



DIOCESE OF KNOXVILLE

805 S. Northshore Dr.
Knoxville, TN 37919

Office of
THE BISHOP

(865) 584-3307 www.dioknox.org

PASTORAL LETTER OF THE MOST REVEREND RICHARD F. STIKA BISHOP OF KNOXVILLE

ON

SIN AND THE WORTHY RECEPTION OF THE HOLY EUCHARIST

"Many of his disciples who were listening said, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?"—John 6:60

1. The hard question. When Jesus taught His followers about the Eucharist, explaining that they must "eat His body" and "drink His blood," many responded, "This saying is hard; who can accept it?" Sadly, "As a result of this, many [of] His disciples returned to their former way of life and no longer accompanied Him" (John 6:60, 66). Christ continues to teach and sanctify us through His Church, having vested it with His power and authority (cf. Matthew 16:18-19 and 18:18; John 20:23). Therefore, when we disagree with something the Church teaches, we must always invoke the Holy Spirit for wisdom and understanding and ask the hard question of our self, "Is the Church wrong or is my understanding of what the Church teaches wrong?"

2. God's prophet in the world. The moral teachings of the Church and its consistent teaching on the worthy reception of the Eucharist are neither defined by majority opinions nor driven by politics. But the accusations of such are as old as the attacks upon the Church since its infancy. The incredible number of martyrs in the Church's long history attests to the violence suffered by the Church as God's prophet in the world. So, on the occasion of proclaiming St. Thomas More as the Patron of Statesmen and Politicians, who was martyred for defending the moral teachings of the Church against political aggression, Pope St. John Paul II stressed that "Man cannot be separated from God, nor politics from morality."

3. In perspective. The subject of sin is rarely popular, but the controversy surrounding the worthy reception of the Eucharist is in truth a question of sin, and specifically that of mortal sin. For if we do not understand the true nature of sin and the serious and even grave harm it brings upon the sinner and the collective body of Christ, and to our relationship with God, then we will not understand the Church's teaching on the worthy reception of the Eucharist. If the Eucharist is not the body and blood, soul and divinity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, but only a symbol, there would be no need to write of its worthy reception. But if the Eucharist truly is the "Real Presence" of Christ, then it should not only be our greatest joy to receive Him in Holy Communion but our greatest desire to receive Him worthily.

4. Good vs. evil. “The greatest trick the devil ever pulled,” French poet Charles Baudelaire wrote, “was convincing the world he didn’t exist.” And intimately connected to this is the loss of the “sense of sin.” But behind every temptation is “the seductive voice, opposed to God,” of Satan, who never stops trying to deceive us and turn our hearts away from God (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 391). For as St. Paul states, “We do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Ephesians 6:12). For good reason then does the Church warn us that “Ignorance of the fact that man has a wounded nature inclined to evil gives rise to serious errors in education, politics, social action, and morals” (CCC, 407).

5. Conscience. The Church is God’s prophet in the world who calls out, “Hear what the Lord has to say” (Micah 6:1). But it also warns us of those “who call evil good, and good evil, who change darkness into light, and light into darkness” (Isaiah 5:20), for the scandal of confusion they sow and the eternal ruin they lead others into requires the Church to speak out. If our conscience is a sacred sanctuary where God’s inner prophet speaks to us, then we must always be on guard against the “seductive voice” of Satan, who continually seeks to pollute it through his many false prophets, who echo his lies and false promises. For our conscience, as sacred as it is, is not infallible in its judgments regarding faith and morals as the Church is in its teaching. Therefore, we must always strive to “listen to the voice of the Lord” (Psalm 95:7), which the Church helps us to hear, and correctly form our conscience as St. John Paul II warns:

“Because of the nature of conscience, the admonition always to follow it must immediately be followed by the question of whether what our conscience is telling us is true or not. If we fail to make this necessary clarification, conscience—instead of being that holy place where God reveals to us our true good—becomes a force which is destructive of our true humanity and of all our relationships (*General Audience*, Aug. 17, 1983).”

6. Mortal vs. venial sin. Given this, the Church distinguishes between sin that is “mortal” and that which is “venial”—between sin that is “deadly” and sin “that is not deadly” (1 John 5:16, 17). Mortal sin is that which crucifies Christ in us, for it is the death of the divine life and supernatural charity we received at baptism, which is sanctifying grace. Venial sin, though not deadly, wounds and hampers our desire to allow God’s grace to act upon us—distancing us, but not completely separating us from Him as mortal sin does.

7. Saying “no” to God. We should never think of venial sin, much less mortal sin, as “no big deal,” for all sin, as St. Augustine explains, is a “love of self even to contempt of God.” For every sin, in the degree of its gravity, is an echo of Satan’s “*Non serviam*” to God—“I will not serve.” And as the “father of lies” (John 8:44), he wants us, as he tempted Adam and Eve, to believe that we have the power to determine what is good and evil, not God. But it belongs to God alone, and to the Church as “the pillar and foundation of truth” (1 Timothy 2:15) that He established, to define what is good and what is evil. To receive God’s mercy, then, we must not attempt to deny or disguise the ugliness of sin. Instead, we must let the grace of God do its work in us, allowing the Holy Spirit to “convict” our heart of our sin so that we might desire to

be reconciled to Him through the precious blood of Jesus Christ, who gave His life to save us from the darkness of sin and death.

8. Sin and Holy Communion. If we are in a “state of grace” (meaning no mortal sin) and are moved by this grace to express in some act of penance a sincere sorrow for our venial sins, they are forgiven, without having to go to sacramental confession as one must do if in a state of mortal sin. For though venial sin wounds us, it does not “diminish” sanctifying grace in us, unlike mortal sin that extinguishes it. Therefore, anyone who is in a “state of grace” may receive the Eucharist without first going to sacramental confession for their venial sins. However, our reverence and love for Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament should be such that we always examine our conscience and strive to make a “perfect” act of contrition for our venial sins—something we should do daily. This is why the Mass begins with the Penitential Rite. And for our contrition of sin to be “perfect,” our sorrow should be as we are counseled to do in making a good act of contrition:

“O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended Thee. I detest all my sins because of Thy just punishments, but most of all, because they offend Thee, my God, who is all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve with the help of Thy grace to sin no more and to avoid the near occasion of sin.”

To receive Jesus in Holy Communion without first expressing our sorrow for our sins is to give Him insult, for it is to take for granted all that He suffered for love of us in His passion and cross. *(Note: Though we do not need to go to the sacrament of reconciliation for the forgiveness of our venial sins, the Church’s precept is that we do so at least once a year. Still, monthly confession is highly recommended for the many blessings we receive in this great sacrament).*

9. Mortal sin and confession. Because the divine life has been extinguished in the person who is in a “state of mortal sin,” they must first receive the “breath” of divine life through the sacrament of reconciliation before receiving the Eucharist. For just as a deceased person is no longer able to receive bodily food, so it is that one who is spiritually dead cannot partake of the “bread of life.” The divine physician must first be allowed to “raise us up” from our spiritual grave so that He might again give us back into the arms of Mother Church as on the day of our baptism (cf. Luke 7:11-14). Only then can we be “given something to eat,” which is the Eucharist (cf. Mark 5:35-43).

10. Church teaching on mortal sin and Holy Communion. The Church has always taught that “the Eucharist is not ordered to the forgiveness of mortal sins” but is “proper to the sacrament of reconciliation.” For “the Eucharist is properly the sacrament of those who are in full communion with the Church” (CCC, 1395). If this is not clear enough, the Church’s “*Code of Canon Law*” states, “Anyone who is conscious of grave sin may not celebrate Mass (priest) or receive the body of the Lord without previously having been to sacramental confession...” (c. 916). It matters not, then, if you are a politician, a priest, a religious, or even the pope—no one in a state of mortal sin can receive the Eucharist without first being reconciled to God through sacramental confession.

11. Two important parables. To best understand the important reasons for the Church's consistent teaching on the worthy reception of the Eucharist, we should reflect upon the parables of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11-32) and the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14). The first reveals the proper path for the forgiveness of mortal sin and reconciliation if we are to again be admitted to our heavenly Father's table. And in the second parable we learn of the grave sacrilege of receiving the Eucharist in a state of mortal sin without first being sacramentally reconciled with God.

12. Mortal sin and the path of reconciliation. The parable of the prodigal son offers a fitting image of one in a state of mortal sin. We become like this son who abandons his father as well as his work in the father's field. And the effects of choosing a "foreign land" over the "father's house" and his "reckless living" leaves him destitute and starving for the good food that only his father's table has. In his mortal sin, he resembles a "zombie"—the walking dead.

13. The first step. The first step to forgiveness and reconciliation, like the prodigal son's, begins with the realization of the grave harm mortal sin does to us separated from "life" in the father's house. This desire must lead us to the confessional, the proper gateway to the Father's house, where with all humility and true contrition we pray, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you."

14. Restored dignity at the father's table. The father, who has so longed for his son's return, rejoices on hearing his humble confession and calls for the "finest robe" to be "quickly" brought and placed upon him. This is the robe of supernatural life and salvation we were first clothed in at our baptism that mortal sin strips us of. The father also calls for a "ring" to be placed upon his son's finger signifying the restored dignity of his "sonship" and for "sandals" to be put upon his feet signifying the great dignity of sharing once again in the work of the father's field. As the Church defines the word "liturgy" as the "work of God" that the people of God share in, we can better understand the significance of the sandals. Only after the son has sought to be properly forgiven and reconciled is he again welcomed to the father's table, where he can partake of the banquet feast.

15. Proper attire matters. Those who dismiss the need for the sacramental confession of mortal sin prior to receiving the Eucharist should seriously reflect upon Jesus' parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1-14), for proper attire absolutely matters. Whereas venial sin stains the white wedding garment that we are robed with at our baptism, mortal sin strips us of it and burns our wedding invitation.

16. The wedding garment. St. John Paul II beautifully describes the Eucharist in his apostolic letter on the *"Dignity and Vocation of Women"* as the "sacrament of the Bridegroom and Bride" (n. 26). Each of us, by virtue of our baptism, is a bride of Christ in the Church and clothed with the wedding garment that we are to keep "spotless and pure, without wrinkle or stain" for the heavenly banquet (Ephesians 5:27), of which the Mass is a foretaste and participation in. In the parable of the wedding feast, Jesus tells of "a king who gave a wedding feast for his son." During the royal celebration, the king discovers someone who is not properly attired and asks, "My friend, how is it that you came in here without a wedding garment?" This is the question

God asks of anyone in a state of mortal sin who approaches the Eucharist. Such is the grave sacrilege of doing so, that Jesus ends the parable with the shocking judgment of the king—“Bind his hands and feet, and cast him into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.” For good reason then does St. Paul offer this very stern warning about the worthy reception of the Eucharist:

“Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many among you are ill and infirm, and a considerable number are dying. If we discerned ourselves, we would not be under judgment; but since we are judged by (the) Lord, we are being disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world. (1 Corinthians 11:23-32).”

17. Scandal. Sin is a horrible thing in what it does to the sinner, to others, and to one’s relationship with God and our eternal salvation. But we live in a society that mocks the Church’s moral teachings and tempts us, as Satan did in the Garden of Eden, to believe that “You will certainly not die!” (Genesis 3:4). Sadly, those who echo Satan’s “seductive” words, by virtue of their public prominence, give scandal, which the Church defines as “an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil” (CCC, 2284). As scandal “can be provoked by laws or institutions,” those especially entrusted with legislative or judicial powers must exercise their responsibilities with great care. As there is no greater destroyer of human life than the genocide of abortion, with more than 19,000 innocent unborn children slaughtered every week in our country alone, those who in their public capacity “obstinately persist” in support of the “culture of death” by working to legislate, fund, protect, or promote it cannot be admitted to Holy Communion, for such is the grave scandal of their public efforts. The only path for receiving the Eucharist is through the sacrament of reconciliation with a perfect act of contrition and a public renunciation of this most horrible sin.

18. Weaponizing the Eucharist. But those who accuse the Church of “weaponizing the Eucharist” are in truth wanting their personal and political beliefs to be enshrined above the *Truth* that Christ entrusted His Church to teach and defend. As St. John Paul II warns, “Democracy cannot be idolized to the point of making it a substitute for morality or a panacea for immorality” (*Gospel of Life*, 70). The Church does not wish “that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

19. Pope Francis. In 2007, Cardinal Bergoglio—later Pope Francis—participated in the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops’ Conferences. He was elected by his brother bishops to chair the committee that prepared the conference’s final document, which among many other subjects, addressed scandal and the reception of the Holy Eucharist:

“We hope that legislators, heads of government, and health professionals, conscious of the dignity of human life and of the rootedness of the family in our peoples, will defend and protect it from the abominable crimes of abortion and euthanasia; that is their responsibility. Hence, in response to government

laws and provisions that are unjust in the light of faith and reason, conscientious objection should be encouraged. We must adhere to “eucharistic coherence,” that is, be conscious that they cannot receive Holy Communion and at the same time act with deeds or words against the commandments, particularly when abortion, euthanasia, and other grave crimes against life and family are encouraged. This responsibility weighs particularly over legislators, heads of governments, and health professionals (n. 436).”

20. The “Bread” of sinners. The Church is a Church of sinners, and the Eucharist, as Pope Francis stated in his *Angelus* reflection of June 6, 2021, is the “Bread of sinners” that “heals because it unites us with Jesus.” This is absolutely true—the infusion of grace in receiving Jesus in the Eucharist wipes out venial sin. But the proper reception of the Eucharist for those in a state of mortal sin must be through the sacrament of reconciliation. So, understood properly, the Church does not withhold the Eucharist, but stipulates that one simply cannot receive Holy Communion in a state of mortal sin until their grave sin has first been properly confessed sacramentally so as to receive the Blessed Sacrament without its desecration.

21. The Church must speak out. As St. John Paul II affirms in his encyclical letter, *On the Eucharist in its Relationship to the Church*, the Church has a special responsibility to those who scandalously disregard the Church’s teaching on the worthy reception of the Eucharist:

“The judgment of one’s state of grace obviously belongs only to the person involved, since it is a question of examining one’s conscience. However, in cases of outward conduct which is seriously, clearly, and steadfastly contrary to the moral norm, the Church, in her pastoral concern for the good order of the community and out of respect for the sacrament, cannot fail to feel directly involved. The *Code of Canon Law* refers to this situation of a manifest lack of proper moral disposition when it states that those who “obstinately persist in manifest grave sin” are not to be admitted to eucharistic communion (n. 37).”

22. CONCLUSION. If the Church speaks out, as I also must as shepherd of this diocese, it is to awaken the consciences of those who are spiritually dead in their grave sin and to call them to repentance. It is to call those who are obstinate in their grave sin and who have become false prophets leading others into grave evils and the loss of eternal salvation. The truth can be ignored, but at what cost? We are all sinners and in need of the mercy and healing that God will never withhold unless, as the prophets warned, we remain “hard of heart.” So, if we choose to ignore the seriousness of mortal sin and the need of sacramental confession prior to receiving Christ in the Eucharist, the same terrible and tragic words will echo that Jesus spoke to Judas in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Friend, do what you have come for” (Matthew 26:50). Such is the sacrilege we commit. But may we hear instead, in preparing ourselves to worthily receive Our Lord and bridegroom in the most Holy Eucharist, the joy of Christ: “Blessed are they who wash

their robes so as to have the right to the tree of life and enter the city through its gates”
(Revelation 22:14).

My intention in offering this pastoral letter is not only to awaken consciences, but to encourage everyone to strive for holiness through God’s merciful love. For only when we are in a state of grace and nourished with the bread of life can we be the face, and hands, and the heart of Jesus to others. More than ever, the world needs saints.

Mary, Mother of the Eucharist, pray for us sinners.