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## RECTOR'S CONFERENCE

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“The Liturgy of the Church as our daily source and summit”

As we celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, I think that the most quoted phrase of the Council is that the Eucharist is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). Indeed, Christ truly and substantially present to us in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is the font from which grace flows to us from the Heart of the Paschal Mystery, and is the highest form of Communion with God Himself. The Liturgy of the Eucharist, as celebrated from the earliest of times, has fed and nourished two millennia of Christians with the life giving Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

But as each of you are well aware there are two great Liturgies of our Church: the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours. I do not intend to offer an historical development of these great gifts of the Church (we leave that to Msgr. Hogan and Frs. Payne and Alfaro), but rather I would like to focus on how these two liturgies are the “source and summit” of our daily lives as priests. *Lex orandi, lex credendi* – as we pray, so we believe – thus the mode in which we pray and celebrate Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours has an effect on the way we believe and more importantly the way the faithful believe. For example, if we celebrate the Eucharist worthily and prayerfully, then those involved in the celebration will see through our faith and prayer the truth of the Real Presence and transformative power of Christ who has come to us. It always amazes me when people comment on how prayerful a particular liturgical celebration was, when in fact, we were simply doing what we were supposed to do. As they say “do what is in red and say what is in black” – this is not rocket science, but when combined with striving to be prayerful (albeit imperfectly), those in attendance experience the beauty of what the Church intends. That is why I am convinced that spiritual renewal lies at the heart of the New Evangelization. As we teach our people to pray by both word and example, they are led into an encounter with the Mystery of the Word made flesh. Pope Benedict often mentions in his addresses that we don’t simply “do something” at Mass, we encounter Someone!

The Risen Christ we encounter in liturgy leads us to a further *Lex – lex vivendi*. As we pray and believe, we learn to live and love – Jesus’ law of Love flows from the Church’s two liturgies. These two arms of our spiritual lives are always pointing us beyond ourselves, for if they did not, they would be dead – like the whitewashed tombs of which Jesus warned the scribes and Pharisees (cf. Mt. 23:27). Thus above our Tabernacle is the Augustinian phrase which reminds us daily that the Eucharist is “the sacrament of piety, sign of unity, and the bond of charity.” We are sent forth to love and serve the Lord, as the old dismissal stated. The Liturgy is not simply for me, or for you, it is to be lived for others.

Let's speak first about the Liturgy of the Eucharist in the daily spirituality of the priest. The world needs us to offer this gift for its transformation and sanctification. If indeed it is the "source and summit" then we will not fail to enter into this primary priestly duty of offering the "once and for all sacrifice" "for our good and the good of all his holy Church." In your course on liturgy and in the ensuing *practica*, we want you to learn the *ars celebrandi* – the art of celebrating this Divine gift. We are the stewards of this gift, it is the lifeblood of our parishes. The preaching of the Word and the reception of the Sacrament will sustain, encourage, and challenge our people more than anything they will hear all week, and the Communion they receive will feed them more deeply than any of us will ever realize. Please don't ever underestimate the importance of the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist – music, environment, hospitality, server training, lectors, ushers, announcements, homily prep, and you, the essential component – you must be prepared as much as possible to mount the altar with joy and seriousness, with enthusiasm and sobriety, that this unique moment calls for. Now thanks be to God, Jesus is going to show up even if fail miserable at any or all of the above. That is the beauty of the Church's teaching on sacramental efficacy *ex opere operato*, it is not about us, but about Him who is the Savior of the world. However, as much as we believe this to be true, our subjective involvement does make tremendous difference for the people in the pew. God save us from more boring sermon! God save us from a community that is cold and uninviting! God save us from a parish that is fed, but does not in turn feed!

All that being said, what about the "source and summit" on my day off? After all, don't I deserve a break from prayer? Not if the priest understands the Mass as the defining and "*essential moment of their day*" (PDV 48). In 1993, Blessed Pope John Paul II spent the greater part of the year dedicating his Wednesday audience catecheses to the ministerial priesthood. On June 9<sup>th</sup> he said:

*If the priest 'hears' this truth proposed to him and to all of the faithful as the voice of the New Testament and Tradition, he will grasp the Council's earnest recommendation of the 'daily celebration (of the Eucharist), which is an act of Christ and the Church even if it is impossible for the faithful to be present' [PO 13]. The tendency to celebrate the Eucharist only when there was an assembly of the faithful emerged in those years [after Vatican II]. According to the Council, although everything possible should be done to gather the faithful for the celebration, it is also true that, even if the priest is alone, the Eucharistic offering which he performs in the name of Christ has the effectiveness that comes from Christ and always obtains new graces for the Church. Therefore, I too recommend to priests and to all the Christian people that they ask the Lord for a stronger faith in this value of the Eucharist ("Priests: Spiritually Rooted in the Eucharist," 9 June 1993).*

Ten years later, in his fourteenth encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, the late Pope also wrote, "*We can understand, then, how important it is for the spiritual life of the priest, as well as for the Church and the world, that priests follow the Council's recommendation to celebrate the Eucharist daily: 'for even if the faithful are unable to be present, it is an act of Christ and the Church' [PO 13 and CIC 904].*"

The pope was worried about functionalism in the life of his priests and continued:

*"Priests are engaged in a wide variety of pastoral activities. If we also consider the social and cultural conditions of the modern world it is easy to understand how priests face the very real risk of losing their focus amid such a great number of different tasks. The Second Vatican Council saw in pastoral charity the bond which gives unity to the priest's life and work. This, the Council*

*adds, 'flows mainly from the Eucharistic Sacrifice, which is therefore the centre and root of the whole priestly life' [PO 14]" (Ecclesia de Eucharistia, 31; cf. also CIC 276 § 2.2).*

There is no such thing as a “private” Mass, since it is always an action of the whole Church: both militant and triumphant. Blessed Columba Marmion explained that even a missionary “in the depths of the bush does not say *Orem* [let me pray] but *Oremus* [let us pray]. It is in the name of the whole of Christendom that he sends up his prayer to God” (*Christ the Ideal of the Priest*, 227). Granted, celebrating alone is not the ideal, but when needs be, there is such value in the gift of the celebration of the Eucharist that the priest should never fail to offer Mass for the needs of his people and indeed for the whole world. I say all of this not to de-emphasize the communal nature of the Liturgy, but to highlight that we are never alone. The “source and summit” in a cathedral church or a rectory chapel is the “essential moment of our day.” As men preparing for the priesthood, keep the Eucharist as your daily connection with the Lord. Prepare well every day and receive Him worthily and you will form the habit of allowing the Mass to be a *sine qua non* of your day.

Now, the second liturgy which we celebrate on a daily basis, and in a very real way is intimately connected to the “source and summit”, is the Liturgy of the Hours. This prayer did not come so naturally to us when we entered the seminary, because for many of us it was completely new. Sad but true, this “other” Liturgy of the Church is less well known or understood. However, a growing awareness in many parishes is leading to a resurgence of an appreciation for this age old practice. As seminarians, we are given many years to grow into this gift and discipline. The seminary does not expect us to be perfect in reciting all of the Hours as a collegian, but as we proceed closer to Holy Orders our recitation should be growing in depth and frequency so that on the day of our diaconate we can truly say that we have formed the habit of reciting all five Hours as a part of our life whether we are here or not, whether we pray in common or not.

The danger that I hear at times is when men say that “it is not my cup of tea” and that the Breviary is not really “my spirituality.” Well, too bad for you! We do not “do” it as our own private devotional – we offer it, like the Eucharist for the needs of the world. Like the Eucharist, it is not a matter of if I feel like it or not, it is a matter of being faithful to the promises we made (or forming the habit as one prepares for the promise). I pray that by the time you are to be ordained a deacon the Office is not a drudgery for you, we are called to freely embrace and at times lovingly struggle through this *opus dei* –work of God – as the monks referred to it. In our scripture classes the study of the psalms should take on special meaning since they form such a major backdrop of our day. Throughout formation we each learn in our own ways to integrate the recitation of the Hours when we are away from the seminary community. As a priest, 95% of your own recitation of Breviary will be heard only by God – these prayers are not in vain. We learn to keep the perspective that this liturgy, even when recited alone, is a public work – *leitourgia* – “for our good and the good of all of his holy Church.”

The *General Instruction of the Liturgy of the Hours* states that priests “are themselves representative in a special way of Christ the Priest, and so share the same responsibility of praying to God for the people entrusted to them, and indeed for the whole world” (#28). A priest or transitional deacon who understands who he is will not fail in his promise to pray the Liturgy of the Hours *in persona Christi et Ecclesiae*. The following paragraph (#29) states that it is an obligation for priests to “recite the full sequence of the Hours each day, as far as possible at the appropriate times.” It continues by explaining each of the five “Hours” of the Divine Office the priest is bound to pray (cf. also *CIC 276 § 2.3* ), a practice that I am proud to see so many of you

doing well before diaconate. What if we lose track of time one day and it is very late and we have not prayed Vespers? Pray it right before Night Prayer. How often I hear people say that “it’s five o’clock somewhere” when they would like a drink in the middle of the afternoon? We are a part of a universal Church and trust me it is always the time we need it to be to pray the right Office.

The Congregation for the Clergy in 2002 reiterated the *serious* obligation of the priest to daily pray the *Liturgy of the Hours*, “an obligation he freely undertook *sub grave*. [...] The priest has received the privilege ‘of speaking to God in the name of all,’ indeed of becoming almost ‘the mouth of the Church.’ In the Divine Office he supplies what was lacking in the praise of Christ and, as an accredited ambassador, his intercession for the salvation of the world is numbered among the most effective” (*PPLP* 14).

Cardinal Dolan makes the claim, “I contend that the renewal in the priesthood for which we all long will not occur until we return to a fidelity to the promise we made as deacons to pray daily with and for the Church in the Divine Office” (*The Priest*, December 2006, 29). The priest, deacon, seminarian, or religious who knows who they are takes seriously their obligation to pray faithfully the Liturgy of the Hours – he is the ambassador of the people before the throne of God. Pope Benedict XVI calls praying the *Office* a “free space” in which to enter and present ourselves before the Lord and to intercede for the souls entrusted to us: “As people of prayer, we represent others when we pray and in so doing, we fulfill a pastoral ministry of the first order. This is not to withdraw into the private sphere, it is a pastoral priority, it is a pastoral activity in which our own priesthood is renewed, and we are once again filled by Christ.” (Address to Priests and Deacons in Freising,” *ORE*, 20 September, 2006, 13). The promise made at ordination to pray the *Liturgy of the Hours* is about relationship – relationship with God and with the faithful. It is not uncommon, nor is it surprising, that when a man leaves the active ministry he inevitably admits to not praying the Office for quite some time. The obligation of the priest to recite the Office is to serve as a constant reminder of God’s presence, the needs of the people, and a way to sanctify the whole of our day. The five times a day we are called to enter into this “free space” offers us moments to recollect ourselves, even if ever so brief, and to “taste” the Lord’s presence and recognize Him in the midst of life, death, and struggle. Very often a word or phrase will speak to our hearts and even to the needs of our day – listen to God through His Word – indeed He is speaking to us. But at times this sacred duty may seem burdensome, however it is always a moment of grace as we are called to go beyond ourselves and pick up the Breviary, which bears more fruit than will ever be known.

Blessed Columba Marmion counseled priests thus, “Certainly the recitation of the Office is a great exercise of faith; we do not see the results of our efforts or of our prayer. [...] What does God expect of His priests? The generosity to spend themselves for the salvation of souls certainly; but this giving of self must be made fruitful by the recitation of the breviary. You must be convinced of this” (*Christ the ideal of the Priest*, 228). In order to help priests who struggle with the recitation of the Office, he advises that a few moments of preparation be spent recollecting on what is about to happen and to Whom one is about to speak. “Without preparation, the breviary will inevitably be recited nonchalantly, mechanically” (228-229). He also recommends having particular intentions for which to pray during the Liturgy of the Hours: “It is an excellent practice to form an intention which will serve as the motive for our recitation. It is easier to keep our minds alert when we have before our eyes the reasons which urge us to pray. Before we begin, let us think of the sufferings and dangers of so many souls; of the multitude of sinners, this immense mass of humanity harassed by demons and vice. When we forget ourselves in this way, we can feel that we are the *os totius Ecclesiae*, and experience the inspiration of devotion” (230). Those

who are bound to the Office by public promise, pray in a particular way in the name of or in the person of the Church: *in persona Ecclesiae*. The priest is called to be the voice of the Church and to intercede for the needs of the People of God. Next to the Eucharist, the most efficacious way in which we pray for the Church is through the recitation of the Divine Office.

Now all of that being said, you might think to yourself that the above mentioned fidelity to daily Mass and the Office is a nice ideal, but one that is not realistic. You might have even had someone tell you that this kind of expectation is unrealistic for the busy parish priest. Well, God doesn't ask us to do that which He doesn't give us the grace to do. I want to share with you very personally for a moment from my own experience. I share this with you in order to glorify God and let you know that the promises we make at ordination are attainable. By God's grace, in my almost sixteen years as a priest, I have been able to offer Mass 364 days a year (note not 365 because Good Friday is the Liturgy of the Pre-Sanctified!). At times this takes planning and sacrifice, especially when travel is involved. But if we plan ahead we will not be left by surprise! Arrange every day around the "source and summit" – the central moment of our day. As Padre Pio would reflect upon daily Mass, he would say that from one Mass to the other he was either in preparation or thanksgiving.

Regarding the Liturgy of the Hours, again, I am boasting in the Lord and not in myself. I want you first and foremost to know that it can be done – and that to believe otherwise is a genuine temptation and a lie from the evil one. There are many priests who strive to fulfill their promises to the utmost. By God's grace, I have been able to pray the whole Office every day since my diaconate missing (as far as I can remember) only three minor Hours missed in almost seventeen years – and I think the Lord allowed that for my own humility – we cannot pray it with perfection, but strive with great devotion to give it all we have. But in other words, it is possible! It is a gift that the Church entrusts to us that we must take as seriously as the other two promises we make at ordination: obedience and celibacy. This three legged stool of our promises will suffer if we do not completely embrace that which is entrusted to us. Plus in the modern era of the ebreviary, there is never an excuse – the day I was with Greg in the hospital, we left so abruptly I only had my phone and it allowed me to lead him in prayer electronically!

Why the emphasis on all of this rigid adherence to the rules? Because the "rules" have been handed down to us to keep us on track and focused on Christ and in loving and serving His people. *Lex orandi, lex credendi, lex vivendi* – if at the end of the day our hearts are not expanding to love ever more like Christ, then we are doing something wrong. The Liturgy of the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours are two great gifts that the Church has given to us to lead us closer to Christ and which nourish us to serve Him ever more faithfully.

A priest friend in Bridgeport, Connecticut, wrote to me this week about his classmate who was just arrested for heinous crimes: "When the sad story broke, I was reminded of something written in a book entitled *About Being A Priest* by Fr. Federico Suarez. 'The priest, in spite of all the extraordinary graces he receives from God, is capable of the most abominable things the moment he lets go of God's hand.' Somewhere along the way, [this priest] let go of God's hand, [...]" Brothers please never let go of God's hand. We stay connected to Him through the faithful fulfillment of our duties. The Liturgy is our connection to Him and His connection to us and the faithful entrusted to us.

Pope Benedict recently invoked our Lady's intercession over our continent in the following words: "As a model of openness to God's grace and of perfect concern for others, there shines forth on your continent the figure of Mary Most Holy, Star of the New Evangelization, invoked throughout America under the glorious title of Our Lady of Guadalupe" (International Congress on the Church in America, *ORE*, 12 December 2013, 3).

Mary, Mother of Priests, pray for us.

St. Vincent de Paul, pray for us.

St. Francis de Sales, pray for us.