

Homily for Mass by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez
Bishop of the Diocese of St. Augustine
Diocesan Day of Eucharistic Prayer and Renewal
St. Joseph Catholic Church, Jacksonville, Fla.
March 10, 2012

CONVERSION TO THE EUCHARIST
(Micah 7:14-15, 18-20; Luke 15:1-3, 11-32)

In the Gospel of St. John, the introduction to Jesus' last supper, his last Passover, is recognized as Jesus' hour of passing from this world to the Father. There St. John says that "he had always loved his own in the world and would show his love for them till the end." The Lord, the Kyrius, does not hesitate to become the servant to wash the Apostles' feet in true humility.

The parable just proclaimed gives us an incredible picture of the Eternal Father whom Jesus reveals. The Father is tender and compassionate to unconceivable levels to the mind of scribes and Pharisees and that of the elder brother. The Eternal Father is rich in mercy for the Father is eager to forgive and reconcile: God's deepest nature is to be merciful. As Micah said, in reference to God, "who does not persist in anger forever, **but rather delights in clemency.**" Therefore no one desires the forgiveness leading to reconciliation and shared life more than God himself does.

The prodigal's sin brings division; the Father's love brings reunion.

God is father/shepherd more than he is judge; his ultimate desire is to save from danger, to forgive and then **to nourish**; the father fully realizes the hunger and emptiness of his children, and worries about how to bring them out of distress in order to make them happy; the father anticipates all his children's needs before they even realize them: his love for them makes him wholly **identified with his children**, wholly immersed in their place and shares their situation: "As in the days **when you [God!] came from the land of Egypt**, show us wonderful signs..." (Micah)

God does not guide his people from afar, rather he is right there with them in the Exodus out of Egypt: he leads by being one of them, by moving around with them, exactly like Jesus did in the midst of the multitudes.

The prodigal son's father shares the distress of his son by being restless about his return: both of them are longing for one another; one could even say it is the father's anguished

expectation and desire for his son that, like a powerful radiation of grace, has the effect of converting his heart and making him come home.

“When he had freely spent everything, a severe famine struck that country, and he found himself in dire need.” Even as we are gorging ourselves on so many things, so much “junk food” of both the body and the soul, this **severe famine** represents our culture’s tragic lack and disregard for precisely the only food that ultimately nourishes: **Christ himself, the food the Father wants to give us.**

The prodigal son had the great grace of **realizing his hunger and need**, and this put him on the way back to the Father. If the son experiences this deep change of heart, it is because of the effect on him of his father’s longing for him to come back. *He would never have “converted” without the certain knowledge of his father’s unconditional love for him.* He realized that his father’s love was infinitely more powerful and lasting and trustworthy than his own sin and revolt.

“While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him, and was filled with compassion. He ran to his son, embraced him and kissed him. “This is the center, the treasure: the revelation of the Father’s inmost heart. God’s forgiveness is not a “rational choice,” a grudging concession or an act of condescension. God *cannot help himself*, because his love for us melts his heart. The Eucharist invites us to become completely enfolded in the waves of love coming from our Father’s heart. **GOD RUNS TOWARD THE REPENTANT SINNER!!!**

“²³ Take the fattened calf and slaughter it. Then let us celebrate with a feast, ²⁴ because this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found. “This **fattened calf** is as excellent **Eucharistic image**. It symbolizes **the most precious thing the Father has to give**, the food that nourishes above all other foods, and which is also a solemn sign of celebration, what the father has saved for the most significant of occasions. And what is celebrated is *the reconciliation of God and sinners in the sacrificed Son.*

The Father holds nothing back, “he who did not spare his own Son. . . .”

For St. Thomas, the Eucharist is the sacrament of the passion. The sacrament that makes present the whole Paschal mystery: repentance, death to the life of sin and yields to forgiveness, reconciliation and rising to new life, and festive banquet of celebration that reveals the love of the Father made manifest in his Gift, a Gift which nourishes and transforms and unites humankind to the Father when it is accepted and consumed *with the right dispositions of mind, heart and soul.*

THE JOY OF GOD in this whole parable is of paramount importance, the joy that realizes its fullness only when God has given us everything most precious to him: his only-begotten Son, the Beloved, the Lamb slaughtered in the place of Isaac, the Son crucified in our place made really present to us sinners as the precious body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ!

In this magnificent first Diocesan Day of Eucharistic Prayer and Renewal, it is so fitting that this local Church of St. Augustine takes this initiative since the first steps of the journey of faith in our Diocese and in the entire country began with the celebration of a Mass at St. Augustine on the feast of the Nativity of Our Lady.

Today I pray to the Blessed Virgin Mary in the unique title of Nuestra Senora de la Leche y del Buen Parto: Oh Mary, Virgin and Mother most holy, behold I will receive your most dear Son, whom you conceived in your immaculate womb, brought forth, nursed and embraced most tenderly. Behold him at whose sight you used to rejoice and were filled with all delight; him whom, humbly and lovingly, once again I present and offer to you, to be clasped in your arms, to be loved by your heart, and to be offered to the Most Holy Trinity as the supreme worship of adoration, for your own honor and glory and for our needs and for those of the whole world. I ask you therefore, most loving Mother: entreat for us all the forgiveness of all our sins, and in abundant measure, the grace of serving him in the future more faithfully, and at the last, final grace, so that with you we may praise him for all the ages of ages. Amen