



Catholic Diocese of Columbus

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**“RETURNING LOVE FOR LOVE”,
A LETTER TO THE FAITHFUL OF THE DIOCESE OF COLUMBUS
AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE MONTH HONORING
THE MOST SACRED HEART OF JESUS**

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

June is the month that Catholics traditionally honor the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, a Heart burning with compassion, mercy, and love. On the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the World Day of Prayer for the Sanctification of Priests, I wrote to the priests of the Diocese, and now I wish to address all the faithful.

Here in the Diocese of Columbus, there has been a re-emergence of devotion to the Heart of Jesus. Bishop Campbell, my venerable predecessor, re-consecrated the Diocese to the Sacred Heart. Many families have begun once more to enthrone the Sacred Heart of Jesus in their homes, and the Sacred Heart Enthronement Network is based here. An annual Sacred Heart Congress is held in the Diocese.

Devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus has been an anchor in the spirituality of Catholics for many centuries. St. Gertrude the Great speaks of this devotion some nine hundred years ago. We are certainly familiar with the events in Paray-le-Monial in France in the seventeenth century when St. Margaret Mary Alacoque saw, touched and spoke with Jesus about his desire to have his heart venerated as a sign of his love for us and his desire for us to love him. St. Claude Colombiere supported St. Margaret Mary, and St. John Eudes succeeded in establishing the liturgical Feast of the Sacred Heart, which was extended to the universal Church in 1856.

To commemorate the 350th anniversary of the revelations of the Sacred Heart of Jesus at Paray-le-Monial, a Jubilee Year has been declared, beginning on 27 December 2023 and continuing through 27 June 2025, the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart. The Diocese will be planning a pilgrimage to France during the Jubilee Year. The theme of the Jubilee Year is “To return love for love.”

Returning love for love: His love for us

Since Jesus Himself spoke of the feast as an exchange of love between himself and his people, we might ask ourselves what this might mean. What does it mean to love? Our modern culture has twisted the definition of love to such an extent that it often carries very little real meaning when the term is used today.

However, deep in the Scripture and deep in the experience of those who have followed and drawn close to the Lord, there is a meaning and there is wonder in the word "Love". We can search the Scripture and find therein the foundation of all love. The revelation of God as Trinity from Genesis to John opens itself to us as a mystery of love. The love of the Father is seen throughout the Old Testament: God's love for His creation; His specific love for Abraham and his descendants; His love for the Hebrew people with whom He entered into a spousal covenant; and His love manifested through the prophets, constantly recalling His own to faithfulness. In the Old Testament, the Heart of God is revealed as one full of mercy and compassion. He is the Father who is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in kindness and fidelity.

But, in the fullness of time, God revealed His Sacred Face through His Beloved Son. Jesus says, "if you have seen me, you have seen the Father." Jesus' Heart is full of compassion for sinners, for the sick and suffering. It is not merely His words but also His gestures which reveal the love of His Heart. The Heart of Christ is revealed still more fully in His sacrificial offering on the Cross, which is intimately connected with the Holy Eucharist.

In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict XVI wrote:

"divine activity now takes on dramatic form when, in Jesus Christ, it is God himself who goes in search of the "stray sheep", a suffering and lost humanity. When Jesus speaks in his parables of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, of the woman who looks for the lost coin, of the father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son, these are no mere words: they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity. His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form. By contemplating the pierced side of Christ (cf. 19:37), we can understand ... "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8). It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must

begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move.

Jesus gave this act of oblation an enduring presence through his institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper. He anticipated his death and resurrection by giving his disciples, in the bread and wine, his very self, his body and blood as the new manna (cf. Jn 6:31-33).” (nn. 12-13)

This is how He revealed the depths of His love for us as disciples. Jesus’ priestly Heart is a Eucharistic Heart. He gives us the Sacrament of Charity, which in turn, makes demands: an exchange of love for love. In more contemporary philosophical language, we might say that we participate in His Being; we too are created to be relational - for a great and burning love that unites us to those we love and who loves us. Even Post-Modern philosophy has belatedly discovered that no person is whole without loving another. We cannot be whole without loving the “Other”.

Returning love for love: Our love for God

What does this mean to love the Other, to love God? Here is where the power and the mystery of the Sacred Heart speaks to us most profoundly and most deeply. To Jesus, mounted on the great symbol of the depth and the power of Love, that is, the Cross, it means to give everything that I have for the love of others.

For Him, it meant emptying Himself of all that He was and all that He had for your sake and for mine. Falling silent on the cross, the Word even seemed to have lost His Father. Let us listen to the dying Christ as given to us by the 5th century poet Romanos the Melodist. “I descended as low as being cast its shadow, I looked into the abyss and cried, “Father where are you?” But I heard only the everlasting ungovernable storm...And when I looked from the immeasurable world to the eye of God, it was an empty socket, without foundation, that stared back at men, and eternity rested on the chaos, gnawing at it, ruminating.”

Because of Christ, we will never experience that terrible silence, that awful sense of abandonment as deeply as did Jesus on the cross. We may well suffer but we will always know that chaos has been overcome and the abyss rendered impotent against the power of the Resurrection. For us love will always mean that the well-being of the other is more important to me than my own, as our well-being was more important to the Heart of the Lord than his own. Yet, as Benedict XVI also pointed out in *Deus Caritas Est* (cf. n. 8), man cannot live by oblation, descending love (that is, agapic, self-giving love) alone, He must also receive.

The Heart of Jesus asks us for our hearts for Him but also for those whom He loves – even our enemies and strangers. Discipleship and evangelization become an expression of that love, especially when difficulties arise, when we feel interior suffering and sadness, disappointment, senses of failure, and inadequacy. In each of these trials, the wounded Heart of the Lord speaks to us from the Cross – “Love them as I have loved you. Suffer for them knowing that the mystery of resurrection and redemption often lies buried in the depth of our pain as it did for Me on Calvary.”

Our world is filled with negativity and judgment. Again, it appears that the hearts of men and women have grown cold. Pope Francis keeps exhorting us to be a “Church of Mercy,” and we, as Catholics must show mercy and patience, even with those who constantly criticize us, jump to conclusions, or look upon us with contempt and disdain. While our natural impulse is to judge or to retaliate when we are mistreated, we must return love for the love we have received from Christ, which far surpasses the hurt we experience.

Jesus’ words “Turn the other cheek,” “Go the extra mile,” and “Love your enemies” are not empty catchphrases. They are the basic expectations for His disciples. From the Cross, He even utters, “Father, forgive them. They do not know what they are doing.” Those whom the Heart of the Lord has loved unto its own emptiness – they are worth our pain – their well-being is as important, perhaps, more important, than our happiness and comfort.

How do we rise up to the greatness of this calling, fragile as we are, in the modern world? Jesus says, “I am the Vine; you are the branches. Apart from me you can do nothing.” In many ways our greatest answer to this question is the Eucharist through which we discover that we are loved more than we can ever love, through the constant union of ourselves with the suffering but risen Lord in the Blessed Sacrament.

St. Elizabeth of the Trinity says of the Eucharist, “Isn’t that a piece of heaven?” We are united with the Jesus through whom we are saved. That union, once free from the shadows of time and human consciousness, is our eternal life. We are almost there each time we approach the altar, each time we consume the Host and drink the Cup, each time we share that with those the Lord has given us to love.

Many years ago, when I was still in the seminary, I made a private retreat with Father Carl Moell, SJ, on the Sacred Heart of Jesus. I had been devoted from my youth to the Heart of Jesus and regularly prayed the Sacred Heart litany. He asked me to replace the “Have mercy on us,” at the end of each invocation, with “Show us

the joy and delight of Your Heart.” It helped me to be more positive and joyful. I recommend this practice to you so that you may boldly and joyfully proclaim the mystery of God’s love even when your enemies misunderstand your love or refuse to love in return.

Returning love for love: Eucharistic love

As we begin the parish year of the Eucharistic Revival, I want to reflect with you on my experience of the Masses and Eucharistic processions held throughout the Diocese. They were a reminder that God does not abandon His people and, in fact, He walks with us – through our cities and towns. His Presence is a reminder that God’s love never fails, yet He comes to the People of God and to those who do not yet believe in God, through you and through the Eucharistic Mystery that is offered and that we celebrate. The faith and devotion of the People of God who participated in these celebrations brought me hope for the future of our Diocese.

Time and space do not allow me to comment on all the Masses and processions, but I will make a few observations. First, they were celebrations of joy. There is a sadness that pervades today’s culture, a mortal sickness in which bitterness dominates people’s private, social, political, and cultural life. Cynicism has set in and people are no longer disposed to joy. Society has advanced in science and technology, but while these things make life easier, they do not eliminate sadness. A new, “technical” society, rooted in efficiency, has arisen, but no amount of technology can produce real and lasting joy. Why not?

Pope Paul VI said that joy comes from beyond; it is spiritual. Sadness comes from within man. While it is convenient to blame God for many of the world’s ills – suffering, misery, poverty, etc., it is important to recognize that these result from the *interior* weakness of individuals. Pope John Paul II recognized that at the root of structural or social sin, there is also personal sin – interior weakness (cf. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 18).

Contributing to this sadness is a utilitarian culture which tends to value people based on what they do, have, and contribute rather than based on who we are as persons. The push toward an ever-more technical and efficient society is taking us away from the roots of ancient cultures which were more concerned about being and beauty than usefulness and efficiency. The joy of simply being together and enjoying one another’s company is diminishing.

Some people cannot imagine enjoying anything. They have become cynical, convinced that they will live in the condition in which they find themselves, without hope of real improvement. Even the sense of eternity is lost to some. We cannot say that the Church is unaffected by this. The Holy Father himself has mentioned that some Christians celebrate Lent without Easter! Yes, there is a crisis of joy and of desiring to be together even within the Church.

How are we to remedy this? The Eucharist is the sacrament which nourishes Christian joy. It is the strongest sacramental sign of the Paschal Lordship of Christ, recalling his Paschal Victory over sin and death. In the Eucharist, Christ is among us. The joy that He has won is preserved and shared. The Eucharist is not incomplete or fading like the pleasures of this world of which we partake to try to experience joy; it is a lasting joy. Joy is fruit of the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus breathed on the Apostles on that first Easter, when they rejoiced to see the Risen Lord!

Second, they were celebrations of faith. I recall the first Mass and procession at St. Peter Church in Columbus; it was held for the Latino community. Nearly one thousand people attended. It was astounding to see how many fathers, mothers, and children made the commitment to be there for Mass and how devoutly they received Holy Communion. Many did not have sufficient access to the sacraments in their countries of origin, but now that there are priests who care for them, they come to Mass.

Equally moving was their reverence during the procession, which was mixed with songs and prayers. The men who were attending the parking lot knelt on the blacktop, when temperatures neared 100 degrees; they removed their hats, and, more importantly, their children followed their example. Their popular piety, which warms the heart, is the necessary medicine for an overly functional and bureaucratic church.

Third, these Masses and processions represented the timelessness and beauty of the Faith. In Zanesville and Lancaster, where the Catholic Church has had a presence for more than two centuries, large crowds participated. The offering of the liturgy at St. Leo Oratory in the ancient way was a reminder also that the Church has deep roots; the participation of a community that at times feels marginalized or persecuted, also demonstrated a profound communion with the local Bishop and local Church. In all these celebrations, the servers, the choirs, and the clergy made sure that everything was beautiful for God.

At St. Thomas in Zanesville, where the people have not been able to worship in their church building for more than three years, the people themselves

demonstrated that the Church is made of living stones, while celebrating the liturgy beautifully. They did not hesitate to give witness to the beauty of God and His Presence amid the brutality of the modern world.

The ugliness of the modern world is seen in the lack of proper proportion to things. There is a genuine loss of a sense of measure and pace. Everything in our world is rapid-paced. Life is marked by excess, by living without breaks or contemplation. People are increasingly immoderate in speech, dress, consumption of food and alcohol, in the sizes of homes and cars. There is little room left for stillness, proportion, nuance, and asceticism.

In contrast to the pervasive ugliness, there is the Heart of Jesus, which is a Eucharistic Heart. Rightly, the Eucharist is called the icon of beauty; the beautiful feast; and, the beautiful “bread”. In the Basilica of the Assumption in Lancaster, the Marian dimension of the Mass was experienced. Mary reminds us by her very presence of beauty. She is called *tota pulchra* – all beautiful. She is beautifully depicted in art, but what is truly beautiful about her is the grace of God at work in her. She was conceived immaculately – with innocence – and lived in full conformity with Christ. St. John Eudes reminds us that her Immaculate Heart and the Heart of Christ beat as one.

Fourth, even smaller communities are capable of making beautiful offerings to God. In Mount Vernon, initially, it seemed as if no one would appear, but they came, including children who made their First Communion. Parishioners also allowed their lawns to be stations for Eucharistic altars of devotion. Each person contributed something, and, this should be a reminder to every pastor of every parish not to underestimate the holy People of God, nor to stifle the works of the Spirit in fostering Eucharistic devotion.

Fifth, the offering of the Mass and the processions offered people hope. This was especially true in Portsmouth. That region, devastated by the opioid epidemic and a lack of employment, is in need of hope. The procession from Holy Redeemer to St. Mary Church was a keen reminder of the mercy that flows from the Heart of Jesus and from His priests. Christ will not abandon His flock, and the people of Portsmouth showed tremendous resiliency. The love of God, flowing from the Sacred Heart, renews us and restores our youthfulness of heart.

Sixth, the Mass and Eucharistic Adoration remind us that God’s mercy and love are relentless. This was made abundantly clear in the one celebration that was not advertised, the Mass held at London Correctional. Our Eucharistic Lord could

penetrate the walls of a jail to remind God's children who find themselves there that they are not forgotten and that they are loved. Those who find themselves incarcerated are so happy and grateful when the priest comes to see them. Perhaps there more than anywhere, there is an opportunity for a priest to show forth his pastoral heart – a heart for the abandoned, forgotten, and despised.

Returning love for love: Real Presence, Real Future

All of this is to say that this is just the beginning of a renewal within the Diocese of Columbus. This coming year is now the year for Eucharistic renewal through the parishes, and the Diocesan Office of Evangelization is ready to support you and your parishioners in your efforts.

For years, we undertook the “Real Presence, Real Future” initiative. Final recommendations have been accepted or rejected; new assignments have been made; and, a new phase of the life of the Diocese is beginning.

Pope Paul VI once said, “The Church needs a perennial Pentecost. She needs fire in her heart, words on her lips, prophecy in her outlook.” (Paul VI, General Audience, 29 November 1972)

Today there is a loss of the sense of the transcendent and of our final destiny. Without desiring to live in the Spirit, people still want to know the future. While science and reason can tell us many things, they cannot accurately predict all future events. People are losing sight of an *ultimate* future. They look at larger cultural, political and social trends and notice changes. Where are we going? When people say, “We are headed toward the future”, what exactly do they mean?

The Eucharist is the sacrament of the future with God. The Church not only speaks of an ultimate future but also carries out works capable of bringing man to his eschatological end. She evangelizes, giving birth to faith, which leads to the beatific vision. She baptizes, creating the condition for adoption as children of God in view of being heirs to the Kingdom. She celebrates the Eucharist, the pledge of future glory.

Finally, she witnesses to charity as a response to the Sacrament of Charity, in anticipation of the Final Judgment, in which how we treat the least of our brothers and sisters is decisive. I want to emphasize this: holding beautiful liturgies and having Catholic imagery is one thing, but it is never enough. We and our people should be transformed into missionaries of God's love, particularly toward those who suffer from poverty, addiction, and other forms of human misery.

Sunday is the Eucharistic day *par excellence* – an affirmation of the Church's Eschatological Faith. For the pilgrim Church, Sunday is the memorial of the eschatological gift of the Spirit that anticipates the Parousia. The Eucharist inaugurates the new times and makes the life of the People of God a dynamic journey toward the presence of the Living God. Its celebration on Sunday reminds us that work is relative; that we are meant to rest and to rejoice in the Lord.

During the coming year, I ask each of you to make yet another effort to invite back to church those who have stopped attending. The personal invitation goes a long way. Jesus' Heart, time and again, was moved with compassion, and He fed the hungry crowds.

At the conclusion of June, the month for honoring the Sacred Heart of Jesus, I want you to know how deeply I appreciate your faith. I entrust you and your families to the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, offering my blessing upon you and your loved ones.

Completely yours in the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus,

+ *Earl K. Fernandez*

Most Reverend Earl K. Fernandez
Bishop of Columbus