

Returning to Grace:
A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist



Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.
Archbishop of Newark

FAMILY STUDY GUIDE

Spring 2021

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

When church historians write about the Year of Our Lord 2020, I predict they will call particular attention to the “Great Eucharistic Fast.” COVID-19, the pandemic that has taken the lives of millions, obliged dioceses throughout the world to take the unprecedented action of closing our churches and effectively denying our people the opportunity to receive Christ’s Body and Blood in the Eucharist. Some scholars may point out that, as a result, Catholics in Europe and North America experienced what others have suffered for many years due to a shortage of priests or outright persecution, namely, the absence of the sacraments.



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Now that there seems to be a light and the end of this long, dark tunnel, many people ask if I think there will be long-term effects to separation imposed by the pandemic. As I’m sure you are aware, declining Mass attendance was a serious concern long before the pandemic. Has the current crisis accelerated this trend, or have we grown in our appreciation for the Eucharist precisely because we were denied access to it for so long? Has absence made our hearts grow fonder? When things return to whatever the “new normal” will be, will some of us prefer virtual worship, if we worship at all? Now that the Sunday obligation has been restored and all Catholics* are required to attend Mass in person every Sunday, how will we respond?

To respond to these and many other questions, I have written *Returning to Grace: A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist*. I urge you to read this letter and to reflect prayerfully as a family on the issues I identify as I seek to respond to the important questions that pastors and lay faithful in our archdiocese are asking today.

My reflections in *Returning to Grace* include some personal stories, some thoughts shared with us by Pope Francis during this time of pandemic, some ideas about the third commandment—to keep the Lord’s Day holy, and, most importantly, reflections on the wonderful mystery of Christ’s gracious gift of His Body and Blood freely given to us in the Holy Eucharist.

Please take a few minutes to read *Returning to Grace* as a family, to pray about the questions it addresses, and to discuss it with family members, friends and fellow parishioners. This Study Guide is intended to help you and your family Pray, Reflect and Discuss the themes contained in the pastoral letter, but I encourage you to pursue the broader, and deeper, spiritual and pastoral implications of “returning to grace” through your family’s own full participation in the Sunday Eucharist to whatever extent is possible given your circumstances.

If we trust in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit, the reopening of our parishes, schools and archdiocesan ministries will truly be a *Return to Grace* for the Archdiocese of Newark. As Pope Francis reminds us, we are now in a crisis and no one will emerge from this pandemic unchanged. Things will be different. The challenge is: will they be better or worse? Will we reorder our priorities? We hope and pray that your family and all God’s people will emerge from this crisis renewed in the Spirit with an even greater love for Jesus’ astonishing gift of Himself to us in the Eucharist.

May our Redeemer bless you, your family, and all members of our archdiocesan family as we seek to return to the grace of the Eucharist in these challenging times.

Sincerely yours in Christ the Redeemer,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads “+ Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R.”

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*Please note that this obligation does not apply to those who are ill; those who have reason to believe that they were recently exposed to the coronavirus or another serious or contagious illness; those who are confined to their home, a hospital, or nursing facility; or those with serious underlying health conditions. One should consult the local pastor if questions arise about the obligation to attend Mass (canon 87).

Returning to Grace: A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist A “Year of the Family” Study Guide for Your Family

On March 19, 2021, the Church celebrated the fifth anniversary of the publication of Pope Francis’s apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, on the beauty and joy of love in the family. On this same day, Pope Francis launched the year “*Amoris Laetitia Family*.” Pope Francis first announced the Year of “*Amoris Laetitia Family*” during his Angelus Message on the Feast of the Holy Family on December 27, 2020. He ended his address invoking the Blessed Mother, “May the Virgin Mary grant that families throughout the world be increasingly fascinated by the evangelical ideal of the Holy Family, so as to become a leaven of [a] new humanity and of a genuine and universal solidarity.”

The Catechetical Office and the Office for Family Life of the Archdiocese of Newark are pleased to provide you with this timely resource during the *Year of the Family*. This family study guide addresses the major themes explored in Cardinal Tobin’s pastoral letter on the Eucharist. It is intended to supplement the pastoral letter, which you and your family are encouraged to read carefully and prayerfully before discussing the reflection questions together. It is our hope and prayer that your time together reflecting upon Cardinal Tobin’s pastoral letter and discerning the significance the Eucharist has in your life and in your family’s lives will lead you all to a deeper relationship with Jesus Christ.



Amoris Laetitia Family
Year 2021 - 2022

Social Distancing

- Some pastors and lay faithful fear there will be long-term effects from the “Great Eucharistic Fast” imposed by the pandemic. They are concerned that some Catholics will prefer virtual worship, if they worship at all.
- One of the greatest blessings of our faith is our deeply held conviction that our Lord is truly present to us in the Eucharist. Simply stated, we believe that when a priest invokes the power of the Holy Spirit during the celebration of Holy Mass, repeating the words of Jesus at the Last Supper, ordinary bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.
- What we receive when we receive Holy Communion is the same “Body of Christ” that St. Paul tells us we are. When we say “Amen,” we are committing to truly reflect the presence of our Lord in our daily lives and to share Him with everyone we encounter. In other words, when we receive the Eucharist, we receive Christ and agree to be Christ with and for others.

Questions for Family Reflection and Discussion –

1. What do you think the long-term effects of this pandemic will be on participation in the Sunday Eucharist? How has the pandemic affected your family’s participation in the Sunday Eucharist? In the sacraments overall?
2. Recent surveys¹ reveal that many Catholics do not understand or accept traditional Church teaching that ordinary bread and wine are transformed into the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ. What is your reaction to these findings? Is this an article of faith that you and your family struggle with? How have you sought clarity on this teaching? What does the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist mean to you and to your family?
3. St. Paul tells us ***we are*** the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12: 27), the same Body of Christ we receive in the Eucharist. In what ways do these words of St. Paul challenge you in daily life? How do you strive to be the Body of Christ at home, work, and school?

Notes:

¹ (Smith, G. (2020, May 30). Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ. [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/.](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/))

Words of Encouragement from Pope Francis

- Our Holy Father Pope Francis has continually spoken out urging us not to be afraid, to remain spiritually close to God and one another, to call on Mary, Mother of the Church, St. Joseph during this Holy Year of St. Joseph, and all the saints, and to remember those who are most in need, especially the poor, vulnerable and displaced members of the human family.
- Pope Francis has also warned us that the sin of indifference can be a far more deadly virus than COVID-19.²
- Our Holy Father reminds all of us that we are not in control of situations like this pandemic that confront us — often without warning. Our job is to listen, pray, discern, stay close to the People of God, and decide without fear.
- As baptized and confirmed Christians, we are called to accept humbly yet confidently the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

Questions for Family Reflection and Discussion –

1. How have the words and example of Pope Francis inspired and/or challenged you and your family during this pandemic?
2. Do you agree that the sin of indifference can be a far more deadly virus than COVID-19? Why or why not? In what ways does the sin of indifference affect your family life?
3. How can you more deeply trust in the presence and power of the Holy Spirit in your family and in the life of the Church?

Notes:

² (Reis, B, (2020, April 19). *Pope at Mass on Divine Mercy Sunday: Let us rise with Thomas.*
<https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2020-04/pope-homily-divine-mercy-sunday-thomas-coronavirus.html>.)

Making the Lord's Day Holy

- One of the most serious challenges before our families and our Church is the recovery of a sense of the sacred in our observance of the Lord's Day. Sunday holds a place of honor in the Christian community because it is the day when our Lord rose from the dead. From the beginning, followers of the risen Jesus considered this day to be the holiest day of the week, and our Church rightly instructs us to make the Lord's Day holy by our attendance at Mass, by avoiding unnecessary work and by devoting our time and attention to family members and friends.
- Our understanding of Sunday as sacred time is a treasured inheritance from our Jewish sisters and brothers for whom the observance of "Shabbat" (the Sabbath) is an integral dimension of Judaism's spirituality. Building on the reverence for the Sabbath that was so essential for their Jewish roots, Christians discovered an even more profound meaning for the Lord's Day.
- Can the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist assume such vital necessity in our lives? Can we recover a sense of sacred time as we emerge from this pandemic? Or will work, shopping, sports and the entertainment media capture our hearts? Will we again devote ourselves to the Grace and Beauty of the Eucharist? Or will we settle for whatever distractions the world has to offer us?

Questions for Family Reflection and Discussion –

1. What are some of the obstacles that today's Catholic families face in trying to make the Lord's Day holy? How can you reorder your priorities as a family to overcome them?
2. What are some practical things that your family can do, or not do, that will help preserve Sundays as "sacred time"? Have you and your family made use of this sacred time to be closer to each other and to God?
3. How can the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist once again become "a vital necessity in our lives"? How can your family recover a sense of sacred time as you emerge from this pandemic?

Family Resources

- United States Conference of Catholic Bishops - The Fountain of Love: How Parents Form Children for Prayerful Participation in the Eucharist
https://www.usccb.org/resources/catsun-2011-doc-franks-love_0.pdf
- U.S. Catholic – "How to keep your family's Sabbath holy" <https://uscatholic.org/articles/201806/how-to-keep-your-familys-sabbath-holy/>
- TeachingCatholicKids.com – Reclaim the Sabbath
<https://teachingcatholickids.com/reclaim-the-sabbath/>

For additional family resources, visit the Catechetical Office Family Faith Formation webpage at www.rcanfaithformation.org/family-faith and the Office for Family Life webpage at www.rcan.org/familylife.

Notes:

Recognizing Jesus— and ourselves—in the Eucharist

- Like true love, the Real Presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is a mystery we can never fully comprehend. It is grace itself, an unmerited gift from God that we are invited and challenged to accept with an open mind and a grateful heart.
- We are called to recognize Jesus as truly present in the consecrated bread and wine, His Body and Blood. We are also called to recognize ourselves as true members of the same Body and Blood of Christ who are intimately united with Him and with each other through the miracle that occurs each time we receive the Eucharist.
- The “Amen” that we respond can never be perfunctory. It should be a genuine, heartfelt expression of our faith in Christ who comes to us as Lord and brother, who becomes one with us in the most intimate communion that is possible for us and creates communion among all the members of His Body. Each time we receive the Holy Eucharist, we accept the Lord’s great commission to proclaim His Gospel and to minister to His people in every nation to the ends of the earth.

Questions for Family Reflection and Discussion

1. Do you and your family receive Jesus with an open mind and a grateful heart? How can you explain this gift to any members of your family who are unable, unwilling, or too young to receive?
2. How is Jesus’ Real Presence in the Eucharist a gift to your family? What difference does receiving this Sacramental gift make in your daily lives and in the ways you treat one another as a family?
3. Amen means “I believe.” How can your “Amen” be a more genuine heartfelt expression of your love for Christ as a family? How does faithful reception of the Eucharist enable your family to share the message of the Gospel with others?
4. How do you and your family:
 - *listen* to those who no longer see the beauty of Christ’s Eucharistic presence?
 - *pray* that you can help our sisters and brothers Return to Grace with open minds and grateful hearts?
 - *discern* what is truly good for yourselves, your families and your communities?
 - stay *close* to one another — spiritually if not physically?
 - *make prudent decisions* about your participation in the life of the Church, especially her worship and her ministry, without anxiety or fear?

Notes:

Prayer

In *Returning to Grace: A Pastoral Letter on the Eucharist*, Cardinal Tobin writes, “I would like to once again make my own Pope Francis’s prayer to Our Lady, Health of the Sick, which ends with the words of an ancient chant, *Sub tuum praesidium*, actually the oldest hymn to Mary, the Mother of God, to implore her protection during the coronavirus pandemic and help us all Return to Grace in new ways when the time is right.” Please join in this prayer to Mary, Mother of the Church:



O Mary, you shine continuously on our journey as a sign of salvation and hope. We entrust ourselves to you, Health of the Sick. At the foot of the Cross, you participated in Jesus’ pain with steadfast faith. You know what we need. We are certain that you will provide so that, as you did at Cana of Galilee, joy and feasting might return after this moment of trial. Help us, Mother of Divine Love, to conform ourselves to the Father’s will and to do what Jesus tells us: He who took our sufferings upon Himself, and bore our sorrows to bring us, through the Cross, to the joy of the Resurrection. Amen.

Sub tuum praesidium. We seek refuge under your protection, O Holy Mother of God. Do not despise our pleas – we who are put to the test – and deliver us from every danger, O glorious and blessed Virgin. Amen.

