



Re-remembering Our Sunday Story

A pastoral letter in pandemic

We read the following account in Luke's Gospel of something extraordinary that happens on the first Easter Sunday:

Now that very day two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. And it happened that while they were conversing and debating, Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. He asked them, "What are you discussing as you walk along?" They stopped, looking downcast. One of them, named Cleopas, said to him in reply, "Are you the only visitor to Jerusalem who does not know of the things that have taken place there in these days?" And he replied to them, "What sort of things?" They said to him, "The things that happened to Jesus the Nazarene, who was a prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, how our chief priests and rulers both handed him over to a sentence of death and crucified him. But we were hoping that he would be the one to redeem Israel; and besides all this, it is now the third day since this took place. Some women from our group, however, have astounded us: they were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; they came back and reported that they had indeed seen a vision of angels who announced that he was alive. Then some of those with us went to the tomb and found things just as the women had described, but him they did not see."

Thus begins the story of two disciples encountering Jesus as they journey along, dealing with a painful experience of loss, but also sensing that a glimmer of hope and new life is stirring within them. In this journey, they encounter the real presence of Christ.

In many ways, the Emmaus story is our story as we emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it has also been our story every time we have gathered in our parish communities for the celebration of the Eucharist. Therefore, it is our Sunday story, and it is good for us to find in it glimmers of hope and new life in Christ.

Likewise, it is important for us to bring to the Eucharist the anguish and confusion of this past year. Some people have lost jobs or have been struggling to put food on the table for their families; others have been seriously ill with the virus; many have died because of it. What normally would have been celebrations of marriage, first Communion, first reconciliation and confirmation were curtailed and even postponed.



Proms, graduations and homecomings were missed. Travel and visits to family and friends were discouraged. And most painfully of all, so many lost the lives of dear friends and loved ones, often without being able to say good-bye or to hold their hands as they died.

In addition, our altered or postponed experiences of Lent, Easter, Christmas, and our Sunday Eucharist have weighed heavily on our hearts. Almost no one was exempt from experiencing the Passion of Jesus in the days and months of pandemic. All of this is to be brought to Christ in the Eucharist.

As we emerge from these days of the pandemic, I offer this pastoral letter as a way of calling all of us to remember our Sunday story, that is, to recall the Emmaus journey with Christ that reveals the deeper meaning of the Eucharist for us at this time. In addition, with this letter I invite everyone to come back to the celebration of the Eucharist: those who stayed away because of the pandemic, those who had not been coming to the Eucharist even before the pandemic began, those who have been coming once in a while, as well as those who have been regular participants. It is time for us to come together again as disciples of Christ and to "re-member" our Sunday story. By this, I do not mean only a recalling of the

teachings and legacy of Jesus Christ that deepen our faith; I also mean that we need to come together again as members of the Body of Christ and in that "re-membering," to become in Christ the faith-filled disciples that we are called to be.



Finally, I offer this reflection on our Sunday story in order to help our parish communities to make the celebration of the Eucharist more engaging, more vibrant and more effective encounters with the presence of Christ, who is always our true Companion. It is in these encounters that we discover how our parishes can become Eucharistic communities of love, service to others and communion with one other and with all of God's People.

Let us return to the Emmaus story:

And [Jesus] said to them, "Oh, how foolish you are! How slow of heart to believe all that the prophets spoke! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?" Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the Scriptures.

This stranger reminds them of how God has always been with them — with us — even in times of great tragedy. But sometimes, disciples of Christ do not recognize it. Our faith in Christ teaches us that we encountered the presence of God with us during these days of pandemic in the courage of doctors, nurses, emergency medical personnel, essential workers, teachers, food pantry volunteers and so many others. Their service and bravery in the face of this virus have helped us to see the presence of Christ in them and to hold on to hope.

We encountered this abiding presence of God in ourselves: In our wearing masks, social distancing and avoiding crowds in order to keep one another safe. We found this presence in our service to the those who sought food and other essential services in their time of need. We found this presence via livestreamed Masses and events, and in our own personal prayer.

We have experienced the stories of Scripture and our encounter with God in new ways. This stranger and these strange times have invited us to find God in new ways. Our care for each other in this time has fostered a renewed sense of communion with people we do not even know. And that communion has poured over into our service of those who are in need, into a renewed sense of solidarity with one

another, even sparking new initiatives for peace and justice. We also have entered into a new understanding of how some of our brothers and sisters in Christ go without the Eucharist for extended periods of time in other parts of the world — and even in our own country — in non-pandemic times.

We have continued to experience the presence of God in this time of pandemic, but often in ways that we might not normally do so. This new awareness of God's presence has helped to broaden our image of God and our sense of communion with one another.

Returning to the Emmaus account:

As they approached the village to which they were going, he gave the impression that he was going on farther. But they urged him, "Stay with us, for it is nearly evening and the day is almost over." So, he went in to stay with them.



While the Eucharist begins with Christ's invitation to come and be with him, that invitation needs our response in which we in turn ask Christ to be with us. We need to come to the Eucharist with a genuine desire to receive Christ into our heart and our mind, the deepest places in our spirit.

Like the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we ought to approach the Eucharist by asking Jesus to be with us, recognizing that he earnestly desires that very thing. We ought to ask Jesus to stay with us as a Companion in all that we have gone through in our lives, especially in the past year.

As with those disciples, it is good for us to ask Christ to be with us in order to help us process our pain and to find signs of hope and new life as we emerge from the difficulties that may have caused us confusion, doubt, worry and even despair. For you see, the Eucharist is a heart-to-heart encounter. It begins in the heart of Christ who longs to be with us, desiring to be a Companion as we journey through life, and hoping that we will invite him into those places deep inside our own hearts where we know pain, doubt and sadness but also experience the stirrings of hope, joy and renewed faith.

We read further in the Emmaus story:

And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning [within us] while he spoke to us on the way and opened the Scriptures to us?"

The two disciples now recognize in the breaking of the bread that this stranger is Jesus, who never really left them, but has revealed himself in new ways to them and now to us. For instance, we recognize now that all those things we were doing during the pandemic to keep others safe and to help those in need were really ways of being "Eucharistic" people. The Eucharist we now share can strengthen us to keep doing these acts of service for others, to build up community, to foster peace and justice. We have not stopped being the Body of Christ but have ministered to the Body of Christ in our service of others (Matthew 25:31-46). In all those things we did for others in this pandemic our hearts have been on fire with the love of Christ and the true heart of the Eucharist — love and service.

Part of our moving forward from the effects of this pandemic will be to deepen our understanding of the Eucharist. Some of the things we might reflect on as individuals and as a parish are:

1. Why is the celebration of the Eucharist so central to our faith?
2. How do we connect the celebration of the Eucharist more fully to our parishes, our personal lives and our homes?
3. Can we recognize the ways in which the pandemic isolated us from one another and how we need the communion we celebrate in the Eucharist to draw us out of our isolation and into renewed relationships with one another?

As we seek to ponder these questions, it is my hope that each of our lives will be renewed by the Eucharist and each of our parishes will become vibrant Eucharistic communities that offer noble and beautiful worship to God and humble and compassionate service to those in need. But this can only happen if we allow the Holy Spirit, through the Eucharist, to claim our hearts and ignite them with the joy that comes from encountering Christ.

The Emmaus story concludes:

So, they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, "The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!" Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread.

The two disciples head back to Jerusalem to share their experience with the other disciples, only to find that they, too, have experienced the risen Jesus. They share the stories of their encounters with the risen Jesus in person and in the breaking of the bread.

We need to share our experience of Jesus from this time of pandemic and draw others deeper into recognizing the presence of Jesus in our Eucharistic celebrations and our resultant service to those in need. As the church firmly believes, we experience everything of the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Quoting the Council of Trent, the Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches: "In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist 'the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained'" [#1374].¹

¹ Council of Trent (1551): DS 1651

Such an encounter with Christ demands from us our full, conscious, and active participation in the Eucharist. Thus, as we emerge from the pandemic, we have the opportunity to foster more vibrant and life-giving liturgies in our parishes.

There will be opportunities to give witness to our faith: to others who have not yet returned to in-person celebration of the Eucharist or those who are still searching for God and answers after these tragic events of the pandemic. We will be drawn into a renewed appreciation of the various aspects of communion that are essential to our identity as Catholics. There will be opportunities to invite others to celebrate Eucharist with us. There also will be opportunities to invite others into our renewed understanding of Eucharist and service.

In these ways, we will "Re-member Our Sunday Story" just as the disciples did on the road to Emmaus. It will be a process of remembering and deepening what Eucharist is, and renewing our parishes through evangelization and life-giving celebrations of the Eucharist. May that experience of our "hearts burning within us" be what empowers us to create more vibrant parishes by Re-membering Our Sunday Story at the Eucharist.

