

## FIFTH SUNDAY OF LENT (YEAR B)

March 21, 2021

Jeremiah 31:31–34 • Hebrews 5:7–9 • John 12:20–33

### I.

Last week, I mentioned something I **saw** that immediately captivated me: a beautiful bronze crucifix I received as a gift, which hangs in my office.

Today, I want to tell you about something I **read** that made an immediate impression on me.

It's the earliest description of the Mass outside the New Testament, and it dates from about the year 155 AD.

The author is St. Justin (ca. 100–165 AD), a native of what was then Flavia Neapolis in Samaria, and what is today the city of Nablus in the West Bank.

Justin was a philosopher and Gentile convert to Christianity, who ardently defended the Christian faith.

He died a martyr at the hands of the Roman Empire, and so he is known as “St. Justin Martyr.”

Justin explains the first part of the Mass like this:

“On the day we call the day of the sun,  
all who dwell in the city or country gather in the same place.  
The memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read...  
When the reader has finished,  
he who presides over those gathered  
admonishes and challenges them to imitate these **beautiful things**.  
Then we all rise together and offer prayers for ourselves . . .and for all others,  
wherever they may be, so that we may be found righteous by our life and actions,  
and faithful to the commandments, so as to obtain eternal salvation.”

This description of the Eucharistic Celebration can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (no. 1345).

I love that line that explains the homily:

“He who presides over those gathered admonishes and challenges them to imitate these **beautiful things.**”

God’s saving works are beautiful things,  
because they heal,  
because they give meaning,  
and because they culminate in ultimate happiness.

These beautiful things rescue men and women from the ugliness of sin,  
from the trap of selfishness,  
from the void of meaninglessness,  
and from ultimate sorrow and pain.

God accomplished those beautiful things  
through the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ,  
as we hear in today’s Gospel.

In the Gospel, some Greek-speaking Jews ask to see Jesus.

Jesus’ reply to them is a symbolic explanation of his death and resurrection.

The point is that Jesus can only be “seen”—  
he can only be understood—  
in terms of his suffering, death, and resurrection:

“Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies,  
it remains just a grain of wheat;  
but if it dies, it produces much fruit.”

The “fruit” of Jesus’ suffering is the witness and holiness of our lives,  
we who are his followers.

And the grain of wheat has a Eucharistic connotation;  
it’s the bread that becomes the Body of Christ.

The words that follow indicate that participation in the Eucharistic Celebration, and reception of the Eucharistic sacrament, empower a Eucharistic life—the imitation of Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross:

“Whoever loves his life loses it,  
     and whoever hates his life in this world  
     will preserve it for eternal life.  
 Whoever serves me must follow me,  
     and where I am, there also will my servant be.”

This is the greatness of Holy Mass, which, according to the Church, is the “source and summit” of all that the Church does (Vatican Council II, *Lumen gentium*, no. 11).

The Eucharist is the beginning and goal of everything we do as members of the Church.

To follow Christ is to love like him—that’s what the Mass does for us.

The Mass is not only a time when we gather and say some prayers together.

The Mass is more profound than that; it’s the renewal of Calvary.

The Mass makes the death and resurrection of Christ present to us; it draws us into the event of our salvation, so that we offer our lives on the altar, together with the sacrifice of Christ.

The Scriptures proclaimed at Mass inspire us; the Sacrifice of the Mass, and the sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood, strengthen us to carry out God’s commandments in the world.

Without the Eucharist—the grain of wheat—we cannot bear fruit as Christians.

Throughout the pandemic, Mass has continued to be offered.

Even during the lockdown,  
when public Masses were suspended as a health precaution,  
other priests and I offered Mass privately for you each day.

Now that things have opened up,  
I'm grateful that the numbers of those attending has increased.

But we still have room.

It's for each person to make a conscientious decision,  
in light of his or her health,  
whether he or she can safely attend Mass.

I would like to assure everyone that, while there are no guarantees in life,  
this church is a safe place to be.

We follow all of the health precautions very carefully.

So, an encouragement to those who are not here:  
If you can safely return, please do so—  
we look forward to seeing you.

If you cannot safely return,  
please watch via livestream,  
and please participate as fully as you can:  
standing, sitting, kneeling, and praying alongside us.

I'm grateful for the Christian witness I have seen in so many people's lives.

This witness helps other people to practice their faith,  
including me.

I would also like to ask something of you, who are here.

If you know of someone who is not coming to Mass,  
please reach out to that person.

Without browbeating or guilt-tripping,  
tell that person that they are missed,  
and that if they can return to Mass, this would be a wonderful thing.

If they can't return to Mass,  
tell them that we pray for them,  
and that we await their return.

Each person's life can be Eucharistic,  
an invitation and encouragement to imitate the "beautiful things"  
God does for us here,  
in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.