



Office of the Bishop
Diocese of Antigonish
168 Hawthorne Street, P.O. Box 1330
Antigonish, NS B2G 2L7
Chancery 902-863-3335 / Fax 902-863-0037
Residence 902-863-1557
E-mail: bishopdunn@dioceseofantigonish.ca

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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We recently celebrated the 175th anniversary of our Diocese and through these celebrations we rediscovered how God is always faithful to us. One of the signs of this faithfulness is the Eucharist and this is why we called for a focus on the Eucharist leading up to a Diocesan Eucharistic Congress. Our hope is that we can engage in strengthening our faith in the Eucharist, be led deeper into understanding and appreciating this gift of the Eucharist and grow together in sharing this gift through word and action.

When we celebrate the Eucharist, we not only attend an event but we are drawn into the great mystery of love that Jesus revealed when he died for us because of his love. To draw us more deeply into this mystery, this Year of the Eucharist invites each of us to a deeper experience of encounter with Christ.

“No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (Jn 15:13). In saying this, Jesus prepared his disciples to remember that through his death on the Cross, Jesus would present his life to his Father, offering himself on the Cross. This self-sacrificing love offers us the opportunity of deepening our loving relationship with God. This saving action of Jesus Christ is re-presented each time the Eucharist is celebrated, for Christ himself offers the Eucharistic sacrifice and offers himself under the species of bread and wine. Christ is present in our gathering (thus the importance of the ministry of hospitality), in the Word (thus the importance of the ministry of lector), in the ministry of the priest (thus the importance of ministers of service) and in his Body and Blood (thus, the importance of communion ministers). The Second Vatican Council proclaimed that the Eucharistic sacrifice is “the source and summit of the Christian life” for we all draw our very life from the Eucharist. From the Eucharist, we receive our spiritual power as Church and are then sent on mission to “go therefore and make disciples” (Mt 28:19).

To help us better understand and reclaim the power and presence of the Eucharist in our lives perhaps we could reflect for a moment on the amazing popularity of the various social media platforms being used by people today. This form of communication has to do with the individuals’ deep desire to be noticed and connected. We all want to feel that our lives matter. In essence within our Eucharistic life and prayer is the opportunity to experience precisely what we have been promised by God. The gift of the Eucharist is the manifestation of Jesus’ desire to fill our hearts with love while at the same time challenging us to bring this love to all we meet. This sort of love is not a temporary or fleeting experience but rather lifts us and allows us to experience ourselves as being both loved and lovable. The Eucharist lifts us out of seeing ourselves alone and connects us in intense and intimate communities of faith, love and service where we experience the joys of God’s loving kindness. By entering into the Eucharist, we enter into the lives of others in such a way that we see the change in the hearts and minds of others and find our own lives changed as we discover the courage and power to “lay down our lives for others”.

When we receive Christ in communion, our lives are transformed as we come to experience more deeply the Father's love for us in Christ. We grow in our spiritual union with the Lord, our readiness for sacrificial love increases, and our desire to serve the Lord grows. As we reflect on our experience, we acknowledge a large decline in Mass attendance such that about 10% of Catholics in the diocese attend the Eucharist. Do we really understand the treasure we have been given? Perhaps we need to give ourselves over to this beautiful encounter with Love when we come to Eucharist. My hope for this Year of the Eucharist is that the hearts of all Catholics might awaken in the Diocese so that we may come to a deeper understanding, appreciation, and experience of the gift of the Eucharist. We will organize a variety of events and experiences so that we might reach this goal.

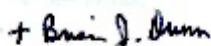
Over the course of this year, monthly homilies will focus on the gift of the Eucharist and parish bulletins will provide education on the parts of the Mass. On the First Sunday of Advent, a new Cross will be blessed at Port Hawkesbury and will begin its traveling with the Diocesan quilt throughout the Diocese. A calendar for the new year will also be made available for parishioners throughout the Diocese. The calendar will include dates of importance to our faith journeys such as saints days as well as some catechesis on the Eucharist. We will have a Eucharistic Congress to engage parishioners in a gathering that is educational and inspirational. Fr. John Baldovin, SJ, a world-renown theologian, will be the main speaker for the Congress on the weekend of the Feast of the Body and Blood of Christ, June 12-14, 2020. As well, a parish based mini-retreat program is being developed and there will be family events such as a movie night, book club, interactive games. Outlines for Holy Hours and Eucharistic Adoration will be sent to every parish. Clergy Deanery Meetings and Pastoral Councils will be invited to share how we might engage the people in their local areas. Parish groups, e.g. CWL, KofC, Cursillo, are invited to host an event on the Eucharist.

Pope Francis reminds us that an encounter with Christ in the Eucharist can lead us to create a "Eucharistic culture", that is, "a way of thinking and working grounded in the Sacrament yet perceptible also beyond the limits of the Church community." We become a Eucharistic people through our communion with the Lord and one another, ready to be of service in our everyday lives, transforming the world and showing mercy through the spiritual and corporal works of mercy. Building a "Eucharistic culture" requires that we be more intentional in our reflections of the central event of Christ offering himself on the cross.

Fostering this "Eucharistic culture" will enable us to live our lives for Christ, demonstrating God's love by serving others and sharing our faith. This changes our way of looking at our attendance at Mass. We gather because Jesus called us to gather and we celebrate Eucharist, not to be served, but with a readiness to be involved and to serve. We grow in our spiritual life not by how much we know, but how much we love and how much we are engaged in the mission of the Church in some meaningful way. The future of our Church will be built on those who want to serve, share and engage in the mission of the local Church. Thus, our focus must be on engaging people in the mission of the church, not on increasing attendance. As a more selfless church emerges within this "Eucharistic culture", this will create more curiosity and interest from disconnected people.

As we undertake this mission, we remember that Christ accompanies us and walks beside us as food for the journey, strengthening us to become witnesses of love and hope for the world. May Mary, Mother of the Eucharist, intercede for us and assist us in meeting her Son in the Eucharist.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "† Brian J. Dunn". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross symbol at the beginning.

† Brian Joseph Dunn
Apostolic Administrator of Antigonish