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A Eucharistic Lent

We are well into the season of Lent now, and I hope it has been a time of grace for all of us. The 40 days of Lent are an image of the 40 days that Jesus spent in the desert, praying and fasting to prepare for the mission he had received from his Father. During Lent we too enter into a spiritual desert, with prayer, fasting, and almsgiving, so that we may be purified and enter more deeply into communion with God.

Another important element of our Lenten journey should be the communion we experience with Jesus in the Eucharist. The practice of attending Mass more frequently during Lent is a powerful way to experience the grace of this holy season, because it brings us directly into the mystery of our Lord's death and resurrection. Daily prayer before the Eucharist is a sure way to experience the closeness and the sacrificial love of our Savior.

The Eucharist may be thought of as food for our journey, not only the journey through Lent, but also our entire journey through life. The disciplines of Lent are meant to purify us and stretch us. They help us to receive God's grace more fully and to respond to his commandment of love. We are not alone on that journey. Jesus accompanies us and sustains us, especially through his Body and Blood in the Eucharist. When we pray in his Eucharistic presence, we look on the face of Jesus, who never stops encouraging and lifting us up. When we receive him in Holy Communion, provided we are free from mortal sin, he joins his life to our lives and becomes spiritually one with us. Even beyond the 40 days of Lent, Jesus offers himself to us every day of our lives.

Last summer I visited the Holy Land, and one of our stops was at Mount Carmel where the prophet Elijah did battle with the false prophets of Israel. Afterwards, Elijah fled for his life into the wilderness. Spiritually and physically exhausted, he even prayed for death and then fell asleep. But an angel of the Lord woke him and offered him bread, saying, "Get up and eat, else the journey will be too long for you (1 Kings 19:7)." There is a chapel on that site, and the tabernacle is an image of that scene, the angel offering bread to Elijah. This Old Testament episode is a foreshadowing of the Eucharist for all of us. Jesus offers his Body and Blood, and says to each one of us, "Take and eat, or the journey will be too long for you." Our Lord knows that the journey of this life can be arduous, so he offers himself to us along the way through the Eucharist as our spiritual food.

The Eucharistic Revival that we are now experiencing is a perfect complement to our observance of Lent and Holy Week. Jesus gave himself as a sacrifice for our salvation, and he makes that sacrifice present to us through the Eucharist. He calls us to repentance and conversion of life, and our encounters with him in the Eucharist can strengthen us along the way. When we approach Christ in the Eucharist, we become profoundly aware of our sinfulness, our need for conversion, and our need for God's forgiveness. Ongoing conversion is a key part of our Lenten journey, a turning away from sin and back to God, and the Eucharist fortifies us against the temptation to fall back into sinful ways. Through the Eucharist, Jesus gives us the resolve to make the decisions we need to make if we wish to persevere in holiness.

Perhaps this Lent will be the opportunity for you to return to attending Sunday Mass, or even to attend an additional daily Mass during the week. I started going to weekday Masses during Lent when I was in college, and that practice was life-changing for me. Maybe this Lent will be the occasion to begin a weekly holy hour before our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. If you can't manage a whole hour, perhaps a half hour would be possible. Whatever attention and time we give to our Lord in the Eucharist will be richly repaid many times over. There is no better way to meditate on the passion of Jesus or the Stations of the Cross than in his Eucharistic presence. Praying face to face with Jesus is also a powerful way to examine our conscience and to prepare for the confession of our sins in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

We often think of Lent in terms of what we've "given up." But Lent is about more than giving up certain foods and drinks, television, electronics, or whatever. Lent is about conversion, turning towards

union with God through Jesus Christ. The ashes and the fasting of Lent are meant to lead us to Jesus, but the Eucharist *is* Jesus. During these holy 40 days and beyond, let us turn to Jesus in the sacrifice of his Body and Blood. May we all have a Eucharistic Lent!