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Sunday: a New Creation and a New Exodus

An article by Fr Joseph Evans on the recent letter by the bishops of England and Wales urging the faithful to return to Sunday Mass because of its central role in our spiritual life.

05/17/2021

Is it going too far to say that the institution of the Mass took place within the context of a deadly virus? When Jesus met with his disciples for

the Last Supper, he was celebrating a Passover meal with them. But the first ever Passover took place in Egypt when that angel of death went through the land smiting the first born of the Egyptians.

But how did he smite them? What was the material instrument used by him to punish Israel's obdurate oppressors? Surely it was some sort of plague, of virus.

Our Lord Jesus turned the memory of that night of death and salvation into the reality of his death on the Cross and our salvation through it, which the Last Supper mysteriously made present in advance and every Mass re-presents subsequently.

So God can save through viruses and through their ritual re-enactment. He can turn them into a greater deed of salvation as he did in Christ's death and resurrection and their sacramental renewal in the Mass.

And it is by going to Mass – with masks, hand sanitiser and the required distance for as long as this might be necessary – that we bring down God’s salvation on the world today. While taking every reasonable precaution to protect ourselves and others from harmful germs, we implore the Lord through the grace and merits of Christ to save the world from the even more harmful germs of sin.

Let’s be in no doubt. Our participation at Mass helps save the world. Certainly, Jesus is humanity’s unique Saviour but that didn’t stop him involving humans – like Simon of Cyrene, Veronica, Mary Magdalene, St John and above all Our Lady – in his saving work. And he wants to involve you and me today.

And so it is that the bishops of England and Wales have made a powerful call for us to return to

Sunday Mass and thereby play our part in bringing down God's grace upon this and all other nations.

In their reflection, *The Day of the Lord*, the bishops point out that the Eucharist is our 'greatest treasure' and talk of the need to restore Sunday Mass 'to its rightful centrality in our lives'. And in a powerful summary of Church teaching, they write: "It is the Eucharist, the celebration of the Mass, that makes the Church; and it is the Church, in the gift of the Holy Spirit, which makes the Eucharist. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the lifeblood of the Church."

And therefore, now that government measures permit this, 'it requires our active participation and, to be fully celebrated, our physical presence'.

Going to Sunday Mass, especially when we receive Communion, is to receive the grace and very person of

Christ, and it is to stand united as a community in our prayer for the salvation of our country. It is the most patriotic act we can perform. There we act with Christ as key co-workers in his great redemptive endeavour. The Mass is a great spiritual vaccination, bringing down divine healing and protection on society.

As Blessed Alvaro del Portillo wrote in a profoundly rich pastoral letter about the Mass in 1986: “The Mass. Let us never get used to celebrating or participating in the Holy Sacrifice! A person who has faith recognises in the Sacrifice of the Altar the most extraordinary wonder ever to be worked in this world of ours.”

But if every Mass has saving power, Sunday Mass takes on even greater proportions. As Pope St John Paul taught in his beautiful 1998 apostolic letter, Dies Domini, Sunday

celebrates the completion of God's work of creation, the freeing of Israel from slavery and Our Lord's greater act of salvation on Calvary and in the garden of the Resurrection. Sunday has thereby become a day of liberation, freeing us from the burden of work and the slavery of sin.

We are offered a chance to experience this freedom every Sunday by our participation at Mass and by living the day as one of liberation in Christ. It is a new creation and a new exodus offered us every week. This might require freeing ourselves from the computer or the phone and could also involve loosening the bonds of others through works of mercy.

Of course, the first act of mercy is to our own family, to offer and receive it, and so Sunday is also a day to experience more deeply the salvation

which God offers us through family life (how much we are saved through the family!). An unrushed family meal, a board-game together or a family stroll could also be truly liberating, as we are freed from our selfish isolation. We learn to talk and to share and begin to enter into the very family life of the Trinity.

So let's support the bishops in this precious and crucial initiative. We Catholics can be quick to point out when we think Church leaders have got it wrong, but let's be equally quick to recognise when they've got it right. And they certainly have on this occasion.

Now's the time to return to the Lord and tell him how much we have missed him, both through attending Sunday Mass and also through personal prayer before the Eucharist.

From my own experience and talking to other priests, I have been touched

to see the deep faith of Catholics in the Eucharist and how much they have missed being able to pray before the Blessed Sacrament. One priest friend told me of a parishioner, spotted by CCTV camera, who – when churches were closed – would go to the church every day at the same hour and put her head against the church wall for a certain time, at precisely the nearest possible point to the tabernacle.

As the bishops of England and Wales so touchingly put it: “In the time to come we can do no better than to rekindle in our hearts, foster and encourage, a yearning for the Real Presence of the Lord and the practice of prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.”

Our forebears were ready to risk the loss of life and property in order to attend Mass during the Reformation. We are not required to take such

risks. Indeed, now that the effective roll-out of the vaccination programme in this land means that the risks associated with attending Mass seem relatively low, let's flock back to Mass and do all we can to bring others with us, both Catholics who lost the habit of going to church during lockdown and, as the bishops put, 'the Covid curious, those who have come into contact with the Catholic Church through our presence on the internet'.

Having whetted their appetite through God's virtual presence on the web, now's the time for them to appreciate how much better Christ's Real Presence in the Eucharist is. Though not yet able to receive Our Lord, they can share with us in our 'Eucharistic amazement', which might lead them into full communion with the Church. Then they will discover that if God became man to be united bodily to all men and

women, he becomes present in the Eucharist to be united bodily with each one of us in the most personal way possible.

The Holy Mass, Centre and Root of the Interior Life (Letter of Blessed Alvaro del Portillo, 1 April 1986)

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