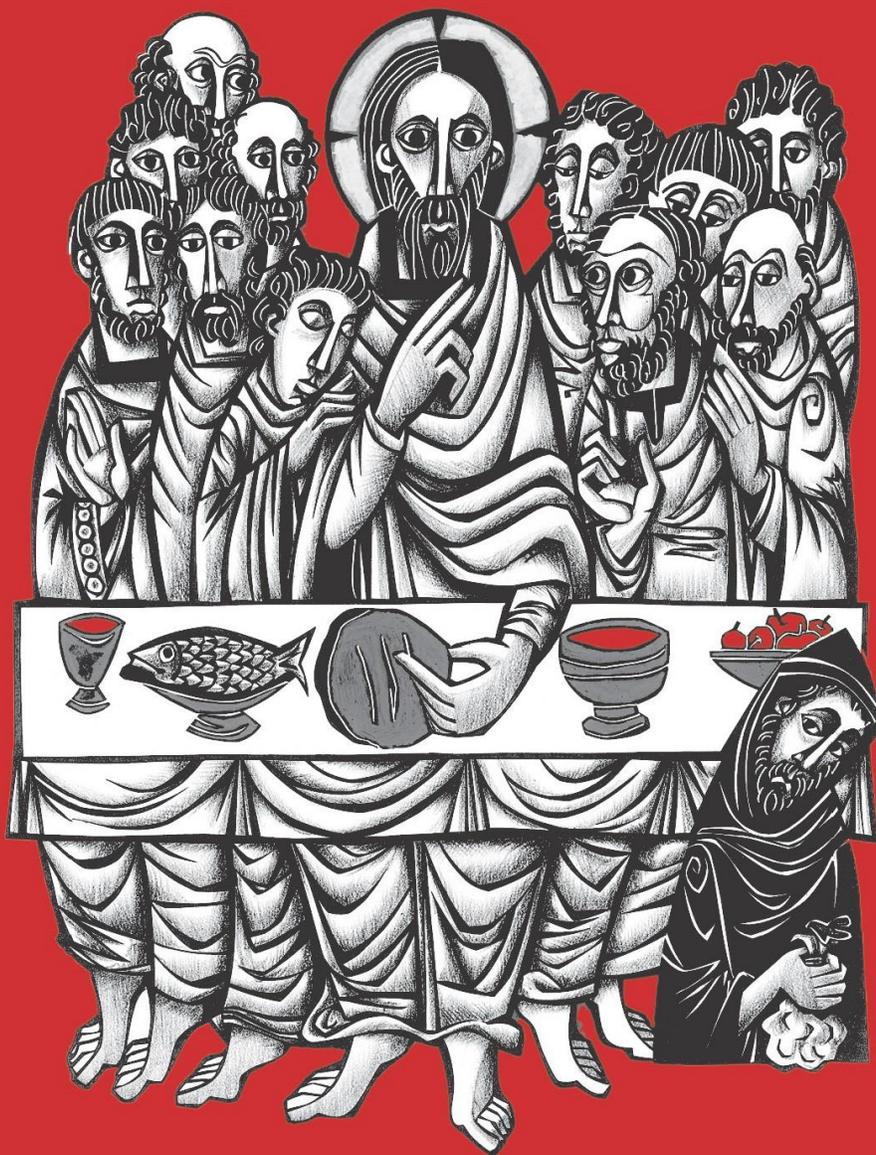


Returning to Grace:
A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist



Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Newark

STUDY GUIDE

Spring 2021

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

When church historians write about the Year of Our Lord 2020, I predict they will call particular attention to the “Great Eucharistic Fast.” COVID-19, the pandemic that has taken the lives of millions, obliged dioceses throughout the world to take the unprecedented action of closing our churches and effectively denying our people the opportunity to receive Christ’s Body and Blood in the Eucharist. Some scholars may point out that, as a result, Catholics in Europe and North America experienced what others have suffered for many years due to a shortage of priests or outright persecution, namely, the absence of the sacraments.



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Now that there seems to be a light and the end of this long, dark tunnel, many people ask if I think there will be long-term effects to separation imposed by the pandemic. As I’m sure you are aware, declining Mass attendance was a serious concern long before the pandemic. Has the current crisis accelerated this trend, or have we grown in our appreciation for the Eucharist precisely because we were denied access to it for so long? Has absence made our hearts grow fonder? When things return to whatever the “new normal” will be, will some of us prefer virtual worship, if we worship at all? Is it time to restore the Sunday obligation and require all Catholics to attend Mass in person every Sunday?

To respond to these and many other questions, I have written *Returning to Grace: A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist*. I urge you to read this letter and to reflect prayerfully on the issues I identify as I seek to respond to the important questions that pastors and lay faithful in our archdiocese are asking today.

My reflections in *Returning to Grace* include some personal stories, some thoughts shared with us by Pope Francis during this time of pandemic, some ideas about the third commandment—to keep the Lord’s Day holy, and, most importantly, reflections on the wonderful mystery of Christ’s gracious gift of His Body and Blood freely given to us in the Holy Eucharist.

Please take a few minutes to read *Returning to Grace*, to pray about the questions it addresses, and to discuss it with family members, friends and fellow parishioners. This Study Guide is intended to help you Pray, Reflect and Discuss the themes contained in the pastoral letter, but I encourage you to pursue the broader and deeper, spiritual and pastoral implications of “returning to grace” through your own full participation in the Sunday Eucharist to whatever extent is possible given your circumstances.

If we trust in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the continual reopening of our parishes, schools and archdiocesan ministries will truly be a *Return to Grace* for the Archdiocese of Newark. As Pope Francis reminds us, we are now in a crisis, and no one will emerge from this pandemic unchanged. Things will be different. The challenge is: will they be better or worse? We hope and pray that God’s people will emerge from this crisis renewed in the Spirit with an even greater love for Jesus’ astonishing gift of Himself to us in the Eucharist.

May our Redeemer bless you and all members of our archdiocesan family as we seek to return to the grace of the Eucharist in these challenging times.

Sincerely yours in Christ the Redeemer,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads “+ Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.” The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Newark

Study Guide for Your Parish

Returning to Grace: A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist

This study guide addresses the major themes explored in Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin’s pastoral letter on the Eucharist. This guide is intended to supplement the pastoral letter, which you are encouraged to read carefully and reflect on prayerfully before responding to the reflection questions following each of the themes identified below. Responses may be kept for personal reflection or shared in small discussion groups where these are appropriate.

Social Distancing

- Some pastors and lay faithful fear there will be long-term effects from the “Great Eucharistic Fast” imposed by the pandemic. They are concerned that some Catholics will prefer virtual worship, if they worship at all.
- One of the greatest blessings of our faith is our deeply held conviction that our Lord is truly present to us in the Eucharist. Simply stated, we believe that when a priest invokes the power of the Holy Spirit during the celebration of Holy Mass, repeating the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, ordinary bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.
- What we receive when we receive Holy Communion is the same “Body of Christ” that St. Paul tells us we are. When we say “Amen,” we are committing to truly reflect the presence of our Lord in our daily lives and to share Him with everyone we encounter. In other words, when we receive the Eucharist, we receive Christ and agree to be Christ with and for others.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion – Personal or Small Groups

1. What do you think the long-term effects of this pandemic will be on participation in the Sunday Eucharist?
2. Recent surveys¹ reveal that many Catholics do not understand or accept traditional Church teaching that ordinary bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ? What is your reaction to these findings? What does the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist mean to you?
3. St. Paul tells us **we are** the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12: 27), the same Body of Christ we receive in the Eucharist. How would you explain this statement? In what ways do these words of St. Paul challenge you?

Notes:

¹ (Smith, G. (2020, May 30). Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ. www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/.)

Spiritual Closeness

- When our churches were closed and it became impossible for most Catholics to receive the Eucharist, our Holy Father Pope Francis strongly urged us to find ways of maintaining “spiritual closeness” with God and with each other. As liturgies were live-streamed, many of our parishes, provided opportunities to make a “spiritual communion,” a traditional means of seeking intimacy with Jesus when the physical reception of the Eucharist is not possible.
- Some pastors and lay faithful are concerned that when things finally return to “normal,” social distancing will remain normative, and many Catholics will have grown accustomed to staying home and either watching Mass online or not participating at all.
- Declining Mass attendance was a serious concern long before the pandemic. Has the current crisis accelerated this trend, or have we grown in our appreciation for the Eucharist precisely because we were denied access to it for so long? Has absence made our hearts grow fonder? Are we ready to return to the spiritual closeness of full participation in the Sunday Eucharist?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion – Personal or Small Groups

1. What are some effective ways you’ve discovered to remain “spiritually close” to the Body of Christ, even while social distancing?
2. How has physical separation from Mass and the sacraments affected you personally? Your family? Your parish?
3. How can we invite and encourage Catholics to return to participating in and celebrating the Sunday Eucharist in person?

Notes:

Returning to Grace

- Is it possible that Catholics who have been denied access to this great sacrament — including those who have “walked away from it” over many years—may realize what they are missing and return to experience the loving presence of Christ in this mystery of grace?
- We don’t participate because of an obligation to do something for God, but rather, our participation permits God to do something unimaginable for us. St. Alphonsus Liguori says that for God, “paradise is the human heart.” Jesus gives the gift so that God can go where God wants to go. All is grace.
- To invite our sisters and brothers to return to full, conscious and active participation in the Eucharistic liturgy, we must emphasize the graciousness of this great gift and its incomparable beauty. I have given this pastoral letter the title *Returning to Grace* because I firmly believe this is what all of us are called to do after and in response to the Great Eucharistic Fast imposed on us by COVID-19.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion – Personal or Small Groups

1. What do you believe are some reasons that Catholics have “walked away from” participation in Mass and the sacraments?
2. How has the separation caused by the pandemic helped some Catholics grow in their appreciation for the great gift that Jesus gives us by sharing with us His Body and Blood? What effect has this separation had on Catholics who see Sunday Mass as an obligation rather than a gift?
3. How do you experience in the Eucharist “the graciousness of this great gift and its incomparable beauty”? What are some ways we can help others experience this?

Notes:

Words of Encouragement from Pope Francis

- Our Holy Father Pope Francis has continually spoken out urging us not to be afraid, to remain spiritually close to God and one another, to call on Mary, Mother of the Church, St. Joseph during this Holy Year of St. Joseph, and all the saints, and to remember those who are most in need, especially the poor, vulnerable and displaced members of the human family.
- Pope Francis has also warned us that the sin of indifference can be a far more deadly virus than COVID-19.
- Our Holy Father reminds all of us who are in positions of co-responsible leadership and service in the Church, that we are simply “altar servers” for the Holy Spirit. We are not in control of situations like this pandemic that confront us — often without warning. Our job is to listen, pray, discern, stay close to the People of God, and decide without fear.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion – Personal or Small Groups

1. How have the words and example of Pope Francis inspired or challenged you during this pandemic?
2. Do you agree that the sin of indifference can be a far more deadly virus than COVID-19? Why or why not? How can we more deeply trust in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives and in the life of the Church?
3. What do you think the Holy Father means when he says that Church leaders are “simply altar servers” for the Holy Spirit?
4. How do we:
 - *listen* to those who no longer see the beauty of Christ’s Eucharistic presence?
 - *pray* that we can help our sisters and brothers Return to Grace with open minds and grateful hearts?
 - *discern* what is truly good for ourselves, our families and our communities?
 - stay *close* to one another — spiritually if not physically?
 - *make prudent decisions* about our participation in the life of the Church, especially her worship and her ministry, without anxiety or fear?

Notes:

Making the Lord's Day Holy

- One of the most serious challenges before us is the recovery of a sense of the sacred in our observance of the Lord's Day. Sunday holds a place of honor in the Christian community because it is the day when our Lord rose from the dead. From the beginning, followers of the risen Jesus considered this day to be the holiest day of the week, and our Church rightly instructs us to make the Lord's day holy by our attendance at Mass, by avoiding unnecessary work and by devoting our time and attention to family members and friends.
- Our understanding of Sunday as sacred time is a treasured inheritance from our Jewish sisters and brothers for whom the observance of "Shabbat" (the Sabbath) is an integral dimension of Judaism's spirituality. Building on the reverence for the Sabbath that was so essential for their Jewish roots, Christians discovered an even more profound meaning for the Lord's Day.
- Can the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist assume such vital necessity in our lives? Can we recover a sense of sacred time as we emerge from this pandemic? Or will work, shopping, sports and the entertainment media capture our hearts? Will we again devote ourselves to the Grace and Beauty of the Eucharist? Or will we settle for whatever distractions the world has to offer us?

Questions for Reflection and Discussion – Personal or Small Groups

1. What are some of the obstacles that today's Catholics face in trying to make the Lord's Day holy?
2. ? What are some practical things you can do, or should not do, that will help you preserve Sundays as "sacred time"?
3. How can the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist once again become "a vital necessity in our lives"? How can we recover a sense of sacred time as we emerge from this pandemic?

Notes:

Recognizing Jesus— and ourselves—in the Eucharist

- Like true love, the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is a mystery we can never fully comprehend. It is grace itself, an unmerited gift from God that we are invited and challenged to accept with an open mind and a grateful heart.
- We are called to recognize Jesus as truly present in the consecrated bread and wine, His Body and Blood. We are also called to recognize ourselves as true members of the same Body and Blood of Christ who are intimately united with Him and with each other through the miracle that occurs each time we receive the Eucharist.
- The “Amen” that we respond can never be perfunctory. It should be a genuine, heartfelt expression of our faith in Christ who comes to us as Lord and brother, who becomes one with us in the most intimate communion that is possible for us and creates communion among all the members of His Body. Each time we receive the Holy Eucharist, we accept the Lord’s great commission to proclaim His Gospel and to minister to His people in every nation to the ends of the earth.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion – Personal or Small Groups

1. How is Jesus’ presence in the Eucharist “an unmerited gift”? What difference does this make in our daily lives?
2. In your own words, explain what is meant by this statement: “When ordinary bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we who receive this great gift are also transformed.”
3. What promises are we making each time we receive the Body of Christ and respond “Amen”? How can I make these promises more meaningful in my life?

Notes:

Imploring Mary's Protection and Care

- Ever since it became clear that this pandemic posed a grave threat to the lives and well-being of millions of people throughout the world, I have asked Mary, Mother of the Church, to intercede on behalf of all who are suffering as well as all who respond to the needs of others.
- I now ask our Blessed Mother to help us return to the Grace and Beauty of the Sunday Eucharist and the reverent reception of Holy Communion by inspiring all of us, clergy, consecrated women and men, and lay faithful, with an ardent love for her Son Jesus, and a deep trust in the Holy Spirit's skill to guide us safely home.
- May Mary's example inspire us all to discern God's will for us and help us to find ways to be close to one another, even as we are keeping a safe distance.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion – Personal or Small Groups

1. Why do we turn to Mary in times of crisis? How can her intercession help us deal with situations that are beyond our control?
2. How can our Blessed Mother help us better appreciate and share the Grace and Beauty of the Sunday Eucharist with our families, our friends and our fellow parishioners?
3. In what ways does Mary, Mother of the Church serve as a model for us as we seek to discover and do God's will in our lives?

Notes:

Prayer

In *Returning to Grace: A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist*, Cardinal Tobin writes “I would like to once again make my own Pope Francis’s prayer to Our Lady, Health of the Sick, which ends with the words of an ancient chant, *Sub tuum praesidium*, actually the oldest hymn to Mary, the Mother of God, to implore her protection during the coronavirus pandemic and help us all Return to Grace in new ways when the time is right.” Please join in this prayer to Mary, Mother of the Church:



O Mary, you shine continuously on our journey as a sign of salvation and hope. We entrust ourselves to you, Health of the Sick. At the foot of the Cross you participated in Jesus’ pain, with steadfast faith. You know what we need. We are certain that you will provide, so that, as you did at Cana of Galilee, joy and feasting might return after this moment of trial. Help us, Mother of Divine Love, to conform ourselves to the Father’s will and to do what Jesus tells us: He who took our sufferings upon Himself, and bore our sorrows to bring us, through the Cross, to the joy of the Resurrection. Amen.

Sub tuum praesidium. We seek refuge under your protection, O Holy Mother of God. Do not despise our pleas – we who are put to the test – and deliver us from every danger, O glorious and blessed Virgin. Amen.

