

Spiritual Communion

Catholics across the world are experiencing an unexpected and unfortunate fast from the Eucharist, which comes in the wake of the novel coronavirus COVID-19. In many ways, the inability of many to receive Holy Communion has become an unimaginable Lenten penance – which has continued now into the Easter season.

American Catholics as well as those in other countries across the world, have seen their archbishops and bishops suspending the public celebration of Holy Mass or granting dispensations from the obligation to attend Sunday Mass, all in the hope of helping prevent spread of the virus by practicing “social distancing.”

How are Catholics to make sense of this absence of public worship or reception of the body, blood, soul and divinity of our Lord?

These days, we are able to take advantage of technology and attend Mass “virtually.” Many bishops and priests, and even the pope, continue to offer live-streams of their Masses for the benefit of the faithful. This is a 21st-century method of accomplishing what St. Charles Borromeo (1538-1584) did, when during an outbreak of plague in Milan during his tenure as archbishop there, he ordered the celebration of the Mass to take place outdoors so people could watch from their homes.

It is important to recall that, although our obligation to attend Mass might be dispensed, we are never dispensed from honoring the Third Commandment to “keeping holy the Sabbath.” Sunday remains to be set apart as another opportunity to grow in communion with the Lord. When we are unable physically to attend Mass, we may consider the practice of “spiritual communion” — an act to which the saints have given a consistent witness.

Spiritual Communion is a traditional practice of expressing to the Lord our longing for him and our desire for him to enter our hearts. St. Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) said: “When you do not receive Communion and you do not attend Mass, you can make a spiritual Communion, which is a most beneficial practice; by it the love of God will be greatly impressed on you.”

St. Jean-Marie Vianney (1786-1859), the famous country priest from Ars, France, once said “when we feel the love of God growing cold, let us instantly make a spiritual Communion. When we cannot go to the church, let us turn towards the tabernacle; no wall can shut us out from the good God.”

How might we go about making a spiritual Communion? St. Peter Julian Eymard (1811-1868), the French “apostle of the Eucharist,” suggested the following format:

“If you do not receive (Holy Communion) sacramentally, receive spiritually by making the following acts: conceive a real desire to be united to Jesus Christ by acknowledging the need you have to love His life; arouse yourself to perfect contrition for all your sins, past and present, by considering the infinite goodness and sanctity of God; receive Jesus Christ in spirit in your inmost soul, entreating Him to give you the grace to live entirely for Him, since you can live only by him; imitate Zacchaeus in his good resolutions and thank our Lord that you have been able to hear Holy Mass, and make a spiritual Communion; offer in thanksgiving a special act of homage, a sacrifice, an act of virtue, and beg the blessing of Jesus Christ upon yourself and all your relatives and friends.”

While there is no formula prescribed by the Church to make an act of spiritual Communion, prayers composed by various saints are part of the Church’s rich treasury of devotions. One of the more popular acts of spiritual Communion comes from St. Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787):

“My Jesus, I believe that you are present in the most Blessed Sacrament. I love You above all things and I desire to receive You into my soul. Since I

cannot now receive You sacramentally, come at least spiritually into my heart. I embrace You as if You were already there and unite myself wholly to You. Never permit me to be separated from You. Amen.”