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Food and Warmth for the Poor

Matthew J. Kuna

This past January, I visited a college classmate of mine who now works in Manhattan. During my stay there, the city was practically frozen over after a snowstorm that closed its public schools. Though we trudged through nine inches of snow and ice to get from place to place, the trip was well worth all the hassle.

Walking toward Penn Station on the Friday of my visit, I came upon the Church of Saint Francis of Assisi – home to the Franciscan Friars’ well-known apostolate to the hungry of New York,

The authentic Christian life unites our love for Christ in the poor with a love for his Real Presence in the Eucharist.

the Saint Francis Breadline. Given that it was First Friday, I decided to stop for a few moments in the lower shrine church where Adoration was taking place. I took a seat in the back, as the pews of the chapel were almost half full.

Some in the congregation were obvious regulars to the First Friday devotions. An older lady to my left knelt on the tile floor and, grasping a wooden rosary in her tired hands, silently mouthed the words to her treasured prayers. A few minutes later, a businessman in an impeccably pressed suit entered and sat in front of me, removing a Divine Mercy prayer book from the side of his black briefcase (perhaps seeking a few minutes of peace from the chaos he faced at the office). A number of others sat in quiet prayer before the Blessed Sacrament.

A church of warmth, rest and safety

However, the majority of those gathered sat bundled in blankets, seeking warmth, rest, and safety from the frigid winds outside. A few clutched large

garbage bags filled with personal belongings. Others wore hats and gloves, and closed their eyes for a little bit. One person even left half of a sandwich in the pew next to me. Although they were most likely not at Saint Francis that afternoon for the Catholic devotions, they appeared to be comfortable and even prayerful in the presence of our Lord, perhaps searching for a hope that they could not find elsewhere.

Sitting in that Adoration chapel, I became very aware of the ways in which I was encountering Christ. His Presence in the Eucharist is the supreme gift He gave the Church at the Last Supper, and gives us at every Mass. Christ is the Living Bread that nourishes our poor souls and accompanies us along the pilgrimage of earthly life. He was most especially present on the altar in that simple monstrance.

Yet in another sense, He was also present in the community of people around me, particularly in the faces that silently cried for help. Some were hungry or thirsty; others may have been naked or sick, alone or afraid. Perhaps they carry the crosses of poverty, homelessness, discrimination, addiction, family instability, or mental illness. They were the “least among us” in whom our Lord calls us to meet him. I was invited to see the face of Christ in that sacred space, a sanctuary from the coldness and bitterness that swarms outside. We truly saw God there. In awe, I sat in my pew and reflected on this.

Authentic Christian life

Saint John Chrysostom reminds us of the deep connection between the Eucharist and Christ’s poor. Preaching once, he remarked: “For he who said: This is my body, and made it so by his words, also said: You saw me hungry and did not feed me, and inasmuch as you did not do it for one of these, the least of my brothers, you did not do it for me.”

In the polarizing times in which we live, we too often witness leaders who divorce their practice of faith from a robust commitment to the vulnerable in society. If we do not open our hearts to see the face of Christ in his poor, then we are not authentically living our baptismal call. Likewise, if our advocacy and social work on behalf of the marginalized are distanced from the sacramental life of the Church – especially the Sunday Mass – then we certainly cannot claim to do God’s work in the world. The authentic Christian life unites our love for Christ in the poor with a love for his Real Presence

in the Eucharist. Nourished by the Mass, we are sent forth to proclaim Christ and to serve our brothers and sisters in his name.

Now is the time for us to commit (or re-commit) to living out this call as Christians. Many in our own communities have no shield from the cold of night or the hunger that seems to pervade our streets. Local shelters, food pantries, and outreach services ask for our assistance. Our Lord is inviting us to serve him by encountering those who need us most.

The Mass is the celebration of Christ’s saving work, namely his Passion, Death,

and Resurrection. As we reflect on his Easter Mystery and grow closer to him in the Eucharist, we experience a perfect moment to seek the face of Jesus, both in the Blessed Sacrament and in his struggling brothers and sisters.

Our world longs for a healing that can only be found in Christ, the One who calls us to his Altar and to the peripheries to give of ourselves in his service. Now is the time to encounter him. ■

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