

April 19, 2020

The readings today take on a very special poignancy in the current situation in our church and world. The first reading emphasizes how the early Christian maintained their faith through how they were united in the essential elements of our Church:

*They devoted themselves  
to the teaching of the apostles  
and to the communal life,  
to the breaking of bread  
and to the prayers.*

Throughout the course of Christian history, being devoted to these same four things have helped Christians-individually and in groups—to grow in times of prosperity and to survive in times of difficulty. However, the way in which they did that changed and adapted to the particular circumstances of their lives and their demands. For example, there have been many times over the last two millennia when being physically gathered for the breaking of the bread—the Mass—was impossible as it is now. However, those times and how Christians maintained their faith—and often helped it flourish—in them can teach us that there is more than one way to maintain those essential elements of our Church and stay connected with one another.

One of the things they did in those times was to shift the emphasis from the being present for the Mass to paying greater attention to the other elements. They also learned to incorporate even elements of the Mass into their individual and family lives when they could not go to Mass.

Today, I'd like to throw out a few specific suggestions as to how we could do the same today, whether we are alone or with others:

1. We find the teaching of the apostles first and foremost in the books of the New Testament. This year at Mass we hear mostly the gospel of Matthew, the tax collector called by Jesus to follow him. In this Easter season, our first reading is always from the Acts of the Apostles. One way we can pay greater attention to the teaching of the apostles at home is to spend time—individually or with other people, if we live with them—reading and reflecting on these two books.
2. We are no longer able to gather in a communal life in our churches, but we also remember that the first Christians didn't have churches—they gathered at home. We can create or deepen a Christian communal life by gathering for prayer and scripture reading. We can do this with the people in our home, virtually over the various media we use to connect today, or simply by taking a few moments during the course of each day to call to mind that each of us is part of the Mystical Body of Christ: That even when we're physically alone, we are connected to all the baptized—Both those who are in the world today, but also all those who have gone before and those who will follow after.
3. The third element is what we are doing right now: The breaking of the bread. We may not be able to receive Holy Communion physically, but we can maintain our spiritual communion. But we can also add an extra level of holiness to the ordinary meals we have alone or together. Perhaps we can put a greater emphasis on grace before and after our meals. Perhaps at our meals we can think and talk to each other about what we are grateful for, even in the midst of our current problems. Sharing our gratitude in this way may be an important reminder that the word "Eucharist"

means “giving thanks” and that we don’t need to be physically present at the Mass to give thanks for what we do have.

4. The final element, of course, is prayer and it’s what make all of these other things part of our faith life. Lots of people can study the bible, gather with other and break bread together (in person or virtually) and do so on a merely human or social level. It is the prayer element that makes these things expressions of our faith and our unity in the church Jesus brought into being through the first disciples. When we add prayer, these elements draw us closer to God and one another. It doesn’t really matter if the prayer is by ourselves or with others, if it’s formal or informal, if it’s prayer of thanks, petition, praise, contemplation, or just simply listening to God speak to us in the silence of our hearts. What matters is that we take the time to be present to God and know that God is with us. That God, whose Divine Mercy we celebrate in a special way wants to guide and support us on this difficult journey.

In the gospel today, we hear the familiar story of Thomas’ incredulity. Often the homily today emphasizes that Thomas came to believe in the resurrection when he met the risen Jesus in person. But let’s not forget that that encounter with Jesus took place in the context of the community of disciples who were gathered in prayer. When he was off by himself on the first Sunday evening, I’m guessing that was because he felt he didn’t need to gather with the other followers of Jesus. He was probably also in the process of losing his connection with them because of what had happened on Good Friday. When he chose, in spite of his doubts, to join them again seven days later, he recommitted himself to the community that would become the church.

I'm not saying that these are easy steps to take as things stand in our lives today. I've discovered that, like most things that are really worthwhile, they require effort and concentration. I've found it hard to do these things myself consistently, and I don't have other people in the house with me 24/7. But I take encouragement from the fact that so many followers of Jesus have done these things in much more dire situations than what I'm going through.

What I've also found helpful is to write down what I'm going to do each day and hold myself to it. This doesn't mean that I do it perfectly each day, but it does help me be honest about why I didn't follow through and to try harder the next day, if the reason for my slipping up or falling down, whatever phrase you want to use, was something within my control rather than being something that I really have no control over.

Even though at the present time we cannot physically join with each other to meet Jesus in the Eucharist, we can still, here and now, make a deliberate and intentional choice to build up and maintain those elements of the early church that we heard today. In the ways that we can, wherever we find ourselves this morning, we can devote ourselves *to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers.*