

# Conference of National Spiritual Assistants

## Secular Franciscan Order

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Monthly Spiritual Message June 2020

### A TIME OF SPIRITUAL COMMUNION

This year became for us the year of “Spiritual Communion” because the **Lockdown** closed all the churches just before Easter. The laity could not “celebrate Mass”<sup>1</sup> or receive Holy Communion! Usually, we go to Mass to **hear the Word of God**, to **offer the Sacrifice**, and to receive the **Holy Communion**. This grace is our privilege and our duty, gifted to us in baptism as Catholics. Lockdown put a stop to our physical participation in the celebration of Eucharist.<sup>2</sup>

For some Catholics, the idea of Spiritual Communion<sup>3</sup> was something completely new<sup>4</sup> even though it has been a long tradition in the Church. This devotion tended to have become one of those things which should not have been forgotten. Indeed, during the time of Saint Francis and Saint Clare people rarely went to Holy Communion even when they attended Mass. They were content to “gaze” on the Eucharist as it was held up high by the celebrating priest.<sup>5</sup>

In her Rule of Life, Saint Clare provided for the sisters to receive Holy Communion seven times a year.<sup>6</sup> Interestingly, one of those times was for the feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.<sup>7</sup> We Franciscans do well to remember Saint Clare’s devotion to this feast since the Dogma of the Assumption was not defined until 1950 by Pope Pius XII some 700 years after the death of St Clare. Another time for the sisters to receive Holy Communion was for the Feast of Saint Francis.<sup>8</sup>

During this period, the theology of the Eucharist was developing. Saint Bonaventure<sup>9</sup> and Saint Thomas Aquinas were asked to prepare a liturgy for Corpus Christi, which was to be a new feast in the Church.<sup>10</sup> It is said that when Saint Bonaventure read what Saint Thomas wrote, he was so impressed that he destroyed what he had written.<sup>11</sup> Saint Thomas wrote among other things:

O Sacred Banquet in which Christ is received  
the memory of his passion is recalled  
the mind is filled with grace  
and a pledge of future glory is given to us.<sup>12</sup>

This hymn sums up his teaching that in the Mass: **1.** Christ is received. (*Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity*) “It is absolutely necessary to confess according to the Catholic faith that the entire Christ is in this sacrament.” (Summa Theologiae: Q. 76, Art. 1.) **2.** Christ’s passion is recalled. (*We are bound together by memory*) **3.** The mind is filled with grace. (*there is an infusion of Sanctifying Grace*) **4.** A pledge of future glory is given to us. (*We are one with Christ on earth as we will be in heaven*) This is what we lost during Lockdown. This is what we lose when we do

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the words “celebrate Mass” in the context of the **Offertory Prayer of the Mass**: “Pray, brothers and sisters, that **my sacrifice, and yours may be acceptable to God, the Almighty Father.**” The priest “celebrates Mass” as a ministerial priest, the laity celebrate Mass together with him because of the priesthood of the faithful, “*a royal priesthood, a people set apart*” (1 Peter 2:9) given to them in baptism.

<sup>2</sup> The term Eucharist is derived from the Greek word *eucharistia* meaning “thanksgiving.”

<sup>3</sup> Alphonsus de Liguori, “Visits to the Most Blessed Sacrament” (written 1745) available as an eBook from eBook.com \$5.12.

<sup>4</sup> Perhaps one of the reasons is that according to the 2016 Census only 11.8% of Catholics attend Mass on a typical Sunday or on the other hand, because people tended to receive Holy Communion more frequently than previously.

<sup>5</sup> This was caused in medieval times by a severe sense of sinfulness, unworthiness, ignorance and perhaps awe.

<sup>6</sup> Christmas, Thursday of Holy Week, Easter, Pentecost, the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin, the Feast of Saint Francis, and the Feast of All Saints. To take Communion so often was considered to be a little unusual.

<sup>7</sup> The doctrine of the Assumption was only defined as a Dogma of the Church in 1950 by Pope Pius XII

<sup>8</sup> St Francis was canonized only two years after his death on the 16<sup>th</sup> of July 1228. St Clare died on August 11<sup>th</sup> 1253. St Clare would have celebrated the Feast of St Francis for almost 25 years.

<sup>9</sup> Bonaventure: Born 1221. Died 15<sup>th</sup> July 1274. Thomas: Born 1225. Died 7<sup>th</sup> March 1274. They died in the same year.

<sup>10</sup> Our Blessed Lord Jesus Christ appeared to St Juliana, a Belgium nun and asked for the feast to be inaugurated in the Church. In 1230 St Juliana communicated this to the bishop of Liège and the feast was first begun in that diocese in Belgium in 1246. The Feast of Corpus Christi was established by Pope IV in 1264. He had been an Archdeacon in Liège before he was elected Pope.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps one day a friar cleaning a friary in Italy will find Saint Bonaventure’s lost writings on the Eucharist. Wouldn’t that be wonderful?

<sup>12</sup> The Hymn or more correctly Antiphon is called in Latin “O Sacrum convivium” (O Sacred Banquet)

not attend Mass each Sunday and receive Holy Communion.

The Christian Churches that do not celebrate Eucharist were not as much affected by Lockdown. Their Sunday Service of the Word was more easily transferred to Radio, Television, Facebook, YouTube, and other means of media communication. Nevertheless, the Eucharistic Churches turned to the devotion of Spiritual Communion to make up for the loss of actually being able to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

Inventively, many Catholic parishes streamed the Mass each day on Facebook and through the use of other media. At the Papal Mass streamed live from Rome, and in other churches they were taking a few minutes at Communion time to read out a prayer of Spiritual Communion. They used the famous prayer of Saint Alphonsus Liguori:

My Jesus, I believe that You are present in the Most Holy Sacrament.  
I love You, above all things, and desire to receive You into my soul.  
Since I cannot at this moment receive you sacramentally into my heart,  
I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You.  
Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen

This desire to receive Christ spiritually brought to light a personal prayer of Blessed Solanus Casey OFM Cap., beatified in Detroit USA on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November 2017. It reveals a powerful insight into what actually receiving Holy Communion means.

Please [Lord] come to me in spiritual communion.  
Send your body and blood gushing through my veins.  
Send your love into my heart,  
my soul and my mind.  
Lift me up to your bosom  
and infuse me with your divine love. Amen.

The prayer of Blessed Solanus, and the prayer of Saint Alphonsus both ask for the same fullness of sanctifying grace which is received in sacramental communion. They both speak profoundly about the exquisite grace of actually receiving Christ in the Blessed Sacrament. From this we understand, even more clearly, that the reception of Holy Communion is a transfusion of divine grace, sanctifying grace, rushing through our whole being. It is no wonder that the devotion of making a “Spiritual Communion” makes us yearn to be united with our dear Lord Jesus Christ. For this reason, above all others, the lifting of Lockdown should fill us with an inner joy because we can return to Mass on Sunday – indeed every day!

In his “Letter to the Entire Order” Saint Francis has a lyrical piece of writing on the Eucharist<sup>13</sup> that all Franciscans should treasure:

Let everyone be struck with fear,  
let the whole world tremble,  
and let the heavens exult  
when Christ, the Son of the living God,  
is present on the altar in the hands of a priest!  
O wonderful loftiness and stupendous dignity!  
O sublime humility! O humble sublimity!  
The Lord of the universe,  
God and the Son of God,  
so humbles Himself that for our salvation  
He hides Himself under an ordinary piece of bread!  
Brothers, [and Sisters] look at the humility of God,  
and *pour out your hearts before Him!*  
Humble yourselves that you may be exalted by Him!  
<sup>29</sup>Hold back nothing of yourselves for yourselves,  
that He Who gives Himself totally to you may receive you totally!

***Please, distribute this Message to your Fraternity, including isolated members.***

Fr John Cooper OFM Cap

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<sup>13</sup> See: The Saint. Page 118; Omnibus page 105 The Franciscan Friars from their foundation in 1209 until 1224 did not have permission to celebrate Mass in their friary chapels or reserve the Blessed Sacrament. On December 3<sup>rd</sup> 1224 the papal document “*Qia populares tumultus*” granted them permission to celebrate Mass in their churches and oratories. The Letter to the Entire Order is therefore dated 1225. It shows Saint Francis’ concern that the friars celebrate Mass with a spirit of prayer and devotion.