



Bishop Hicks' Column

May 2022 | Your parish family waits for your return



Shortly before Holy Week, I issued a letter noting I was lifting the dispensation from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass on Palm Sunday since the possibility of catching COVID-19 had dramatically decreased. I knew I would hear grumblings from individuals who had gotten used to attending a virtual, livestreamed Mass. But I was surprised to hear from several people who had no idea that such an attendance obligation existed.

Canon law is straightforward in its direction: "On Sundays and other holy days of obligation, the faithful are obliged to participate in the Mass." (Can. 1247) Now, this responsibility to attend Sunday Mass does not exist in the Catholic Church to be punitive. It exists as something that brings us life through the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We come together to celebrate Jesus' sacrifice as a Eucharistic community.

In simpler terms, being together matters. I was struck by the importance of this belief during this year's Chrism Mass, which was only the second time I had celebrated this powerful liturgy as the bishop of Joliet. Last year, we were limited to 20% capacity of the cathedral, so only a few priests attended, and about three people were sitting in every other pew. This year, a multitude of priests gathered behind me on the altar, and I looked out onto pews filled with so many good people of God from our parishes across the diocese. There were feelings of hope and joy and exuberance in the air. As I recessed down the aisle to a triumphal hymn at the end of Mass, I felt so alive - I felt like I was walking on a cloud! I could see the same excitement in the smiles of people as I blessed them on my way out.

When I reached the narthex of the cathedral, I saw Sr. Sharon Stola, OSB, the diocese's director

of divine worship. I spontaneously said, "I hope this is OK. I just want to thank you for organizing all of this." And then I gave her a big hug and blessed her. I could see in her smile that she was resounding with the same joy I felt, as we were all gathered as one body in Christ.

Jesus stressed the importance of coming together to worship in Matthew 18:20: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." The Second Vatican Council followed up on this by recognizing that "this full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else; for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit." And now, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, on the feast of Corpus Christi on June 16, is launching a three-year eucharistic revival to kindle a living relationship with our Lord, Jesus Christ, in the Eucharist.

Think of this eucharistic revival as a family reunion of sorts, since it is beginning as we embark on what we hope and pray will be a post-pandemic society. Please know that I am grateful for the technology that allowed us to worship virtually when safety measures restricted us from meeting in person. Livestreamed Masses served as a lifeline for us all, and they continue to serve as an option for the sick and homebound.

Yet, if you are able, come back to your parish, where your family in Christ is waiting for you. Return so that you may join your brothers and sisters in Christ to adore God, praise him, and receive his love in the Eucharist. Remember that we must first come together as one before we can "go in peace to love and serve the Lord." †