in front of the altar, and listened from a place prepared for me on the side of the stage. As the priest finished speaking, I was just beginning to move back to my kneeler in front of the altar for a time of quiet prayer, when a young man from the congregation walked up the stairs to the stage and knelt in my place. I could see a look of alarm on the faces of the adult organizers of this well-scripted evening. Someone had hijacked the archbishop's kneeler!

So, I just stayed put on the side. The young man prayed right in front of the monstrance for a few minutes, and as he stood up to return to his place, someone else got up and took his place. Then a few more came up and knelt on the steps, then a few more around the altar, until after a few minutes, there were dozens of young people on their knees silently surrounding the altar. They remained there until we signaled them to return to their places for benediction at the end of the holy hour.

It was beautiful to witness the prayerful response of these young Catholics to the silent but sure invitation of Jesus to come to Him, to be with Him. The invitation to be with Jesus, to live as His disciples is being given to all of us. Increasingly, young Catholics are hearing the invitation in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament – and are finding the strength to respond in times of adoration before the Eucharistic Lord. It is a hopeful sign – to have those who will soon assume roles of leadership and service in the Church – to be leading us now in appreciation for the power of the presence of the risen Christ in the Eucharist.

Six months from tonight, we will be celebrating Christmas eve. During the Eucharistic Congress, we are invited to reflect on the mystery that we celebrate first a Christmas – that God, in the person of Jesus Christ, wants to be with us in everything. After witnessing His death and resurrection, the apostles watched as Jesus ascended into heaven. They knew that they would not be bumping into Him on the road, in their towns, in the old familiar ways. But he had promised to remain with them. He had given them the gift of the Holy Eucharist. At Pentecost they understood the meaning of His promise and the power of His Eucharistic presence. We

acknowledge the fulfillment of that promise tonight – that Jesus remains with us in the Church now in “Ordinary time” – until He comes in glory.

Our 21st century culture is noisy and seductive. We are distracted – even scandalized – by the things that go on around us – challenges to the dignity of human life, to family life, to the value of religion itself. There is no quick cure for all of this. But in the midst of distraction and discouragement, we know that Jesus is with us. He is calling us. We are being drawn to Him.

Often, when I am visiting a school or speaking with a group of young men who are considering the priesthood. I will be asked: What is the best thing about being a priest (or bishop)? It is an easy question to answer. The best thing about being a priest is the Eucharist – to celebrate Mass and to stand in the person of Christ the High Priest, to provide His holy people with the Bread of Life and the cup of Eternal Salvation. The Eucharist – it is the best thing about being a priest. But can't we really all say the same thing? Isn't it the best thing about being Catholic? – Being able to participate in the Eucharist, to share, the Body and Blood of Christ? The Second Vatican Council reiterated this truth so dear to Catholics, calling the Eucharist the source and summit of Catholic life.

Our life is a Eucharistic life. The Eucharist sets the rhythm of our life in the Body of Christ. Weekly, even daily, we bring our joys and sorrows, our gifts and our deficiencies, our very lives, and offer them in union with the one saving sacrifice of Christ. And we are sent out from the Mass, nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ, to bring His sanctifying presence to our homes, our jobs, our schools, our neighborhoods.

It is the hunger of God's people for the Eucharist that brings the priest to the altar day by day. It is that hunger – and the desire of Jesus to be with us – that has given me the privilege of celebrating Mass in beautiful cathedrals and in small rural churches – in school chapels, hospital chapels, in scout camps, in prisons, in the mountains, at the beach, at my mother's bedside on the day she died.

Because of the vitality of Catholic life in a place like St. Louis, because of the large number of priests, because of the freedom we enjoy in this country, Mass is very convenient. We might almost be tempted to take it for granted. Tonight we should think about and pray for those who are risking their lives for the Eucharist. They may be huddled in a back room or a dark basement – not in a beautiful basilica – to be close to the Lord. Somewhere an imprisoned priest is celebrating Mass for his fellow captives with a small amount of bread and wine smuggled into the prison. These brothers and sisters of ours hunger for the Eucharist as we do. It is the best thing about being Catholic for them, too. They are willing to risk their lives to be with Jesus, who gave His Life for them – for us.

The wonderful fruit of the Eucharistic liturgy in our Catholic life is the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament in our churches and chapels. The Lord in the Blessed Sacrament draws us back into church outside of the time of the liturgy, to prolong and deepen what we have celebrated as a church. The Lord invites us away, briefly, from the necessary activities of our lives, to a time and place of refreshment, in quiet, in His presence. We feel the presence of the

Lord very powerfully in the liturgy. We sense it very powerfully in the Eucharist reserved in the tabernacle or exposed on the altar.

Jesus, in the Blessed Sacrament beckons us to come into church, to pray, to get to know Him. The Eucharistic presence gives life to what would be lifeless buildings between Masses. Even when nothing is going on in church, the Lord's presence is on-going. Where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, we know we are in something more than a museum or auditorium. There is a real, personal presence that invites us in, to pray, to listen, to be close, just as He extended that silent invitation to the young people who were drawn to the monstrance.

Our culture does present us with many challenges to family life, attacks against human life, against the very nature of marriage, the challenge of living virtuously in cyberspace, questions of health care, and the age-old challenge of suffering and death. Prayer before the Blessed Sacrament does not work magic in the face of such challenges. But time before the Lord does open us to His promptings. Eucharistic devotion is a time to be reminded that the Lord is and must be at the center of everything.

In every age, the Church calls us to make use of the gift of Eucharistic devotion. In this Eucharistic Congress, Archbishop Carlson is renewing that invitation for all of us. If we accept the invitation and come to the Eucharistic Lord, then I am sure that God will bless us with other gifts, flowing from this one. Of course, we are in no position to bargain with God. We are not to think we are owed anything because we spend time before the Blessed Sacrament. Still, there are any number of things I think we could expect to see develop in our lives as a result of our devotion to the Eucharist. The experience of the Church leads us to a sincere hope that this devotion can bear good fruit. From among the many fruits of a Eucharistic life, let me mention 3.

First, as we spend time with the Lord, I think we can expect to experience a deeper love for His body, the Church. It is tempting for any of us to criticize various expressions of Catholic life, or others whose faith and practice many not quite measure up. This has been the case since New Testament time. The Church is made up of sinners here on earth. My shortcomings are bound to bump into yours from time to time. But the closer we come to Jesus, the more we see how much he loves His bride the Church – not some idealized version of the Church, but the Church as she really is. He pours out His life for her and He invites us to do the same. He invites us to grow in love for our parishes and pastors, to be lovingly connected to the diocesan church and the archbishop, to love being part of the universal church where the holy father shepherds us in the place of Christ Himself.

One of the most enjoyable occasions for a bishop is the opportunity to dedicate a new church building. There is an obvious focus on the walls, the font and the altar, but the words of the prayers and hymns help us focus on the living church. The liturgy reminds us that we are living stones being built into a spiritual edifice, where the Holy Spirit dwells. Whatever our vocation, Jesus is asking us to share in the task of building up the Church. It is in and through the Church that we meet Jesus in His integrity. In particular, we should look to grow in full, conscious and active participation in the celebration of the Eucharist, the Mass.

As we grow in love and devotion to Jesus in the blessed Sacrament, our love for the Church just has to grow. Without the Eucharist, there is no Church. Without the Church, there is no Eucharist.

Second, an important fruit of devotion to the Eucharist is a greater zeal for touching the lives of others, especially the poor, the sick and the poor in spirit. The Church gives us a guide to how to do this, no matter who we are, in the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.

A number of years ago, I made a retreat at the Mercy Center here in St. Louis. I'm not sure if they have kept it, but at that time, the Sisters of Mercy had a heritage room, filled with photos and displays of their life and work since coming to St. Louis in the mid-19th century. I was taught by the Sisters of Mercy in my early years of school, so I was interested in the displays. One thing in particular caught my eye. It was a letter signed by Archbishop Kain in 1900, giving permission to the sisters at the convent of St. John's Hospital for special days of Eucharistic exposition or benediction. It listed the days, and when I counted them, it was about 3 out of 4 days every month. If you didn't know any better, you might have thought from reading the list that the sisters spent the day in the chapel. That was not the case at all. They spent the big part of everyday on their feet, on the floors of the hospital, seeing to the care of every patient. They were able to do tremendous good, because they also spent part of the day on their knees, with the Lord.

St. Vincent de Paul, one of the patrons of the archdiocese, led a spiritual renewal of the clergy and of the Church in France in his time. This renewal was rooted in prayer and was connected to care for the materially poor. For St. Vincent, this was not an either/or proposition. If one was called out of prayer in the chapel to answer the need of a beggar, he was to realize that he was leaving Jesus in the tabernacle to greet Jesus in the beggar. St. Vincent had harsh warnings for any whose fervent prayer to the Lord did not lead him to recognize Jesus on the sidewalk or in the sick bed.

We are all familiar with the extraordinary work done for the poor by Blessed Teresa of Calcutta and now by her Sisters of Charity every day. The day begins with a quiet encounter with Christ in the Mass and in Eucharistic adoration. We are not left to wonder, are we, about the source of their zeal for the poor?

I recently spoke with a young husband and father who told me of how much he appreciates the hour of adoration that he keeps at his parish every week – at 4 A.M. It is clear that, at that hour, he is not shirking any of his many responsibilities at home or at work. In fact, he is convinced that he gains a spiritual energy from his time of adoration that helps him reach out more intentionally to his wife, his kids and his employees – an energy that far outweighs the loss of an hour's sleep.

Many of us live comfortable lives, and we may not have to have much contact with those who are materially poor. We should probably have more. They deserve our attention and they have something to offer us. In any case, there are many, very close to home in our families and in our parishes who are carrying heavy burdens. It is not unusual to find a growing spirit of apostolic service in individuals and communities that are devoted to the Lord in the Eucharist.

Finally, I believe that our devotion to the Lord in the Eucharist will bear fruit in a greater realization of God's love for us in Christ Jesus. Really, this blessing is at the heart of other blessings that flow from Eucharistic spirituality. We do not spend time before the Blessed Sacrament to make ourselves better women or men, so that God will love us more. Instead, we try to immerse ourselves in the mystery of God's love for us in the person of Jesus Christ.

I am willing to believe that there are a few of you here tonight who give lip service to the notion that God loves you no matter what, but who really don't believe it. What you really believe is that God wants you on some self-improvement program – a kind of moral or spiritual equivalent of a diet. And if you work hard enough at it, you just might make yourself acceptable in His sight. I am afraid that some of you may think that God will love you less if you are not super husbands and wives, perfect parents super priests or perfect consecrated religious – that God will turn away from you if you turn away from him in sin. If you believe that, you are wrong.

I must say that, as I reflect on my own relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist, a relationship that is still developing, it has led me to the point where I can say: God loves me – period. There is nothing I did to start Him loving me and nothing I can do to stop it. (there is much more I can say about that relationship, but I know I can say that much.) This knowledge has given me a greater understanding of the freedom that is mine in Christ. It has brought real healing into my life.

God is not simply a larger version of you or me. He is not competing with us, trying by force or shame us to get the better of us. He draws us into life with Him, in Christ. He wants us to be free – free to love as we are loved. When we remain in prayer with Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, we come to know this truth.

Whenever I speak with young Catholics about their experience of an event like the pilgrimage to the March of Life, they always describe the time of Eucharistic adoration as one of the highlights. This time of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament addresses a deep spiritual hunger that they have – that we all have. They want to know that they are loved and appreciated for the unique individuals that they are. And they want to know that they can surrender themselves to something bigger than themselves. The recognition of the personal presence of Jesus, who identifies Himself with the Church, makes that knowledge possible.

In these days after Pentecost, we might well pray for the Holy Spirit's gift of Wisdom. It has been said that one who receives this gift is able to savor the things of God, to have an experiential rather than a merely conceptual knowledge of God. Wisdom can help us develop a kind of "sympathy" for the divine – to feel as God feels. This might sound almost sacrilegious if it were not for the Incarnation, the truth of God – with – us. God communicates His love to us in a person, Jesus, who is human as well as divine. That person is accessible to us in the holy Eucharist. As we become more devoted to that person, Jesus Christ, may the Holy Spirit lead us to true wisdom – that is, to know and love as Jesus Himself knows and loves.