

My Dear People of God,

In a beautiful Second Century letter of the bishop, St. Ignatius of Antioch, he describes what it means to possess God: “Here is the beginning and the end of life: faith is the beginning, the end is love; and when the two blend perfectly with each other, they are God” (St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Ephesians*, 14:1). To bind faith and love together perfectly is to possess God.

Commenting on these two important virtues in his Lenten Message this year, Pope Benedict XVI writes, “[F]aith precedes charity, but faith is genuine only if crowned by charity.” The inspiration for this statement comes from St. Paul who wrote, “So faith, hope and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love.” The Holy Father continues, “Everything begins from the humble acceptance of faith (‘knowing that one is loved by God’), but has to arrive at the truth of charity (‘knowing how to love God and neighbor’), which remains forever, as the fulfillment of all the virtues (cf. I Corinthians 13:13)” (2013 Lenten Message of the Holy Father, 4).

The life of faith begins at Baptism and is intimately connected to love. For the vast majority of Catholics, infant baptism is the norm. This I have always seen as a singular gift. My parents thought the faith was important enough to pass it on to me. They did not consider faith to be an option any more than they would have thought learning how to read or being part of the family an option. Being Christian for them and for many other loving parents is not “an ethical choice or a lofty idea.” Parents love us into the faith. They know the faith is important. It is an essential. And why is it so essential? Because it is the loving embrace with our whole being of Jesus Christ. There are moments in this embrace when we can falter, grow lukewarm, perhaps even let go, but an embrace it is, a relationship that is first and foremost a response to the God who has first loved us (I John 4:10). Faith is a supernatural gift to us from God. We, in turn, must know who it is we are embracing. Here we find the content of faith.

Faith is an embrace of truth. For this reason it must be learned. Beginning with our parents but continuing with our family and teachers, there must be others who bring us to a deeper and greater understanding of what it is we believe. I have heard it said that love increases when we know more about the object of our love. This is so true. Our knowledge of the content of faith and our loving embrace of it go together. We learn this lesson better when someone lives it for us. We read the Sacred Scriptures, faithfully attend catechism classes and listen to instruction, but until we see the faith lived, we cannot imitate it, which is primarily how we learn. The content of faith and the expression of faith are always meant to be in union with each other. When we separate the content of faith from the expression of faith, we risk undermining both.

Every year I have the good fortune of reading the letters written by several hundred young men and women to be confirmed in the diocese. They tell me why they want the Sacrament of Confirmation. Very often they write about a wonderful grandparent or a loving uncle or aunt or teacher who is an example to them of what it means to be a devout and practicing Catholic Christian. They speak with great affection, because that person embodies what it means to live a Christian life. That person is not only kind and compassionate but also filled with wisdom and an understanding of the faith. That wise and loving witness, anchored in the faith, listens

patiently but also corrects gently. The young people notice the difference between this attitude and a more secular approach and, more importantly, want to know what the difference is and think the difference should matter. God bless these adults who give valuable witness to our young people of faith's content and expression. In this Year of Faith, may their number increase!

If faith is so vitally linked to love in the Sacrament of Baptism, then love vitally expresses faith in the Sacrament of the Eucharist. Catholics love the Eucharist and should. Yet it is saddening to learn from some surveys how many Catholics do not understand fully what it is they receive in Holy Communion. This is a deficit that we, as priests, should address, just as we should the glaring lack of participation in the Sacrament of Penance, another sacrament of love. In the Sacrament of the Eucharist, however, we progress into a full communion of love that is fed by faith. I return to something I mentioned earlier. We love more when we understand the object of our love.

I ponder the statement of Jesus to the Samaritan woman at the well, often read on the Third Sunday of Lent. He says to her, "If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him and he would have given you living water" (John 4:10). If we knew the gift of God, then what would happen? If we knew better that Jesus gives himself entirely to us in the Eucharist as food for eternal life (John 6:51), then our desire for that gift would increase. If we knew what love God has shown us by sending His Son to die on a cross and to conquer death through the Resurrection, a mystery relived and made present in the Eucharistic sacrifice, then we might not see Mass as a routine but more as a gift of privileged love. If we knew better the gift of God, then we would regard the Eucharist with greater respect and neglect it less.

I remember when I was first taught, as a child, that Jesus was present in the Eucharist, Body, Soul, Blood and Divinity. I heard what He said in the Gospels, what St. Paul wrote about the Eucharist in First Corinthians, what the Church taught about it in the catechism, what my parents and teachers said about it, and I believed it. I believed it but found it difficult to grasp. How could this be? When I asked myself that question, I learned an important lesson. I learned that some of the most meaningful things in life could not be grasped perfectly or completely—a parent's love, friendship, life, death, and, in fact, anything of consequence for a human being. All of them were real, yet not easily defined or comprehended. In the case of the Eucharist, it was experienced in the supreme and sublime mystery of the Mass. The Eucharistic Sacrifice was and remains for me the intimate encounter with the Divine. Just as a mother's meal revealed her love, a grandparent's death revealed mortality and friendship taught something about fidelity. So, also, the Mass revealed the summit of Divine expression.

Having taught the mystery of His flesh and blood as food and drink for eternal life (John 6:22-69), Jesus watched as the disbelieving crowd turned away. Obviously the crowd could not believe. But faith in this incomprehensible mystery was possible and St. Peter shows us how. "Master, to whom shall we go?" he said. "You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and are convinced that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:68-69). In this Year of Faith, may we grow to be more like St. Peter and less like the crowd!

Baptism and Eucharist are two supremely important sacraments. One begins initiation, the

other fully celebrates it. Both manifest the dynamic of faith and love. Parents should take seriously the obligation to baptize their children and to insure that their children are brought up in the practice of the faith. All of us should take seriously the demands of our baptismal promises—to profess faith and renounce sin. And, finally, we must attend Mass faithfully on Sunday and Holy Days and receive our Eucharistic Lord.

On one final note, I am very concerned not only for those of you who do not attend Mass faithfully but also for those who cannot or do not receive Holy Communion. As I wrote last year in my Lenten Pastoral Letter, perhaps you need the Sacrament of Penance or are prevented from receiving the sacraments by certain circumstances in your lives. Be assured that God loves you and that we love you too. Pray for the grace of conversion. This is a grace that we all need continually. Also, when for whatever reason you cannot receive Holy Communion, you can make a “spiritual communion.” When you do this, you open your hearts to God, admit your faults and the need for forgiveness, and express your deep desire to receive our Lord. God will hear your prayers and show you His love. I know this to be true.

To you, the faithful of the Diocese of Lake Charles, I extend my blessings for a holy Lent in this Year of Faith. May you listen well to the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ, put them into practice, live your faith, abide in love and remain faithful to the Church, who is the bride of Christ (Ephesians 5:25-32; Revelation 21:1-2, 9-10). Through the prayers of Mary, who is the model for that Church as Mother, may you grow in faith and love, as I remain

Devotedly yours in our Lord,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "+Glen John Provost". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

+Glen John Provost
Bishop of Lake Charles