



31 August 2022

To: The Faithful in the Diocese of London Regarding the Celebration of Sunday Eucharist

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It has been over two and a half years since our world was hit by the COVID-19 virus, which upset our lives in many ways, including how we celebrated our faith. It was unheard of, in our lifetime, to have to close churches and suspend the celebration of the sacraments of the Church. So many other places were closed as well, forcing us to find innovative ways to be present to others and get the things we needed. It was, indeed, a bleak time but one that put us in solidarity with the people around us. Our streets may have been empty of vehicles and pedestrians, but they were filled with many expressions of love and goodness as we witnessed neighbours caring for neighbours, and total strangers helping one another.

It was the same in our faith communities. We were united in prayer and sacrifice but not in person, for the sake of the common good, in order to diminish the spread of the virus and keep people as safe as possible. Pastoral team members reached out by phone and internet to assure our parishioners that we were there for them, even behind the closed doors of the churches. Priests celebrated Mass in empty churches, and by the internet were able to remain in contact with parishioners. Many will remember the hardship we suffered when we could not even gather for Funeral Masses. We eventually saw the gradual re-opening of our churches. Numbers were greatly restricted, however, and congregations were sparse. It was then that we learned to practice physical distancing and new cleaning methods. Hand sanitizers and masks became normative in our small gatherings, as did abbreviated and simple Masses. I am very grateful to all – pastoral teams and staff, volunteers and clergy – who worked hard at the parish level to carry on in such extraordinary circumstances.

That time without regular Sunday celebrations was not an easy time. Many of you communicated your desire to celebrate the sacraments, your desire to receive the Eucharist. In some cases, the best we could do was to offer up our suffering, in union with Christ. Throughout that time, along with other bishops across the country and across the globe, I extended to the faithful a dispensation from the Sunday obligation. Restrictions on numbers made it impossible for all the faithful to gather and, at the same time, we were concerned about the ways that the virus was spreading.

All those sacrifices paid off. Over time, with the new vaccines and strict rules on our gatherings in public, we saw the gradual decline of the virus among us. It is still present, though, since we have just gone through the seventh wave of COVID-19 in our area, and some are still testing positive. Medical experts warn that the virus is not yet eradicated and have prepared us for future waves to hit. In light of the great strides we have made as a country and on the local level, we see that we have been returning to a more normal life as it was pre-pandemic. The same is true in our churches. With no government-imposed restrictions and most pastoral activities returning across the Diocese, parish life is once again bringing people together for Masses and sacraments, for devotions and instructions, and for the many works of mercy for which our Church is known.

Since our parishes re-opened, many of you have returned to the weekly celebration of the Sunday Eucharist and other sacraments. This is central to our Catholic faith. Watching Mass on television has been a long-standing tradition for home-bound parishioners, especially the infirm and the elderly. Throughout the pandemic, televised and livestreamed Masses filled a need along this line, but there is more to our Christian faith and the celebration of the sacraments. Not only do we need to pray and hear the word of God together, but our participation in the Eucharist is the essential “food for our journey” as disciples of Jesus. It is here that we encounter the Risen Lord, not only when we hear his word and break the Bread of the Eucharist (Luke 24:13-35), but also in each other in the faith community, and in the priest who presides over the prayer. Watching by TV or internet will never be the same or match the efficacy of what Jesus wanted for us when, at the Last Supper, he said, “Do this in memory of me” (Luke 22:19).

It is appropriate, therefore, that I now lift the dispensation from Mass and remind you of the need to gather to celebrate our faith. **The general dispensation from the Sunday obligation is hereby abrogated, effective 6 September 2022.** This is not done in any way to create hardship but to do as the Church has done from the beginning, that is, to emphasize what is important for our lives as Catholic Christians. In this spirit, then, I extend an invitation to all the faithful to return to the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist, “the Supper of the Lamb” (Revelation 19:9), and to the other sacraments. We are members of the Body of Christ, the Church, who together participate in the sharing of the Body and Blood of Christ, the Eucharist, so that we may become that which we eat; that is, Christ who serves others.

On the day before he was to suffer, on the night of the Last Supper, Jesus said to his disciples, “I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer” (Luke 22:15). In our own day, the Lord no less desires to eat his Passover with us! With God’s grace we have the ability to respond to this invitation and to Jesus’ desire to share this meal with us. In his recent apostolic letter *Desiderio Desideravi*, issued on 29 June of this year, Pope Francis wrote: *Before our response to his invitation — well before! — there is his desire for us. We may not even be aware of it, but every time we go to Mass, the first reason is that we are drawn there by his desire for us* (DD n. 6).

Pope Francis reminds us what the Second Vatican Council taught about our celebrations; that we are all called to full, conscious, active, and fruitful participation as we celebrate the Eucharist. This can only happen when we are personally present, but for this to happen the Pope calls us to rediscover, to safeguard, and to live the truth and power of the Christian celebration (DD n. 16). With the help of God, this is possible.

I realize, however, that some of the faithful are still cautious and concerned about being in crowds. This may be due to ongoing health concerns related to the pandemic such as COVID variants, or pre-existing conditions such as a debilitating illness or the challenges associated with a long life. The Church’s law has always taught – and still does – that if you are sick or infirm, you are excused from Sunday worship (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1248 §2). The Church is sensitive to such needs. As your Bishop, I want to assure you that your parish wants to serve you in the best way possible. I encourage you to contact your parish with any particular need if you are unable to participate in the Sunday Eucharist.

I renew my thanks, along with those of Bishop Joseph, for all you have done during the pandemic to care for each other, especially those who were in need. I thank you for your efforts to preserve and to promote the unity we share in Christ Jesus through your acts of love. Without the acts of charity, we risk sounding like noisy gongs or clanging cymbals (cf. 1 Corinthians 13:1).

Bishop Joseph and I have already begun visiting Families of Parishes and will again be on the road to celebrate the Eucharist in our parishes. We are looking forward to celebrating the Eucharist with you!

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Most Reverend Ronald P. Fabbro, CSB
Bishop of London