

Love Made Visible

*A pastoral letter on adoration of the Most Holy Eucharist
Bishop James Conley*

Holy Thursday, 2017

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

We are made for love.

We are made to love, and to be loved.

Each one of us longs to be loved, because love is the source and the meaning of our lives. Without love, our lives feel empty, meaningless, and lonely. Most of us have found that nothing can take the place of love—nothing can satisfy us but love, given and received, by which we experience the love of God.

We are made by Love, in the image of Love, and for the purpose of Love—because God is love, and God has created each one of us in and through love.

Indeed, love is at the center of what it means to be a person. And the whole Christian mystery is the story of God’s love for us—the love of Jesus Christ, who came into the world for love.

Christ came into the world because the bonds of love between God and mankind had been broken by sin, and only he could repair them. He came because God loves us enough to atone for our sins. He came in love to undo the brokenness, pain, emptiness, and death brought forth by our frequent failure to love. He came to accept the death we deserve as sinners, to die so that we could have life. He came to save the world, through love. In love, he became a sacrifice to atone for our sin and to bring salvation to the world.

Love is selfless sacrifice, and sacrifice is the language of love. Love is the gift of ourselves to our beloved. And Christ made a gift of himself—he gave us his body and blood—poured himself out for our salvation, when he conquered death by dying and rising again.

Christ gave us his body and blood, as an act of love, so that we could know the love of God.

On the night before he was crucified, Jesus gathered with his apostles for a Passover meal.

Jesus and his apostles recalled the promises that God had made to his people: that he would provide a sacrifice to atone for sin, that he would set his people free, that he would send a savior, who would bring salvation to the world.

Jesus told the apostles that he was “the way, the truth, and the life.” He told them that he was the fulfillment of every prophecy and expectation, every hope and every promise, and that by his life, death, and resurrection, men and women could live forever in union with God.

Christ revealed to his apostles his mission of love. He told them to “love one another, as I love you.” He told them that they should make disciples, to proclaim the Gospel to the world, “so that they may share my joy completely.”

Before he conquered death forever, in a sacrifice of love, Jesus gave himself to the Church in the gift of the Eucharist.

He blessed bread, broke it, and gave it to his disciples, and he told them that it was his body, which they should take and eat. Then he took a chalice filled with wine, blessed it, and gave it to his disciples, telling them that they should drink. “This is my blood of the covenant,” Jesus said, “which will be shed on behalf of many for the forgiveness of sins.”

In the Eucharist, the apostles received a share in Christ’s own identity: they became a part of his passion and death, and they became a part of his resurrection. The Eucharist unified the apostles to Jesus Christ in the bonds of his sacrificial love.

“By making the bread into his Body and the wine into his Blood,” wrote Pope Benedict XVI, “he anticipates his death, he accepts it in his heart, and he transforms it into an action of love.”

When he gave his apostles the Eucharist, he told them to “do this in remembrance of me.” He gave them the grace to take ordinary bread and wine, and through his words, transform it into his body and blood, so that his disciples in the Church could receive him, and be unified to him in love.

In the Eucharist, Pope Benedict XVI taught, “God's own love—his *agape*—comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us.”

In the Eucharist, we are made sharers in Christ's mission of love. He came to redeem the world. In the Eucharist, we are called to make disciples of all nations, so that all people will know the freedom of life in the love of the Lord. He has given us—the Church—a mission. And in the gift of the Holy Eucharist, he has given us himself, so that as we follow him, we can be unified to his life, and he can be present, with us, at all times, until the end of the world.

We are living in a time, and a culture, which does not seem to know the love of God. In fact, Pope St. John Paul II taught that we are living in a culture that “often lives as if God does not exist.”

Our social and cultural values are not defined by virtue or grace, but by sentiment and confusion, by, as Pope Benedict XVI said, the “dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires.”

Pope Francis says that in our time, “humanity is experiencing a turning-point in its history,” in which “our contemporaries are barely living from day to day, with dire consequences.” We are acutely aware that in our world abortion is tolerated, personal conscience obliterated, and the family undermined and attacked by the cultural powers that shape public opinion and policy. More personally, we are all aware that in our post-Christian culture, men and women are impacted by a terrible loneliness, a despondency, and, ultimately, by the gripping despair of life without God.

Today, the great advances in technology have combined with our ethos of relativism to form a world in need of beauty, and truth and goodness: in need of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

We live in a world which is longing to experience the love of God. We live in missionary territory, as “strangers in a strange land.” Our world, our Church, our parishes, communities, and families are all in need of the renewal that comes in and through Christ's love. And God is calling us to be missionaries of renewal in Jesus Christ.

Because we are baptized in Christ, and have been confirmed in the Holy Spirit, and unified with Christ in the Eucharist, the defining mission of our lives must be to “make disciples of all nations.”

We, who have experienced God’s love and become his disciples, are called—each one of us—to be missionaries of the Gospel, proclaiming Jesus Christ, as if for the very first time, to our families, neighbors, and friends—to souls living in a culture longing for Jesus Christ.

But to witness to renewal through God’s love, our own hearts must grow in ever deeper love for God. To be true missionaries, we must experience a daily conversion of the heart—a daily renewal of life in God’s love. At the heart of the renewal is the Holy Eucharist.

The Eucharist is at the center of every good work the Church undertakes and is at the heart of the identity of Christ’s great saints. The great missionaries and saints who have gone before us have been guided, sanctified, and transformed by the Eucharist. They were renewed in the gift of the Lord’s love, in the sacrament of the Eucharist.

Pope Benedict XVI said that the Church’s great saints “constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbor from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord.”

The Eucharist, which is the “source and summit” of our faith, has the power to transform us—to deepen our intimate friendship with Jesus Christ, to remake our hearts like his, and to fill us with the power of his love. And today, because God is calling us to renew our commitment to become missionaries of the Gospel, he is calling us to deepen our devotion to the Eucharist, and to be transformed by the power of Christ’s Eucharistic presence.

“The Eucharist not only gathers the Church,” wrote Bishop Dominique Rey, “but sends us out, renewed, to gather the whole world.”

God is calling us to be holy missionaries of the Gospel. And at the heart of holiness is the Eucharist.

In a particular way, God is calling us, in the Diocese of Lincoln, in every family, every parish, every school, and in every religious community, to grow more deeply

in love with the Lord, and to become missionaries of his love, through a deeper commitment to the practice of exposition and adoration of the Eucharist.

When we adore Christ in the Eucharist, exposed in the monstrance, we gaze directly at the mystery of his presence. The Eucharist is love made visible.

Pope Benedict XVI said that when we look upon Christ in the Eucharist “we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving.” For that reason, adoration of the Eucharist, exposed to our view in the monstrance, is particularly important for us, and a particularly powerful encounter with the Lord.

I often ask children to imagine walking by the house of the Holy Family in Nazareth. Children who love the Lord might remember that Jesus lives there, and make a gesture of reverence, or say a short prayer. But if we walked by the Lord’s house, and he was out on the porch, and we could look directly at him, we would stop, and talk to him, and know that he was hearing us, and talking to us. So it is with adoring Christ in the Eucharist, visible to us in the monstrance. We see him, and we know that he sees us. We speak to him, and we know that he hears us. When we adore Christ in the Eucharist, exposed in the monstrance, the Lord engages all of our senses, through the ministry of the Church, to awaken us to the power of encountering him—love made visible.

Pope St. John Paul II wrote that through adoration of the Eucharist, “we can say not only that each of us receives Christ, but also that Christ receives each of us. He enters into friendship with us: ‘You are my friends.’”

In friendship, in the dialogue of Eucharistic adoration, God transforms us, so that, in love, we can make gifts of our ourselves to the world, just as Christ has made a gift of himself in the Eucharist.

Pope St. John Paul II called Eucharistic adoration a “transforming force,” which transforms us, and transforms the world.

Encountering Christ in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is an invitation, for all people, to deepen their relationship with the Lord, and to grow in communion with his Church. In adoration, we grow in unity and friendship with him—we learn to hear his voice, to know his will, and, most especially, to know and trust the power of his love.

Everyone—no matter his circumstances—can kneel before the Eucharist, and encounter, in visible reality, the mystery of God’s transformative and powerful love. We all long for love, and in the gift of Eucharistic adoration, we can all experience the love of the Lord.

No one needs to be a mystic to kneel before the Lord in adoration. Everyone begins the practice of prayer without knowing much about how to pray. But in silence, kneeling before Jesus, we learn how God speaks to us. We learn to hear his “still, small voice,” and we learn to speak to God from the depths of our own hearts. In silence, we learn to put aside the plaguing distractions of our time—the chirping and buzzing of our technology—and simply experience the presence of God, which transforms us in peace.

“God’s first language,” said St. John of the Cross, “is silence.” In the silence of Eucharistic adoration, we learn true humility. As we kneel before our Creator-God, we are confronted with the power and the mystery of God’s love. And it is from this silence and humility that we experience a deep communion and friendship with God.

Cardinal Robert Sarah says that “silence is an attitude of the soul,” and that when we adore the Lord in silence, his presence fills our hearts, our minds, and our imaginations.

Again, Cardinal Sarah writes that “without radical humility, expressed in gestures of adoration and in sacred rituals, no friendship with God is possible. True Christian silence becomes sacred silence as it becomes silence of communion. This is why silence is necessary for a true sacramental life: It leads to adoration, to a personal encounter with the Living God. Before the divine majesty, we are at a loss for words. Who would dare speak up in the presence of the Almighty?”

There are prayerful steps we can take, in the silence of Eucharistic adoration, to hear the Lord’s voice. We can begin by thanking God for his presence, and by asking him to help us to know him, and to love him. We can acknowledge our distractions, and ask the Lord to give us the gift of silence. And, through Scripture, or the mysteries of the rosary, through some other spiritual practice or reading, or through simple contemplation of God’s goodness, we can begin to hear the Lord’s voice. We can share our hearts with the Lord, and ask him to fill our minds, our imaginations, and our hearts with his presence.

God speaks to us when he is present before us in the Eucharist. We need only learn his language: we need only dare to kneel humbly before the Lord and, with trust in God, begin a dialogue of silence—intimate, powerful, and real.

Christ gave his Church the Eucharist before sending us forth to proclaim the Gospel, because missionary discipleship requires the Eucharist. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament conditions us for charity, and commissions us to go forth, loving God by loving our neighbors. Saint Teresa of Calcutta said that there is an “inseparable twofold presence of Jesus, in the Bread of Life and in the distressing disguise of the poorest of the poor.”

Pope Benedict XVI said that adoration of the Blessed Sacrament should always prepare us to love as the Lord loves us. In adoration of the Eucharist, he taught, “we ourselves will be transformed. . . His dynamic enters into us and then seeks to spread outwards to others until it fills the world, so that his love can truly become the dominant measure of the world.”

Certainly, adoration of the Eucharist can transform family life for holiness and mission.

Fathers who pray with their children have children who grow up to pray. Children look to their fathers as models of discipleship, and are more likely to grow in loving relationship with God if they see their fathers as men of prayer. Fathers who take their children to adoration model humble discipleship to their families, and form them for lifelong discipleship.

Mothers who take time to visit the Blessed Sacrament in adoration are renewed for the daily challenge of their vocation. Motherhood requires patience, peace, and serenity which surpasses understanding. Christ, present in the Eucharist, is the source of love for mothers, who are asked to love ceaselessly, and without counting the cost.

Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament prepares families for mission. Parents have a responsibility to form their children to be merciful, charitable missionary disciples. All families have a sacred call to be a source of apostolic joy in the world, to witness to Christ, and to proclaim him together, with intentionality and enthusiasm. But God calls each family to a particular kind of work or apostolate, and each family must discern how they are uniquely called to bring the Gospel into the world. That discernment begins with families in prayer, in the presence of the

Eucharist, asking the Lord to guide them in the mission of the Gospel, and asking him to equip them for mission.

Husbands and wives who kneel together in adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, especially with their children, find their family love renewed by Christ's love, so that they can pour their joy into the evangelization of the world, in the unique and important way God calls them.

Likewise, priests who spend time adoring Christ in the Eucharist are strengthened to serve the Church and the world as ministers of mercy and truth. Each priest is called to teach, to sanctify, and to lead—to be a conduit of grace in the world. Each priest is called to be an evangelist, and a witness. Each priest is called to stand *in persona Christi*. Priests undertake this ministry with fidelity and strength when they are renewed, frequently, in the love of God, in the presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Religious men and women who adore the Eucharistic Lord find new vitality and joy in their vows, in their common life, and in their charisms and apostolic life. Religious sisters and brothers are a leaven in the world, a source of salt and light. They are engaged in the work of intercession and spiritual warfare. Religious men and women are signs of the power of baptism. They are signs of Christ's love when they experience his love, most especially through the gift of the Holy Eucharist.

Pope St. John Paul II wrote that “Jesus Christ is the answer to the question posed by every human life.” Each one of us, kneeling in silence before the Lord, finds the answers to the questions posed by our lives.

Older people who adore the Lord find refreshment in the living water of Christ's presence. Young people in adoration find that Christ guides them, fills them with purpose, and calls them to holiness and vocation.

Kneeling before Christ in the Eucharist, the hopeless find hope. The weak find strength. Captives find freedom. The afflicted find comfort. The mourning find consolation. The lonely find friendship. Sinners find mercy.

Kneeling before Christ in the Eucharist, all of us find love. And love is what we are longing for. Before Christ in the Eucharist—love made visible—each one of us discovers that the enduring, satisfying, life-giving answer to the questions of our

lives is Love: love poured out from Jesus, and love poured out from us into the world, as missionaries of Christ's salvation.

Adoration of the Eucharist has been a grace in the Diocese of Lincoln since its founding. We are blessed with two contemplative religious orders of nuns, adoring the Eucharist and praying for our Church. We are blessed with parishes, including our Cathedral, in which the Eucharist has been adored for generations. We are blessed with priests and religious who love and promote Eucharistic adoration, with college students who make holy hours in the middle of the night, and with families who kneel before the Eucharist together—with mothers and fathers who teach their children to pray before Jesus.

Because the Lord is calling us to deepen our commitment to become missionaries of the Gospel, he is also calling us to deepen our commitment to adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, especially adoration of the Eucharist exposed in the monstrance, through which we can gaze at the mystery of love made visible, the presence of Christ.

I have encouraged our pastors to expose the Blessed Sacrament for holy hours, or for days of prayer, or for perpetual adoration, as often as possible. I encourage our schools to make adoration a regular part of each week, whenever possible. And I encourage all Catholics to make adoration of the Blessed Sacrament a daily part of life, and to be committed to a holy hour of Eucharistic adoration at least once a week, whenever possible before the exposed Blessed Sacrament.

On June 18th, the Solemnity of Corpus Christi, I will rededicate the Bishops' Chapel at the Cathedral of the Risen Christ as a chapel of perpetual adoration of Christ in Eucharist. Perpetual adoration exposed in the monstrance, will begin there soon after that. I pray that this dedicated place of Eucharistic adoration, in the Cathedral, the Mother Church of our diocese, will be a source of renewal in the hearts of all Catholics, and in our families, and in the world.

Christ calls us to become holy, as he is holy. Christ calls us to be missionaries, so that every human heart may know God's mercy and freedom. Christ calls us to know his love, and to love as he does. He calls us to become self-gifts, as he gives himself in the Eucharist.

May our common mission as Christ's disciples be renewed, strengthened, and deepened by God's love, in our silent adoration of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus Christ, who is love made visible.

Please be assured of my prayers, for a blessed and holy Easter.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "James Conley". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a small cross symbol at the beginning of the first word.

Bishop James Conley
Diocese of Lincoln.