

**Homily for the Mass for the Women of Distinction
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

**June 5th, 2021
Saturday of the 9th Week of Ordinary Time
Memorial of St. Boniface**

**† Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

Dear brother priests, and my sisters and brothers in Christ, it is good that we are together here to celebrate this Mass today offering thanks to God for the exemplary fidelity and generosity shown by our 2020 and 2021 Women of Distinction. It is a delight finally for us to host all of you here at our Cathedral, and this time together makes me all the more grateful for the tremendous work you, and all of our Councils of Catholic Women, do around our diocese.

Recently I have spoken and written on the theme of “Eucharistic Coherence,” a phrase drawn from the Aparecida document, which, then-Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, now Pope Francis, played a large role in promulgating throughout the Episcopal Conference of Latin America and the Caribbean back in 2007. It was a declaration that called all of Latin America back to a full-hearted living out of the Gospel, and our Holy Father

seems to still have much of it in his heart now as Pope Francis. That document uses this profound phrase – “Eucharistic Coherence” – to refer to the necessary consistency that must be evident between a Catholic’s life, and the Blessed Sacrament that they receive at Mass. It aims to protect the Eucharist from desecration, but it also aims to protect the life of grace of those Catholics receiving the Eucharist, for, as St. Paul reminds the earliest Christians, *“Whoever eats unworthily of the bread and drinks from the Lord’s cup makes himself guilty of profaning the body and of the blood of the Lord”* (1 Cor 11:27). This desire, that both the sacrament and souls be respected and cherished, is something that Pope Francis has continued to emphasize through his recent promulgation of the new Book VI of the *Code of Canon Law*.

As much as I would want to offer you all some canonical commentary today, I suspect you would find it less exciting than I do! And yet the Lord brought again and again that idea of “Eucharistic Coherence” back to the top of my mind and prayer, and, as I began to examine the readings and reflect on the purpose of our celebration today, I found a new depth to this phrase.

“Eucharistic Coherence,” certainly refers to the consistency that must mark a Christian’s actions and his faith: his or her life must match that of the Life of Christ that they receive in Holy Communion. But by this greatest of sacraments, Our Lord does not turn us into cookie-cutter versions of Himself! Rather, marvelously, each of us is meant – in our own particular, unique, unrepeatable way – to emulate what we receive.

Lawrence Feingold, in his comprehensive tome on the theology of the Eucharist, summarizes the Blessed Sacrament as three fundamental gifts: of *presence... of sacrifice... and of communion*. Presence: Jesus truly remaining *with* us. Sacrifice: Jesus offering Himself *for* us. And Communion: Jesus Himself being our spiritual sustenance.

Tomorrow, as we celebrate the great feast of Corpus Christi, it will be the proper time to meditate on what exactly Jesus gives us in the Eucharist, but *today* I want to speak about *our* side of this mystery. Since the Eucharist is a gift of presence, sacrifice, and communion, what kind of *invitation* does Our Lord offer to us to emulate His gift? How can our lives reflect what we have received? Can our actions and words and deeds echo, or *cohere with*, the Sacrament we approach today?

Presence. Of course, Jesus is present to us in the Blessed Sacrament. He waits for us, remains near to us in every tabernacle, and comes within our bodies and souls in those beautiful minutes after we receive Him at Mass. The Catholic faithful yearned for that presence last summer when we were deprived from attending public Masses! How good it is for everyone to be able to receive Jesus again today!

But what is His Presence like? How can we emulate Him? I think it comes down to a simple action: to give all of our attention to the person that is in front of us at any given minute. Think about it. Jesus is completely present to you when you pray to Him. He does not get distracted. He does not pull out his phone, or run off to something else, or get bored after a while. He stays with us, He speaks to us, He gives all His attention to us. How might we practice this present-ness with those we love?

My dear sisters in Christ, perhaps better than the men in the room, you have been given a naturally *receptive and sensitive* heart. This is the first of several such particularly feminine gifts that Pope St. John Paul II outlined in his marvelous encyclical to women, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, and it matches beautifully to this first attribute of Our Lord's gift of the Eucharist: His

simply remaining *present* to us. We laugh about the trope of a man zoning out as his poor wife tries to engage him in conversation, but there is a grain of truth to it: women are generally better than men at knowing what is happening in someone else's heart, and paying attention to that.

The feminine heart is often better able to be *present* and *sensitive* to the person they are with. Do not neglect this tremendous gift! Use your natural sensitivity to love ... to preach the Gospel ... to make Christ *present* to our world! In all those simple moments when you are *present* and *sensitive* to those around you, know that Christ's Eucharistic Love is reflected in you!

Sacrifice. This is the second attribute that Prof. Feingold finds in Jesus' gift of His Body and Blood. Of course, we describe the Mass as a "sacrifice," and so it is. It is the re-presentation of the sacrifice that Jesus began at the Last Supper - the Blood of the New Covenant - culminating on Calvary with His sacrificial death on our behalf. A sacrifice is something offered, endured, or given-over to another. In the Old Testament this was often from the first fruits of someone's flock or field. Jesus gives Himself in sacrifice to the Father, and so do we every time we offer something up for love of God. Of course, we do this as well whenever we pour ourselves out in service to the

Church, in love for our family or friends, or even on our own as we endure some cross, hardship, or humiliation in self-sacrifice for someone else.

Again, with all of you gathered here today, I want to take a moment to appreciate how this attribute of *sacrifice* is reflected specifically in the feminine heart. St. John Paul spoke of the feminine genius being marked not only by receptivity, but also by *generosity*. This takes nothing away from the ways that men are generous, but it acknowledges that a woman has a natural tendency to pour herself out in love. We see this innate *generosity* so clearly in the love between a mother and child. It is sometimes called the “mama bear” instinct, the natural willingness before and after giving birth to her child for a mother to sacrifice herself for her baby. This sacrificial love is expressed differently by a father, who is more likely to sacrifice himself *outwardly* to protect or provide. A mother’s love tends toward a *self-sacrifice*, a *generosity*, that is more constant ... more inward ... more sublime ... more compassionate. My dear sisters, let the Lord’s sacrifice inspire your own generosity anew today!

Finally, Communion. Of course, we call the Eucharist “Holy Communion,” so again we realize how close to the heart of things we are in

describing this Sacrament as a gift of Communion. God Himself is a Communion, a Trinity, and though even that language falls short, every other relationship-word fails even more. Father, Son, and Spirit are not really “friends,” or “siblings,” or “coworkers.” No, they are best described as a Communion, a Unity, a Trinity: three persons living from a common life, united and entirely consumed by love for each other. And so, when we receive Holy Communion, we are being *received into* that Communion that God *is*. Holy Communion does not so much make us friends, or siblings, or coworkers with God – though those words are not entirely wrong – but our relationship with Him is best described by “communion.” And how do we live that relationship? By letting our life be united with God’s, and our hearts set afire by His love.

My dear sisters, again, you can offer the world a particular example of this kind of life. Pope St. John Paul II offered one final attribute of the feminine heart that specifically instantiates this *communion* that marks God Himself, and His gift of the Eucharist, and that final attribute is *maternity*. No friendship, no brotherhood, no collaboration – none of those relationships comes close to the bond that a mother has with her child. Yet

our world is apt to stop short of motherly love: it costs a lot, *it costs everything*, and that is too high a price to pay according to the usual mindset these days. Better just to risk yourself a little to love – just be a friend, just do something together, just have a working relationship – this kind of love is safer, it costs less, it is easier to control. While Jesus taught us to call God “Our Father,” we also see elements of God’s kind like that of a mother’s: it is a total self-gift; an unprotected and open heart; a blank check from God to us.

The feminine heart is so good at showing us all how this is done! Love unreservedly. Show us all what it looks like to give life and love to those around you. Be mothers to your own children, but also all those little or lost souls in our world today.

The Scriptures offered us at this Mass deepen our reflection here on feminine love. To the modern mentality of limited-love, the great Archangel Raphael’s parting words to Tobit and his family remind them, and us, that *“Those who perform deeds of charity and of righteousness will have fulness of life; but those who commit sin are the enemies of their own lives”* (Tobit 12:9-10). We cannot think that to love is to lose something! No, love is precisely where we will find joy and completeness.

Secondly, Jesus directs all of our gaze to a *woman's* generosity in the temple: "She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living" (Mark 12:44). That last word – "life," "livelihood," or "living" – describes her gift of not just the last of her possessions, but the gift of her whole existence, her very life. Jesus' gift is the very same!

My dear sisters, allow Christ's gift to sustain and inspire your own self-gift, and trust that you will find joy in allowing Him to conform your love to His own.

May God give us this grace. Amen.