



The Eucharist: Disciples and Adorers throughout the Centuries (Mary's Role in our Living a Eucharistic Life)

Monday, June 20, 2022

The Eucharist in times of persecution:
Mary and the Eucharist

Welcome to the fifth night of our annual novena to the Immaculate Heart of Mary! We are so grateful you are here as we prepare for our feast day. Tonight, I am going to speak on how the Eucharist and Our Lady are two great helps during times of persecution.

There are some days where I can almost visualize what it was like for the early Christians to be led to the Coliseum to be fed to the lions. The anticipation, the nervousness of being food for the wild animals; the crowds shouting and jeering at those condemned to die. You might wonder from where these thoughts come. No, it is not because I have fallen asleep reading the Roman Martyrology but rather it is because I teach high school. I know this is not a completely fair accurate comparison; being fed to hungry lions would go much quicker and maybe the lions would be gentler. I hope that you see the humor in this analogy but also the truth. It is not that I do not like teaching. I cannot think of anything else that I would rather be doing, forming our young people in the Catholic Faith, and I hope that they see our perseverance in coming back day after day to bring Jesus to them. Yet we are fighting for their souls against “the principalities,...the powers” (Eph. 6:12); they are being pulled into this culture and it is a battle to ensure that we are doing everything we can to bring the Gospel to them.

The discouragement and frustration come when these students for whom we care have bought into the lie that society has sold them. I do not have to tell this to all of you here. You are parents and grandparents who are praying for a child or grandchild who has left the faith for the great emptiness; you are employees who are striving to show forth Christ in the workplace when you know that He may not be accepted; you are citizens who are trying to witness in the public square; you are young people striving to grow and mature in the faith in our current world.

If that is not enough, you go to the news and you see what is happening all over the country and the world. The criticism, the riots, the attacks, the vandalism – it weighs very heavy on the faithful Catholic, striving to be true to the teachings of Christ. Sometimes, one wants to say, “I would rather face the lions than this.” It might also be a temptation to go underground. St. Thomas More said, “The times are never so bad that a good man cannot live in them.” But sometimes the age is so bad that a good man is called to die for them. We do not seek death but we seek to be faithful in the midst of persecution, knowing that we have here no lasting city (Heb. 13:14).

Our era has been a time of immense suffering compared to previous ages in the Church. A startling fact is that the number of martyrs of the first nineteen centuries do not come close to the number of martyrs in the twentieth century alone. Yes, the century in which most of us in this room were born has had the most Christian martyrs. It is obvious that as time goes on the devil's attacks become more pronounced, especially toward the Catholic Church and what she represents. One only has to see a few headlines to see how the Catholic Church is being targeted. For example, from May 2020 to October 2021, there were one hundred acts of vandalism on Catholic Churches in the United States (USCCB). The number has increased to 152, if we extend the time to July of 2022. Also, acts of violence toward pro-life organizations have been growing in the last few months with the anticipation of the Supreme Court decision connected to Roe v. Wade. Statues of our revered Saints are being toppled, Churches are being threatened but most disheartening is the Eucharist being attacked.

We are living through a time of persecution, especially if we look at what the word “persecute” means. It means “to harass or punish in a manner designed to injure, grieve, or afflict specifically : to cause to suffer because of belief” or



Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Wichita

3550 N. 167th St. W. Colwich, KS 67030
(316) 722-9316 | www.sistersihmofwichita.org

“to annoy with persistent or urgent approaches (such as attacks, pleas, or importunities) : PESTER”. The word comes from the Latin, “sequi” meaning to follow and “per” through. It represents the idea of being hounded. I think this describes the current milieu toward Christianity.

While we pray that this be taken from us “deliver us from evil”, that we have the courage to await better times, we should not be surprised - Jesus has prepared us for this. He stated during his public ministry, “When they take you before synagogues and before rulers and authorities, do not worry about how or what your defense will be or about what you are to say. For the holy Spirit will teach you at that moment what you should say” (Luke 12:11-12). It is important to note that Jesus says “when” not “if”. In another Gospel, there is more, “Watch out for yourselves. They will hand you over to the courts...You will be arraigned before governors and kings because of me, as a witness before them. But the gospel must first be preached to all nations. Brother will hand over brother to death, and the father his child; children will rise up against parents and have them put to death. You will be hated by all because of my name. But the one who perseveres to the end will be saved” (Mark 13:9-10, 12-13). This is what our Lord anticipated and for what He has prepared us.

At the Last Supper, he told His apostles, “If the world hates you, realize that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, the world would love its own; but because you do not belong to the world, and I have chosen you out of the world, the world hates you. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. And they will do all these things to you on account of my name, because they do not know the one who sent me” (John 15: 18-21)

Someone unfamiliar with the life of Jesus might mock us and say that one would have to be insane to tread behind a leader who places those warnings before his followers. But knowing our Lord’s life, we know that He experienced persecution, even from his early years on earth. Shortly after His birth, the Holy Family fled to Egypt as His life was threatened by King Herod. The Holy Family, Jesus, Mary and Joseph, became refugees. We do not know how long this lasted but they were away from their homeland for several years; ironically, it was not just any land but a land that had enslaved their people hundreds of years prior. Did the Holy Family have a group of Jewish people to associate with or were they completely isolated from their people? We may never know. We know that they would have been generous in accepting this situation, they would have reached out to those in need regardless of their condition. They were grateful to have been preserved, and they awaited God’s will as it was to next be manifested.

This is not the only suffering our Lord experienced. The comments said of Him in the Gospel can be easily glossed over but they indicate insults toward Him and His family. One could even assume He was treated differently by those His own age. When the people of Nazareth wanted to push Him over the brow of the hill, these feelings did not emerge suddenly but probably had their source in how they felt toward Him from early on. During His public ministry, His words were carefully watched so that they could find something on which to accuse Him. When His hour had come, He allowed Himself to be arrested and, once this happened, He was treated in the most horrible fashion: scourged, crowned with the sharpest of thorns, spat upon, mocked, nailed to a cross and made to hang naked for all to see. I believe that, while our Lord has not suffered specifically the many injustices people experience in our own time, He did suffer all of the emotional stress that our modern evils generate.

So, we know that our Lord suffered in His life; we know that he prepared us, His Church, for suffering. How are we to face these trials? I want to go to a Saint from the 1800s who gives us some insight...St. John Bosco. He had been gifted with at least forty dreams that were lessons for his boys, his community and even spoke to the entire Church. One of them is known by the title the “Two Columns”; I will read you part of his account:

“Imagine yourselves to be with me... on an isolated rock and not to see any patch of land other than what is under your feet. On the whole of that vast sheet of water you see an innumerable fleet of ships in battle array. The prows of the ships are formed into sharp, spearlike points so that wherever they are thrust they pierce and completely destroy. These ships are armed with cannons, with lots of rifles, with incendiary materials, with other arms of all kinds, and also with books, and they advance against a ship very much bigger and higher than themselves and try to dash against it with the prows or to burn it or in some way to do it every possible harm.

In the midst of the immense expanse of sea, two mighty columns of great height arise a little distance the one from the other. On the top of one, there is the statue of the Immaculate Virgin, from whose feet hangs a large placard with



Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Wichita

3550 N. 167th St. W. Colwich, KS 67030
(316) 722-9316 | www.sistersihmofwichita.org

this inscription: 'Help of Christians'; on the other, which is much higher and bigger, stands a Host of great size proportionate to the column and beneath is another placard with the words: 'Salvation of the Faithful.'

"The supreme commander on the big ship is the Sovereign Pontiff.... All the enemy ships move to attack it, and they try in every way to stop it and to sink it: They make attempts in vain and waste all their labor and ammunition; the big ship goes safely and smoothly on its way. Sometimes it happens that, struck by formidable blows, it gets large, deep gaps in its sides; but no sooner is the harm done than a gentle breeze blows from the two columns [again Mary and the Eucharist] and the cracks close up and the gaps are stopped immediately.

"All at once the Pope falls gravely wounded. Immediately, those who are with him run to help him and they lift him up. A second time the Pope is struck, he falls again and dies. A shout of victory and of joy rings out amongst the enemies; from their ships an unspeakable mockery arises. But hardly is the Pontiff dead than another Pope takes his place. The adversaries begin to lose courage.

"The new Pope, putting the enemy to rout and overcoming every obstacle, guides the ship right up to the two columns and comes to rest between them; he makes it fast with a light chain that hangs from the bow to an anchor of the column on which stands the Host; and with another light chain which hangs from the stern, he fastens it at the opposite end to another anchor hanging from the column on which stands the Immaculate Virgin.

"Then a great convulsion takes place. All the ships that until then had fought against the Pope's ship are scattered; they flee away, collide and break to pieces one against another. Some sink and try to sink others. Several small ships that had fought gallantly for the Pope race to be the first to bind themselves to those two columns....Over the sea there reigns a great calm" (205-210).

St. John Bosco explains his dream: "The enemy ships are persecutions. The most serious trials for the Church are near at hand...Her enemies are represented by the ships that tried to sink the ship if they could. Only two means are left to save her amidst so much confusion: DEVOTION TO MARY MOST HOLY and FREQUENT COMMUNION, making use of every means and doing our best to practice them and having them practiced everywhere and by everybody" (210-211).

This dream of St. John Bosco makes sense when we look at the crucifixion of our Lord, the climax of His earthly life. It is there that both the mystery of the Eucharist and of Mary's maternal care are fully revealed; therefore, it only makes sense that devotion to Mary and the Holy Eucharist go together and assist us, especially in times of persecution. Mary was given to us to be our Mother and from His pierced side flowed the blood and water foreshadowing Baptism and the Eucharist.

Of all of the substances that Jesus could have chosen or could have made important, He chose bread and wine; yes, these are staples in many cultures. However, it is interesting to see the process that goes into their preparation – the wheat and the grapes are crushed. For us to become what we receive, we too need to go through a process of dying to self. We also need to be generous as Jesus is generous. As has been stated, He comes to all people in the Eucharist; He has placed Himself into the hands of his people.

In Sacrosanctum Concilium Vatican II's dogmatic constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (§47), we are encouraged at Mass, the memorial of His death and resurrection, that we are not to be "silent spectators" but we "should take part in the sacred action conscious of what [we] are doing, with devotion and full collaboration." We "should learn also to offer [our]selves". This will bring us into greater union with Christ and with the Father (§48).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church in paragraph 1326 reminds us that this life is not our goal but rather we look toward Heaven, "Finally, by the Eucharistic celebration we already unite ourselves with the heavenly liturgy and anticipate eternal life, when God will be all in all." The Eucharist remembers not just His Passion but also celebrates His Resurrection.

I would now like to take some select stories from Church History to see how this is played out. I will start with the Acts of the Apostles, the history of the early Church. Jesus has just promised them at His Ascension, "And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20). The first chapter of Acts shows how they lived, gathered around our Lady, "All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer, together with some women, and Mary the mother of Jesus" (1:14). In the next chapter, Luke writes, "They devoted themselves to the teaching of the



Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Wichita

3550 N. 167th St. W. Colwich, KS 67030
(316) 722-9316 | www.sistersihmofwichita.org

apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers” (Acts 2:42). The breaking of the bread as we know is the Eucharist.

It wasn't long before the early Church was being persecuted. St. Stephen, the first martyr, wasn't alone in his suffering, I read from Acts 7, “But [Stephen], filled with the holy Spirit, looked up intently to heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and he said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55-56).

In the very next chapter of Acts, Luke writes, “On that day, there broke out a severe persecution of the church in Jerusalem, and all were scattered throughout the countryside of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (8:1b). I am sure that there was concern in the members of the early Church but they only had to remember all that Jesus had said, his promise of the Eucharist and His Mother.

An example from the Roman persecutions is St. Ignatius of Antioch, who had been taken from his hometown to be killed in Rome. He wrote the Christians in the city, “Let me be food for the wild beasts, for they are my way to God. I am God's wheat and shall be ground by their teeth so that I may become Christ's pure bread. Pray to Christ for me that the animals will be the means of making me a sacrificial victim for God.” And again, “Give me the privilege of imitating the passion of my God. If you have him in your heart, you will understand what I wish. You will sympathize with me because you will know what urges me on.”

State-sponsored persecution ends at the beginning of the 4th century; this doesn't mean that Christians didn't suffer for their faith in the next one thousand years but I want to move ahead to another major persecution of the Church, that of England during the time of Queen Elizabeth I. Beginning in the middle of the 16th century, faithful Catholics suffered greatly in England. King Henry VIII, her father, had killed Thomas More and Bishop Fisher and dissolved 800 monasteries in England, destroying some, confiscating others or leaving them to fall apart due to neglect. Elizabeth continued a plan against the Church but intensified things; she required attendance at Anglican services at the cost of being fined. She forbade the celebration of the Catholic Mass as well as the sacraments. She even went so far as to hunt down Priests living in England; these holy men were tortured and killed. She was responsible for the death of well over one hundred Priests. They would be trained in France before crossing the Channel; they were to move from one location to the next secretly in order to say Mass for the faithful.

We have several stories of these priests, Blessed Robert Anderton and Blessed William Marsden were arrested as soon as they got off the boat; they were suspected of being priests and they did not deny the charge. They were hung, drawn and quartered. Two of the most famous Priests were Fr. Edmund Campion (after having endured the rack, his arms extended to below his knees) and Fr. Robert Southwell. *Diary of a Hunted Priests* documents one Priest who surprisingly survived.

Yet these are not the only ones who lived and gave the witness of their lives during these difficult times. There were many faithful lay people who were killed in response to the attacks against the Church. One man, Thomas Bosgrave, was put to death for placing his hat on the head of a priest who was being led to execution; he said, “The honor I owe to your function will not allow me to see you go bareheaded.”

One person in particular that I have found inspiring is a laywoman, Margaret Clitherow. She converted to the Catholic faith at the age of 18; she was already married. Her non-Catholic husband, whose brother was a priest, would pay her fines when she refused to attend Anglican services. Margaret had been imprisoned for not attending services; she even gave birth to her third child in prison. She sent her oldest to the English college in Reims to study for the priesthood. She was brought to trial for hiding priests and having the Mass celebrated in her house. Catholics during this time would contrive hiding places for priests and for the articles needed for the celebration of Mass. They had to practice extreme stealth for their neighbors were always on the watch to turn them in to the authorities. Yet Margaret would not plead; she did not want her family to have to testify against her or suffer for her being found guilty. As a result, she was pressed to death. No amount of punishment would convince her to betray her belief in the Eucharist. To Margaret, the Eucharist and thus the priesthood was everything to her; she was willing to go to her death for she could not live without his Real Presence. What were the consequences? She and her unborn baby were pressed to death on March 25th which happened to be Good Friday that year; she wasn't even allowed clothing during her



Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Wichita

3550 N. 167th St. W. Colwich, KS 67030
(316) 722-9316 | www.sistersihmofwichita.org

execution. The garment she wove during her imprisonment was to be her burial shroud. When asked to confess her crime, she stated, "No, no, Mr. Sheriff, I die for the love of my Lord Jesu." "She was laid on the ground, a sharp stone beneath her back, her hands stretched out in the form of a cross and bound to two posts. Then a door was placed upon her, which was weighted down till she was crushed to death. Her last words during an agony of fifteen minutes, were "Jesu! Jesu! Jesu! have mercy on me!" This example speaks to me of our times as well. The culture of death seeks to eliminate all aspects of the truth, the Eucharist, the unborn.

Another example I want to share with you is from modern times from the life of Francis Xavier Cardinal Nguyen Van Thuan, from Vietnam, ordained to the priesthood in 1957; he died in 2002. His cause has been introduced and he has been named venerable. In the early years of his priesthood, he was blessed with great success. Yet on a trip to Lourdes, he heard in his heart the words our Lady had spoken to Bernadette, "I do not promise you joy and consolations on this earth, but trials and sufferings." He reflected on them and spent each of the following years preparing for what was in store; many years passed before he was finally arrested in 1975 and he knew that this is what our Lady had been preparing him for – fifteen years of imprisonment, some of which was in solitary confinement.

He relied upon the presence of Jesus and Mary during these years. They were watching over him as you can see from the following stories. Some members of the faithful were able to smuggle in altar breads and wine. The wine was presented in a medicine bottle as necessary for his stomachaches; the altar breads were placed inside a flashlight. Being able to celebrate the Mass brought the Bishop great joy. He recounts, "Each time I celebrated Mass, I had the opportunity to extend my hands and nail myself to the cross with Jesus, to drink with him the bitter chalice. Each day in reciting the words of consecration, I confirmed with all my heart and soul a new pact, an eternal pact between Jesus and me through his blood mixed with mine. Those were the most beautiful Masses of my life!" (131). About Jesus' presence, he writes, "The Eucharist became for me and for the other Christians a hidden and encouraging presence in the midst of all our difficulties" (132).

And our Lady continued to be present to him, "During the journey into the obscurity of being a prisoner, I prayed to Mary with all simplicity, 'Mother, if you see that I can no longer be useful to your Church, grant me the grace to consume my life in prison. Otherwise, allow me to leave prison on one of your feasts' (199). On the feast of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple he was called to the commander's office and asked if there was anything he wished. He asked for his freedom and while it would usually take time to get the paperwork completed, he gained his freedom on that very feast.

It is clear that we are called to turn to the Eucharist and to Mary in times of persecution. It is interesting to note that the column on which the Eucharist stands is taller than Mary's column. Both are important but it is obvious that Mary does not seek to take away attention from her Son. She wants to lead us to Jesus, especially Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament.

As we face the difficulties of our life, whether it be in family life, in the state of our world, I want you to remember one of the most popular psalms, Psalm 23. This is a good reminder to us of how our Lord has prepared us for the sufferings of this life; he has not forsaken or abandoned us but is rather present with us. The evil one wants us to think that we are all alone but that is not true. Jesus has given us His Body and Blood to be our food and Mary to be our Mother; these are two needs that we have from the beginning and they don't go away with time.

The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I shall want.
Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose.
Near restful waters he leads me, to revive my drooping spirit.
He guides me along the right path; he is true to his name.
If I should walk in the valley of darkness no evil would I fear.
You are there with your crook and your staff;
with these you give me comfort.
You have prepared a banquet for me in the sight of my foes.
My head you have anointed with oil; my cup is overflowing.
Surely goodness and kindness shall follow me all the days of my life.
In the Lord's own house shall I dwell for ever and ever.



Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Wichita

3550 N. 167th St. W. Colwich, KS 67030
(316) 722-9316 | www.sistersihmofwichita.org

Works Consulted

- “Backgrounder: Attacks on Catholic Churches in the U.S.” USCCB, www.usccb.org/committees/religious-liberty/Backgrounder-Attacks-on-Catholic-Churches-in-US. Accessed 7 July 2022.
- “Books of the Bible.” USCCB, bible.usccb.org/bible. Accessed 7 July 2022.
- Bosco, John. *Forty Dreams of St. John Bosco*. TAN Books and Publishers, 2009.
- Camm, Bede. "St. Margaret Clitherow." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 4. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908. www.newadvent.org/cathen/04059b.htm. Accessed 20 June 2022
- “Catechism of the Catholic Church.” www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM. Accessed 7 July 2022.
- Ignatius of Antioch. “CHURCH FATHERS: Epistle to the Romans” www.newadvent.org/fathers/0107.htm. Accessed 7 July 2022.
- “Persecution.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/persecution>. Accessed 7 Jul. 2022.
- “Psalm 23” <https://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/Confirmation/Readings/OC-Readings-P2.pdf> Accessed 7 July 2022.
- “Sacrosanctum Concilium.” www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat_ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html. Accessed 7 July 2022.
- Thuan, Francis Xavier Nguyen van, et al. *Testimony of Hope: The Spiritual Exercises of Pope John Paul II*. Pauline Books and Media, 2000.
- USCCB Public Affairs office. “One Hundred Incidents of Vandalism Reported at Catholic Sites in U.S. Since May 2020.” USCCB, www.usccb.org/news/2021/one-hundred-incidents-vandalism-reported-catholic-sites-us-may-2020. Accessed 19 June 2022.



Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary of Wichita

3550 N. 167th St. W. Colwich, KS 67030
(316) 722-9316 | www.sistersihmofwichita.org