

“He loved them to the end!”
Opening Address by Bishop Felipe J. Estévez
Eucharistic Congress, Birmingham, Ala.
June 28, 2019

St. John, who witnessed with the Mother of the Lord the outpouring of blood and water from the pierced side of the crucified, stated that God is love. The solemnity of the Sacred Heart is the celebration of this awesome mystery of the Son’s self-giving love for us in the Holy Spirit. In turn, the Eternal Father “bestows on us in mercy the boundless treasures of his love.”

The awesome love of Jesus the Good Shepherd, liturgically celebrated as the feast of the Sacred Heart, is the same mystery of the Eucharistic Lord which St. John introduces in his Gospel with particular majestic solemnity: “before the feast of Passover, Jesus realized that the hour had come for him to pass from the world to the Father. He had loved his own in this world and would show his love for them to the end.” (Jo, 13,1)

The Lord’s Supper is the memorial of his sacrificial death. His passion is to save every child of God. The parable of the Good Shepherd depicts graphically what St. Paul would call the “foolishness of God,” a God who leaves behind 100 sheep in the quest for the lost one, and when he finds it “he sets it (tenderly) on his shoulders with great joy and upon his arrival at home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them, ‘Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep.’”

As St. Thomas Aquinas said, the Eucharist is the sacrament of the passion. The Eucharist is the sacrament of the paschal mystery, that is, the living and effective sign of the passion, death, and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is accurate to state that the essence of the Eucharist, the mystery of faith, is in fact also the core message of the proclamation of the Gospel – the kerygma – calling each person to believe in the paschal mystery of Our Lord Jesus Christ and to be saved through him, with him, and in him, in the Holy Spirit for the glory of the Father.

Pope Francis urges us all to facilitate a renewed encounter with the living Christ who is full of mercy toward us and brings us joy setting us free “from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness, and loneliness.” As Bishop Robert J. Baker leads the 50th anniversary of the local Church of Birmingham, Bishop Robert Baker chose as a priority: the Eucharist fostering missionary discipleship. Bishop Robert Baker has called us to the beginning of the first proclamation of the Gospel, that first call, that first love, the joyful announcement that the Lord Jesus died to save each of us and that Jesus the Christ is alive in his church, the body of Christ, the total Christ as St. Augustine liked so much to call it. As we become his missionary disciples, we are urged, like St. Paul, not to keep the good news of the Risen Lord to ourselves but, with urgency, to deepen into the message and share it boldly with our neighbors.

This mandate is so well explained in Bishop Robert J. Baker’s pastoral letter: “The Eucharist and Missionary Discipleship. Called. Formed. Sent. Make Disciples of all Peoples.” The initiative of organizing a missionary Eucharistic Congress with the beautiful initiative of sending out missionary disciples throughout the entire diocese has the fragrance of the early Christians who

were filled with the vigor of the Holy Spirit in the midst of a hostile society. They witnessed to their faith with the sole power of the cross.

What a wonderful “God-incidence” it is that on a date like today 50 years ago, on June 28, 1969, this diocese began its journey of faith, hope, and love. With the Letter to the Hebrews 13:8, we can truly say: “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and forever.”

This passion for evangelization continues even stronger today. This apostolic desire to let the Holy Name of Jesus be known, loved, and served by every creature in the whole world shines brightly today. It is especially exemplified with such amazing success by the global Catholic network, EWTN, which is located here in the Diocese of Birmingham. This global network is well known for its enduring love and reverence for the Mass, promoting a real culture honoring the Most Blessed Sacrament through a variety of initiatives.

In the Eucharist, Christ is always renewing his gift of self, which he made on the cross. Vatican II said: the most blessed Eucharist contains the church’s entire spiritual wealth...the Eucharist shows itself to be the source and summit of the whole proclamation of the Gospel. The other sacraments, as well as every ministry of the church and every work of the apostolate, are linked with the Holy Eucharist and are directed toward it (P. O. no. 5).

The fact that Sunday attendance is only practiced by less than one of four Catholics in our country is an indication that we need the enlightened experience of the disciples of Emmaus. The two disciples, in awe, exclaimed: “were not our hearts burning inside us as he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?” “And after recognizing the Risen Lord in the breaking of bread, they went out to proclaim their experience proclaiming aloud: ‘The Lord has been raised. It is true! Then they recounted what had happened on the road and how they had come to know him in the breaking of bread.’” In this story, we find an inspiration for us Christians of the 21st century who experience Christ at the Mass but need to share the faith experience somehow with neighbors and friends. The end of the Mass is a missionary mandate: “Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord!

The missionary proclamation of the Gospel has this unique reciprocity moving simultaneously from the Word to the Eucharist and in turn a movement from the Eucharist toward a renewed reverence for the Scriptures. St. Jerome understood this so well: “for me, the Gospel is the Body of Christ; for me, the Holy Scriptures is his teaching. And when he says: whoever does eat my flesh and drink my blood (Jo. 6:53), even though these words can also be understood of the Eucharistic mystery, Christ’s body and blood are really the word of Scripture, God’s teaching.

When we approach the Eucharistic Mystery, if a crumb falls to the ground, we are troubled. Yet, when we are listening to the word of God, and God’s Word and Christ’s flesh and blood are being poured into our ears, yet we pay no heed, what great peril should we not feel.” St. Jerome understood so well that the Word of God and the Eucharist are so deeply bound together that we cannot understand one without the other: the word of God takes flesh in the event of the Eucharist!

The Eucharist is that fire of love that fulfills a most important prophecy of Jesus. The setting is important. “A number from the Greek community approached the Apostle Phillip for ‘they wanted to see Jesus.’” The Holy Spirit had sown in their hearts that remarkable desire; these Greeks, to me, are a symbol of the thirst of all people to encounter the truth. Perhaps these “outsiders” were worthy of the expression of Jesus: “they believed without seeing.” At the end of the encounter, Jesus said one of the most important sayings of the entire Gospel: “And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself” (John 12:32). When St. Ignatius of Antioch said, “The Christian is not the result of persuasion but of power,” he illustrated this saying quite well. Only the encounter with the Lord can lead to faith.

To evangelize is a work of humility. It is a self-effacing mission to lead others to encounter the Lord and his church and accompany the neighbor while not standing on the way, as Jesus reminded his disciples to consider themselves as mere servants. The people of God remain Catholic, not because of the perceived fidelity or perfect worthiness of God’s ministers, but simply because the power of grace that is mediated by the Word of God and the sacraments. The fact is that Jesus Christ did not choose angels to lead the church but an imperfect group of fishermen... a very ordinary group of people. The account of the Resurrection according to the Gospel of St. Mark conveys the same message: The Good news is mediated by apostles who are utterly imperfect and certainly unworthy, but the power of the message is such that its power is unstoppable.

It is astonishing to notice that St. Therese of Lisieux is the patroness of missions. In fact, she lived practically her very short life in one place. She was not involved in any external apostolic activity, and one can only imagine that she prayed a lot for the conversion of sinners and the fruitfulness of all involved in the proclamation of the Gospel.

In meditating on 1 Cor. 13, Therese wrote: “Charity gave me the key to my vocation. I understood that the Church had a Heart and that this Heart was burning with love. I understood it was Love alone that made the Church’s members act, that if Love ever became extinct, apostles would not preach the Gospel and martyrs would not shed their blood. I understood that love comprised all vocations, that it embraced all times and places...in a word, that it was eternal...Oh, Jesus, my love, my vocation, at last, I have found it, my vocation is love! “The Eucharist is that deeper source which Therese calls “heart and love.” In forming evangelizers, what is most important is to enable them to renew their capacity to draw from this eternal font of living water...” out of his heart will flow rivers of living water” (Jn 7:37ss)

Pope Francis, in his apostolic letter *The Joy of the Gospel* said: “...we need to make the Church constantly go out of herself, keeping her mission focused on Jesus Christ, and her commitment to the poor” (no.97). St. Vincent de Paul showed this vision subordinating piety to evangelizing activity. True love of God is found in love of neighbor. For St. Vincent, charity is above all rules. St. Vincent de Paul had internalized the teaching of the Good Samaritan’s compassion. The Mass does not end with the last procession; in fact, the Mass begins with the “body of Christ” making a difference, practicing the corporal and spiritual works of mercy, the advocacy for justice, the defense of the vulnerable, addressing multiple unmet needs of society.

In the last meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 2019, we approved important procedures and protocols related to accountability and transparency of bishops in dealing with sexual abuses and improper behavior related to the 6th commandment. The atmosphere was understandably heavy and tense, reflective and serious. Then came Bishop Robert Barron who made a presentation on the need to evangelize the “nones” and how to find ways to attract those Catholic teens and young adults who are no longer going to Mass on Sunday – the 4th commandment. There was an immediate upsurge of great interest on the part of the audience. So many bishops wanted to share their opinions that it made it difficult for the presentation to end. It had truly grasped the heart and mind of the audience. How wonderful it was because the heart of the church is evangelization. It was evident that the successors of the apostles were acting like the apostles after Pentecost, driven by the power of the Spirit to make disciples for the Lord Jesus. I experienced such hope in the future of the church’s life. It seemed as if, for a short while, we had moved from the mysteries of sorrow to the mysteries of light!

St. John Paul II, on his 25th anniversary as pope, in his last encyclical, on the Eucharist, wrote in his last chapter on the Mother of the Lord. He entitled it: “At the School of Mary, Woman of the Eucharist.” He stated that Mary lived Eucharistic faith even before its institution. She made her own the sacrificial dimension of the Eucharist. Pope John Paul also creatively reflected on the Magnificat, Mary’s song with Eucharistic overtones. Since the Son of God took flesh from the humble servant of Nazareth, the communion in the body of Christ is forever associated with the fiat of the holy Mother of God.

Jesus had a great and preferential love for the sick. Thus, it is quite logical and understandable that the church would reserve in the tabernacle the Blessed Sacrament for the care of the dying and the very sick at home. Eventually, the practice of visits to the Blessed Sacrament and adoration flourished out of love for the real presence. It is such a blessing that many of our teens and young adults have a special attraction to reading the Scriptures and gazing with love at the Beloved Lord. St. Augustine said that this practice of adoration is necessary to make our communion truly authentic. Long is the list of saints who witnessed to the practice of adoration such as Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Mary Margaret, St. Mother Elizabeth Seton, St. Alphonsus Liguori, St. Peter Julian Eymard, St. Aloysius Gonzaga, St. John Paul II, Venerable Fulton Sheen. And as Bishop Robert Baker shared in his pastoral letter, let us also include young Carlos Acutis.

We are privileged tonight to take the Most Holy Eucharist into the streets of Birmingham. Our parishes nurture such reverential respect for this mystery in our churches, but tonight the bishop invites us to share this awesome gift with the public at large. Indeed, the one who is hidden in the species of bread and wine is the Savior of all humankind.

Last Sunday, we celebrated Corpus Christi, and on this day, many processions took place in His honor throughout the universal church. St. Pope John Paul II once wrote: “we shall go among houses, schools, workshops, offices, and shops. We shall go where the life of mankind is bubbling, where the passions are boiling, where its conflicts explode, where its sufferings are consumed and its hopes flower. We shall go to give testimony with humble joy that the little white host is the answer to most pressing queries, comfort for every pain and sorrow of the most lacerating kind; there is a pledge of satisfaction for that burning thirst for happiness and love

which everyone bears in himself and herself, in the secret of the heart...let us go out across the city, and we shall show the sacrament of the presence of Christ to all.”