

On this Corpus Christi Sunday I want to announce that the Archbishop has declared this year, beginning today, to be a Year of the Eucharist. We will soon put together a plan for celebrating this year. But today, as Pastor, I want to share with you several changes in celebrating of the Mass that Archbishop Etienne has decreed in his document opening this Eucharistic year.

One point the Archbishop wants to reinforce again, as we come up for communion we are to bow to the Blessed Sacrament before receiving. Some of us are kneeling, and the Archbishop asks us to follow the liturgical norm set by the American bishops, which is a reverent bow. The Archbishop also has directed that the congregation kneels for the Eucharistic Prayer, but we already do that.

The second point is a significant change. Archbishop Etienne has decided that in the Archdiocese of Seattle the people will return to kneeling after the Lamb of God. I think a little history is in order here. The universal norm has historically been to remain standing after the

Lamb of God, but in the United States we have a long tradition of kneeling at that point. Most of you my age or older grew up with that. When the new translation of the latest Roman Missal for English-speaking countries came out, the American bishops petitioned Rome to retain this tradition for our own country – and the Vatican permitted individual American bishops to decide the question in their dioceses. Archbishop Brunett decided we would remain standing after the Lamb of God and Archbishop Sartain never changed that. But now Archbishop Etienne has decided we'll go back to what almost all the American dioceses are doing – kneeling after the Lamb of God, beginning today – although at our outdoor masses the option to stand is still there.

The final change is what happens after communion. This was another point that individual bishops determined for their own diocese. At the time of the new Missal we were directed by Archbishop Brunett to remain standing until all had received communion. But, again, beginning today the Archbishop decided that the people are to return

to their seats after receiving communion and sit or kneel. Liturgical changes are always difficult, but I hope we be able to adapt to these changes without too much difficulty.

Some might be tempted to think – why all this fuss and back and forth over the Eucharist? But today’s feast and readings give us the grounds for our care concerning the mass. I want to make two points in this homily about the Eucharist. The first is once again to stress the Real Presence of Jesus in the Sacrament. You’ve probably heard this before, but since so many Catholics apparently don’t know about, or don’t believe in, the Real Presence it’s worth repeating. In our Gospel from John 6 Jesus says, “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.” The Greek word for flesh here is “sarx.” The more common Greek word would be “soma.” “Soma” is the word the other Gospels use to refer to the Eucharist. It’s best translated as “body,” but it can have symbolic meanings. But “sarx” can only mean “flesh,” the material of our physical body.

The second word scholars stress in John 6 is the verb “to eat.” There are different Greek words to describe eating. “Phragein” is the more polite verb. It can be used in figurative ways such as digesting something intellectually or assimilating an idea. But the verb “trogein” only describes munching on a piece of food. And “trogein” is used four times in this passage in John 6. The use of “sarx” and “trogein” stress the physical reality of what Jesus means when He tells his Disciples “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life.”

This is important when we think of the liturgical changes the Archbishop just announced. He wants us to remember that at the Eucharist we are in the presence of, and truly consume, Jesus Himself. Kneeling is a sign of adoration of Jesus in the sacrament. We might think, then why not genuflect rather than bow before receiving communion? But that is the norm given by the whole body of the American bishops not an individual bishop’s decision. And I believe the

decision was made for practical reasons of moving the line along and not stumbling over one another.

The final point I want to make briefly is especially important for our own time of the virus and the stresses that go with it. Our first reading was from Deuteronomy. It tells of the People of God wandering in the desert during the Exodus while being nourished and maintained by manna from heaven. This manna was bread from heaven given by God to His people. “He . . . let you be afflicted with hunger, and then fed you with manna, a food unknown to your fathers.”

We are wandering in our own desert right now during this crisis, not knowing when it will be over, but tempted by loss of faith, fear, and discouragement. Maybe we feel we’re starving spiritually. The Eucharist is meant to nourish us on our spiritual journey, as through a desert. We have begun to celebrate mass once more – outdoors. Only about 20% have signed up to be on the rotation to attend. It’s difficult to stand out in the weather for mass. But I ask those who haven’t signed up to do

so, and for those who are invited to come – no matter how difficult it is for you to face what seems like a compromised mass, or how bad the weather. We all need Jesus – and especially in this form of “food for the journey.” Jesus does physically accompany us in our desert in the Eucharist. Encounter Him, worship Him, be fed by Him there, now more than ever.