

“It is the Lord!”



“I am with you always”

(Matthew 28:20)

A Pastoral Letter

The Most Reverend David D. Kagan, D.D., P.A., J.C.L.
Bishop of Bismarck

“It is the Lord!”

Introduction

This marvelous exclamation comes from St. John the Evangelist on the occasion of the third appearance of Jesus to His disciples after the Resurrection. It took place on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias. After a long and unfruitful night of fishing, Jesus calls to Peter, John, and a few others and asks if they have caught anything. Being told no, Jesus tells them to cast their nets over the right side of the boat and they take a miraculous draught of 153 large fish. At that moment, it is St. John who exclaims to Peter and the others “It is the Lord!”

I write this Pastoral Letter to you, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus, as a reminder of the limitless and merciful love of God for us as expressed within the Church which is founded upon the pierced Heart of Jesus from which flows His seven sacraments of the new and eternal covenant. In this parish phase of our Eucharistic Revival, I ask you to read this pastoral, meditate on it, and keep it as a daily reference for yourselves as you continue to pray, work, and sacrifice for the love of God and your neighbor and strive to live your baptismal vocation to be holy and to be saints.

The title of this pastoral letter, “It is the Lord!” reflects a basic truth about the seven sacraments instituted by Jesus. In the celebration of each of the sacraments, it is truly the Lord Jesus Who acts, and He acts through the minister of the sacraments. Just as St. John, St. Peter, and the other disciples recognized Jesus in that miracle of the fish, so too do we encounter and recognize Jesus in every sacrament, especially in the Most Holy Eucharist.

The seven sacraments are the privileged encounters with Jesus throughout the entire course of our earthly lives, from the time of our birth to that moment when we pass over to eternity in death. That merciful and limitless love of the Lord for us is so deep and abiding that the seven sacraments are His way of nourishing, consoling, strengthening, and enlivening our daily lives of faith, hope, and charity. They are His way of keeping His promise, “I am with you always” (Mt 28:20).

This pastoral letter will have four brief sections covering what we Catholics believe about: The Sacraments in General, The Most Holy Eucharist, The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, and finally, some Practical Considerations about the Most Holy Eucharist and Mass and some Practical Considerations about the Sacrament of Penance and going to Confession. It is my fervent hope and prayer that this helps you, even in a small way, to come to know, love, and serve the Lord better in His Church, and helps you to exclaim, “It is the Lord!” and then follow Him faithfully to heaven.

The Sacraments in General

By His Passion, Death, Resurrection, and Ascension, Jesus won for us the graces of redemption. Grace is the very divine life of the Blessed Trinity made available to us so we can grow in holiness and have and enjoy eternal life with God in heaven. While God can dispense this grace in any way He wishes, and He does give His grace to us in many ways, nonetheless, He chose to institute the seven sacraments as special channels by which He makes His grace available to all.

As a child, I studied our faith and religion using the *Baltimore Catechism*. Anyone who, like me, used this excellent text to learn the basics of our faith would remember the Question-and-Answer format and the question: “What is a sacrament?” The correct answer is: “A sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ which gives grace.” While there is much more for all to learn about the sacraments, this answer lays the solid and correct foundation for everything else there is to know about the sacraments.

The first thing to know and remember is that the seven sacraments instituted by Christ give form to the spiritual events, the “milestones” of our lives, and are signs of deeper realities. There is one major difference between the sacraments and other nice rituals: a sacrament has a supernatural dimension since it actually gives the very grace it signifies. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us.” (CCC, 1131)

I offer an example to illustrate this truth about each of the seven sacraments. In Baptism, the ritual of immersion or pouring of water is an outward, physical sign of the spiritual cleansing of the soul of sin that happens as a result of God’s grace.

Celebrated worthily and in faith, the sacraments confer the very grace that they signify. This is why I said that in each of the sacraments we encounter Jesus, and using Baptism again, it is Jesus Christ who really baptizes through the words and actions of His minister. It is the very same for each of the sacraments.

What are the seven sacraments? Every Catholic should know the answer to this question. The seven sacraments are: Baptism, Confirmation, Holy Eucharist, Penance or Reconciliation, Anointing of the Sick, Holy Orders, and Matrimony.

Sacred Scripture and Sacred Tradition affirm that Christ, in establishing the New Covenant, left us the seven sacraments as specific sources of grace for our salvation. He also gave charge of the sacraments to the Apostles so the Church would continue to confer His sanctifying grace and to build communion between Himself and His people until the end of time.

What are the signs of the seven sacraments? In the institution of the sacraments, Jesus used a material or physical sign which He transforms and uses as a channel of grace. Each of the seven sacraments has a material element or, as the Church calls it, the “matter” that is central to the nature of the sacrament. For Baptism, the matter is water; for Confirmation, the matter is Sacred Chrism and laying on of hands; for the Holy Eucharist the matter is unleavened bread and grape wine; for Penance, the matter is an oral confession of sins; for the Anointing of the Sick, the matter is the Oil of the Sick; for Holy Orders, the matter is the laying on of hands; for Matrimony, the matter is the couple themselves. The form of each of the seven sacraments is the prayer recited aloud in connection with the matter used in the sacraments.

Knowing what a sacrament is, what the seven sacraments instituted by Christ are, and what are the essential elements of each, I would like to say something about why they are necessary. Why do we need the seven sacraments? It seems to me that there are four obvious reasons why the seven sacraments are necessary.

The sacraments are necessary for our growth in holiness. They mark us as faithful disciples of the Lord and enable us to live a life of true charity toward others.

The sacraments are necessary for our salvation. We need the graces of God given to us through them to be faithful. They are the primary means by which God sanctifies us.

The sacraments draw us closer to God. In each sacrament, we encounter Jesus, Son of God and Savior, and thus they enable us to be more closely united with the Blessed Trinity.

The sacraments constitute three divine calls. Through them, God calls us to a life of personal holiness and a Christian vocation; to worship Him as the Church indicates in order to have the graces we need to grow in holiness and fulfill our vocations; and to live according to His moral teachings in His Church.

As I conclude this first part of the pastoral letter, a final question should be addressed. How often do we receive the Sacraments? Not every one of the seven sacraments is or can be received daily, or even often. For instance, the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Holy Orders are received only once in a person's life because each imprints an indelible mark on the soul for time and eternity.

The sacraments of the Most Holy Eucharist and Penance can be received often, even daily. The next two parts of this pastoral letter will speak in greater depth about them.

The sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick can be received as often as necessary when a person is ill or dying. No one should neglect to call for a priest during a serious or terminal illness, as no one should be without the final graces of consolation, strength, and comfort of the Lord. The sacrament of Matrimony can be received more than once in a lifetime, but only if one of the spouses has died or a prior union has been declared invalid by a Catholic Church tribunal.

The Sacrament of the Most Holy Eucharist

While volumes can and have been written about the Most Holy Eucharist, that is not my intention here. I would urge you to read the entire section in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* devoted to the Most Holy Eucharist as it is clear and precise. Also, read the encyclicals of the last several Popes on the Most Holy Eucharist, they provide excellent food for meditation.

In this pastoral letter, I will first address the question of what the Most Holy Eucharist is. Then, I will address the question of when to receive the Most Holy Eucharist. Finally, I will address the question of when NOT to receive the Most Holy Eucharist.

Simply stated, the Most Holy Eucharist is the sacrament of the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ. The Lord Jesus instituted this sacrament at the Last Supper on the night before He died by crucifixion on Good Friday. In the Holy Eucharist, Jesus gives us His own real Body and Blood as spiritual food, filling us with sanctifying grace and uniting us more fully to Himself and His Mystical Body, the Church.

The Most Holy Eucharist is the source and summit of the whole of Christian life. All the other sacraments and all else that the Church does is ordered to the Holy Eucharist because the mission of the Church is to gather the faithful in union with Christ, who is really and substantially present in the Eucharist. (CCC, 1324) The sacramental presence of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist is called the “Real Presence” by the Church. The Church calls the change of the matter of bread and wine into His Body and Blood “transubstantiation.”

The Church explains the doctrines of transubstantiation and the Real Presence, which all who claim to be Catholic must believe without exception or reservation in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. “Because Christ our Redeemer said that it was truly His body that he was offering under the species of bread, it has always been the conviction of the Church of God that by the consecration of the bread and wine there takes place a change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of His blood.” (CCC, 1376)

Related to the matter of when Catholics should receive the Most Holy Eucharist is the question of who can and should receive the Most Holy Eucharist. Simply stated, any baptized Catholic who has reached the age of reason and is free from any known mortal sins can and should receive the Holy Eucharist. In the Latin Rite of the Catholic Church, we receive our First Holy Communion at about seven or eight years of age after having made our First Confession. Whether one is a child or an adult, when receiving First Holy Communion Sacramental Confession is always celebrated first. Finally, as previously indicated, any baptized Catholic of the age of reason can and

should receive the Holy Eucharist. However, this baptized Catholic must be in good standing with the Church; this means that there are no known impediments to receiving the Holy Eucharist worthily and fruitfully.

The matter of when to receive the Holy Eucharist is neither difficult to describe nor difficult to understand. The Church urges all Catholics able to receive the Holy Eucharist to do so often and even daily if that is possible. Since all Catholics have the serious obligation to attend Holy Mass every Sunday and Holy Day of Obligation, these days are certainly times when Catholics should receive the Holy Eucharist. (CCC, 1389)

A final consideration for every Catholic is the serious matter of not receiving the Holy Eucharist. When should a Catholic not receive the Holy Eucharist? If a Catholic is aware of having committed a mortal sin that severs completely our relationship with God, that Catholic may not and cannot receive the Holy Eucharist. That Catholic must go to confession first and confess that mortal sin and then he or she may receive the Holy Eucharist.

A Catholic should not receive the Holy Eucharist if the Eucharistic fast has not been kept by that Catholic. This fast is the abstaining from food and drink (except water and medicine) for one hour prior to receiving the Holy Eucharist. Food is anything edible and that includes chewing gum and all other candies.

The Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation

The first question addressed here is: what is the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation? The sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is a sacrament of healing in which Jesus Himself, through the actions of his earthly minister forgives actual or personal sins committed after Baptism. It is the graced means instituted by Christ to restore our communion with God and His Church when we have broken (mortal sin) or weakened (venial sin) it by sin. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "Those who approach the sacrament of Penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion." (CCC, 1422)

Every sin committed after Baptism is an actual sin and the Church distinguishes actual sins as either *mortal sins* or *venial sins*. A mortal sin is a grievous offense against God that destroys a person's relationship with Him by severing him or her from divine love. "It turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and his beatitude, by preferring an inferior good to Him." (CCC, 1855) A mortal sin also alienates us from the sacraments, including the Holy Eucharist, which we may not receive again until we have obtained absolution in the sacrament of Penance. There are three conditions for a sin to be mortal and all three must be fully present and acted upon freely by a person. First, the sinful act must be a grave matter as defined by the Church. Second, the person committing the sin must have full knowledge that the act is grave, that is, it will separate the person from God and the Church. Third, the person must freely choose to commit the act, knowing the consequences. Thus, to die in the state of deliberate and unrepentant mortal sin, a person will be separated from God for all eternity as he was in this life. That state of eternal separation from God is called hell.

A venial sin, by contrast, is a less serious offense against the moral law of God and does not meet all three conditions for a mortal sin. However, all venial sins injure our relationship with God and cannot be dismissed as unimportant. All venial sins should be confessed in the sacrament of Penance, even if one is not conscious of having committed any mortal sins. The frequent reception of the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation makes it easier for us to recognize and combat venial sins. Frequent confession also helps us to further foster good spiritual habits and to avoid bad habits which can easily become vices.

The second question to be addressed is: when should one receive the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation? Knowing what the sacrament is and what sins a person is capable of committing after Baptism, the answer is clear. This sacrament should be received as often as necessary, even when no mortal sin has been committed. While the Church urges us to receive the sacrament of Penance regularly, it does not set a schedule for its reception. A good rule of thumb is to go to confession about once every month unless one knows that he or she needs to receive the sacrament of Penance more frequently.

The third question to be considered is: why have the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation? To answer this question properly and correctly, we must understand why Jesus instituted this sacrament. Remember that the call to conversion was an

essential part of Christ's proclamation that the Kingdom of God is at hand. Conversion of mind and heart was necessary to be part of the Kingdom, and conversion of mind and heart was necessary to be a disciple. Thus, true conversion is a constant in one's life, which is bombarded by temptations, and in His great mercy, Jesus instituted the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation as our ready means to obtain forgiveness for sins that wound and impede our conversion, but it also restores our friendship with the Lord.

Jesus calls us to an interior conversion and repentance, which are to be manifested in external, sensible ways. The Church teaches us in this way: "Jesus' call to conversion and penance, like that of the prophets before him, does not aim first at outward works, 'sackcloth and ashes,' fasting and mortification, but at the *conversion of the heart, interior conversion*. Without this, such penances remain sterile and false; however, interior conversion urges expression in visible signs, gestures, and works of penance." (CCC, 1430)

Jesus delegated to His Apostles, the first bishops and priests of His Church, the power to forgive sins in His name (Mt 16:19; Jn 20:19, 22-23). In doing this, He gave them the authority to reconcile sinners with the Church and "to be the sign and instrument of the forgiveness and reconciliation that he acquired for us at the price of his blood." (CCC, 1442)

Knowing why Jesus instituted the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, we can look to answer that third question as to why the Church has this sacrament. Not only because it is the will of Jesus, the Son of God and Savior, who shed His Blood for the forgiveness of sins, but because the enduring effects of this sacrament are so needed to live the Catholic life faithfully in the Church.

Keeping in mind that the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation is the ordinary means by which God forgives all sins committed after Baptism and reconciles us with Himself and the Church: of the many good effects of this sacrament, I shall list four.

Penance forgives our mortal sins and returns us to a state of grace. Most especially, it allows us to return to the reception of the Holy Eucharist and it removes the eternal punishment (Hell) due for mortal sin.

Penance forgives our venial sins and remits a portion of the temporal punishment due for sin which would have to be satisfied on earth or in Purgatory.

Penance reconciles us to God and His Church, grants us peace of conscience, and provides us with spiritual consolation.

Penance strengthens us by giving us actual grace to help us reject temptations and avoid sin in the future.

Practical Considerations

The Most Holy Eucharist and the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass

When I refer to this fourth section of the pastoral letter as “Practical Considerations,” I am referring to the way we conduct ourselves at Mass. Keeping in mind that our Mass is the highest and most perfect form of prayer we as Catholics have and can offer, there are some things we must keep in mind when we participate in the Mass.

The Mass is composed of four major parts: the Penitential Act, the Liturgy of the Word, the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and the Rite of Dismissal. These four parts are successive and interdependent and thus, they form the whole of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass. With this in mind, I offer several “practical considerations” for Mass each Catholic should know and keep.

First, be on time for Mass, be it a Sunday, a Holy Day of Obligation, or a weekday Mass. To come late to Mass, that is, after the priest has begun the Penitential Act, is not appropriate and is a visible sign of a lack of reverence for the Lord and a lack of respect for the Church gathered for Mass.

Second, dress appropriately for Mass, especially in warm weather. While it is not necessary to wear expensive clothing, you should dress to the best of your ability for church. Do not come dressed for the beach or a picnic when you come to Mass, it is very irreverent and a real distraction to all present. Shorts, tank tops, flip flops, and other scant clothing worn by men and women are not appropriate for

Mass and the worship of Almighty God.

Third, carrying on conversations in the *body* of the Church before and after Mass is very disrespectful to those who wish to prepare themselves in prayer for Mass and to offer thanksgiving to God after Mass. If you choose to visit, use the gathering areas of the Church, or go outside to talk.

Fourth, once Mass has begun, give your full attention to it throughout. Sometimes there are distractions, but that is much more the exception than the rule. Do not become a distraction by talking or by the way you stand, sit, or kneel during Mass.

Fifth, related to the fourth consideration, is the exchange of the Sign of Peace. As the Bishop of the Bismarck, it is my solemn privilege and duty to exercise oversight of all the sacred liturgies of the Church. I have not reintroduced for general use yet, the Sign of Peace at Mass. The reason for this is that it is not being done correctly and in accordance with the mind of the Church. In fact, the way it is done is a distraction to the priest and congregation, it is disruptive of the Mass and reveals a lack of awareness of the Real Presence of Christ on the altar. Talking, backslapping, hugging, and reaching around, behind, or in front of others are all inappropriate and not what the Church expects in performing this gesture, which seems to have become something like intermission at an event rather than an act related to the Penitential Act of the Mass.

Sixth, the manner in which Catholics who can receive Holy Communion come forward and do so is important. As you know, the Church allows for the reception of Holy Communion on the tongue or in the hand while either standing or kneeling. A few reminders if you receive in the hand: make certain the priest or deacon knows you wish to receive in the hand, and don't put out your hands at the last moment. Your left hand is to be in the palm of your right hand, then you step to the side and using your right hand place the sacred host in your mouth and return to your place. DO NOT grab for the sacred host or hold your hands in any way that could allow the sacred host to fall to the floor. Finally, if you choose to receive Holy Communion in your hand, make sure your hands are clean and they do not have things written on them in ink. Parents, please check your children's hands to make sure they are not dirty. If you receive the sacred host on your tongue, open your mouth and stick out your tongue so the priest or deacon can place the sacred host on your tongue without

touching your teeth or tongue. DO NOT bite at the sacred host or just open your mouth without sticking out your tongue.

The Sacrament of Penance and Confession

Recalling what I said already in this pastoral on the sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, I offer a few “Practical Considerations” when one comes to receive the sacrament in Confession. First, prepare yourself to make a complete and integral confession of all your sins since the last time you went to confession. You do this by using the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, and the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy to examine your life and conscience. Also, in your preparation, offer a prayer to God the Holy Spirit to enlighten and strengthen you to make that complete and integral confession.

Second, when you enter the confessional, kneel or sit, bless yourself, and begin your confession by telling the priest how long it has been since your last confession. Then, tell the priest your sins, but be specific about what the sins are and how many times you can remember committing them. Finally, let the priest know when you are finished. When I say be specific about the sins you have committed, I mean that saying something like “I failed to love” does not tell the priest in what way. Name the sins you have committed so the priest can offer you a brief encouragement not to sin again. Your examination of life and conscience before going to confession is a time to recall your sins to be confessed, not while you are with the priest in the confessional.

Next, after the priest has given you a brief encouragement, he will give you a penance and then tell you to say an Act of Contrition, which you are to pray out loud, and when you are finished, the priest will impart to you Sacramental Absolution and then send you on your way to do the penance he gave you.

Further, please keep in mind that Confession is not for spiritual direction or a counseling session. If you think you need this, make an appointment with a priest for another time. Sacramental Confession is for the confession of our sins and should not take more than a few minutes. As an act of charity, be aware that others are waiting to receive the sacrament also, and in consideration of them, be clear and complete in your confession and allow them the same opportunity to receive the sacrament.

Finally, please keep in mind that you have nothing to worry about or be fearful of when going to Confession. The “seal of Confession” binds every priest never to repeat what he hears in the confessional nor to identify anyone who comes to Confession. If a priest would do this, he incurs automatic excommunication from the Catholic Church. Even under the threat of civil prosecution and penalties, a priest will never reveal anything after hearing a Confession.

Conclusion

As we continue with phase two of our Eucharistic Revival, which is the parish phase, it is my hope that what I have presented to you, my dear people, will be a help in deepening your knowledge of and devotion to the Most Holy Eucharist. Whether you are at Holy Mass or spending time with Our Lord in Eucharistic Adoration, know that He longs for you to be with Him, He wants your prayers, and He will answer your prayers in ways that are best for you and for the Church.

I would ask you to share your faith in the Holy Eucharist with others, be they family, friends, neighbors, or co-workers. Invite someone to Mass with you or to spend time with you at Adoration. Be the Lord’s and the Church’s Eucharistic disciples.

May Jesus Christ be praised, now and forever!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+1 David D. Kagan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

The Most Reverend David D. Kagan
Bishop of Bismarck

Given at the Chancery this
Solemnity of SS. Peter & Paul
29th of June A.D. 2023

