

ADVENT 2022 PASTORAL NOTE

# Were not our hearts burning?



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This past Summer, I celebrated the tenth anniversary of my installation as Archbishop of Denver. In reflecting back, one theme that stands out is the centrality of the Holy Eucharist to my ministry. The Holy Eucharist, which I have had the privilege of celebrating in the Cathedral and in multiple parishes in the archdiocese, has been part of many of the major decisions I have made as Archbishop. Jesus' command, "Abide in me, and I in you" (John 15:4), has been a prominent theme in my own spiritual life and I cannot understand Jesus' words apart from the Eucharist. This is why I am pleased to announce the launch of the National Eucharistic Revival here in the Archdiocese of Denver beginning November 20th with the Solemnity of Christ the King.

In 2015, I made the decision to restore the order of the sacraments of initiation. At the time, many people focused on how this would affect the sacrament of Confirmation. While Confirmation remains essential to our growth in Christian life, the decision most affected how we approach, understand, and receive the Eucharist. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, "The holy Eucharist completes Christian initiation. Those who have been raised to the dignity of the royal priesthood by Baptism and configured more deeply to Christ by Confirmation participate with the whole community in the Lord's own sacrifice by means of the Eucharist" (CCC 1322). My pastoral hope was not to declare third graders "spiritual adults," but to give our young people every grace necessary to fully participate in the Mass and most fruitfully receive Jesus Christ in the Eucharist.

In 2020, we together experienced possibly the most perplexing and challenging year of our lives. As Archbishop, I was faced with very difficult decisions around how to navigate access to the Holy Eucharist among the endless uncertainties of the pandemic and restrictions on public gatherings. It was a time of great suffering, confusion, sadness, and tension, but it was also a time that was rich with the Lord's blessings. While I continue to mourn the absence of those who have chosen not to return to Mass, I rejoice in the incredible number of the faithful who found creative ways to keep the Lord's Day holy and only grew in appreciation of and anticipation for receiving the Eucharist.

Now, we find ourselves on the threshold of a three-year national initiative to build up faith and devotion to Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist and the gift of his sacrifice in the Holy Mass. My deepest longing is to see a renewal of love for the Eucharist in the heart of every Catholic. I have many hopes for the faithful in the Archdiocese of Denver during these three years and I share in the Lord's desire expressed through our diocesan synodal process to "bring our Eucharistic Lord to others and to bring others to our Eucharistic Lord."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Archdiocese of Denver, *Synodal Process Executive Report*, 2022.

## Our Context

As we set out on this journey toward greater love and devotion to the Eucharist, it is helpful to reflect upon the times we live and the wounds of the world around us. A 2019 Pew Research Center study reported that only 31% of Catholics believe the Church's teaching on Jesus' real presence in the Eucharist.<sup>2</sup> To be clear, the Church teaches that when the priest prays the prayer of consecration over the bread and wine in the Mass, they actually become the Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity of Jesus Christ. The second Person of the Holy Trinity is present with us, as he promised, "whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:56).

It would be easy for us to conclude that this is merely an issue of understanding the Church's teaching on the Eucharist and in turn that our solution is simply to teach the truth. However, the Pew study also discovered that 22% of Catholics (1 in 5) know the Church's teaching on the real presence but *still reject it*. We must acknowledge that this is not only an issue of understanding but also an issue of faith and more importantly, of love.

Phil Davignon recently published an article arguing this exact point entitled "Misunderstanding the Rise of the Nones." In summarizing the work of Dr. James K. A. Smith, Davignon writes, "people's behavior is not driven primarily by what they know and believe but by what they love and imagine as good." This gives us great insight into the dynamics of conversion and faith as we understand that intellectual comprehension, while necessary, does not on its own guarantee authentic faith or burning love for the Lord.

The article identifies two factors which help people come to a living faith in Jesus' Eucharistic presence and power. These two factors are: the things we love and what we imagine as good.<sup>3</sup> The gospel story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus reflects both factors. Fittingly, the entire encounter also reflects what happens leading up to and within the Mass.

## The Road to Emmaus


The story begins with two disciples trying to make sense of what they witnessed and believed to be true. They are wrestling with an unsettled matter of the heart:

*"Now that very day two of them were going to a village seven miles from Jerusalem called Emmaus, and they were conversing about all the things that had occurred. And it happened that while they were conversing and debating,*

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<sup>2</sup> Gregory A. Smith, "Just one-third of U.S. Catholics agree with their church that Eucharist is body, blood of Christ," *Pew Research Center*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/>.

<sup>3</sup> Phil Davignon, "Misunderstanding the Rise of the Nones," *Church Life Journal*, McGrath Institute for Church Life, University of Notre Dame, September 16, 2022, <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/misunderstanding-the-rise-of-the-nones/>.



*Jesus himself drew near and walked with them, but their eyes were prevented from recognizing him. He asked them, “What are you discussing as you walk along?” (Luke 24:13-17).*

They share with Jesus all that has happened in Jerusalem concerning the crucifixion, death, burial, and most amazing, the resurrection of Christ. Jesus responds to their inner turmoil by walking and entering into dialogue with them. As the disciples share what is going on in their hearts, it becomes clear that they cannot rightly interpret what has happened. Jesus, using the Jewish scriptures, the law and the prophets, explains, *“Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them what referred to him in all the scriptures*” (Luke 24:26-27).

Jesus offers a course correction for the imagination and worldview of the disciples by helping them to see the true story. He chooses to first listen to them and allow them to articulate where they had strayed. He then shares and initiates them into his own worldview through the scriptures.

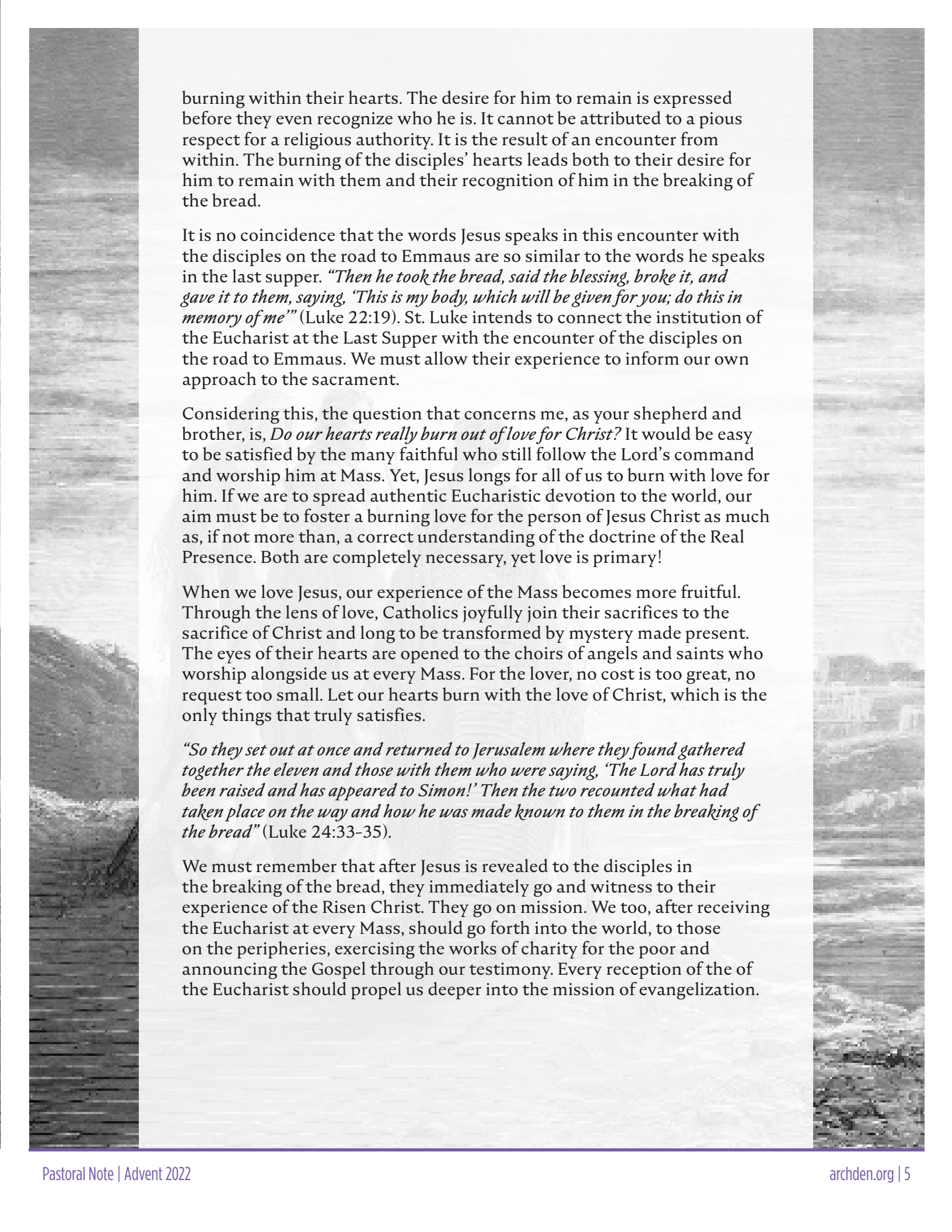
It is for this reason that I have been emphasizing the importance of re-acquiring a biblical worldview and putting on an apostolic mindset. For us to recognize Jesus in the Eucharist, we must first share his worldview and vision of reality, especially as revealed in John 6. If our way of thinking is radically different or even opposed to Jesus’ it will be difficult for us to open ourselves to the grace of the Eucharist. We, like the disciples, have an opportunity at every Mass to hear Jesus’ story in the readings (the Liturgy of the Word), and allow our imagination and worldview to conform to his.

After Jesus unpacks the scriptures for the disciples, they are satisfied intellectually by his teaching but remain discontent. They beg him to stay with them. Then we read:

*“And it happened that, while he was with them at table, he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them. With that their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he vanished from their sight. Then they said to each other, ‘Were not our hearts burning within us while he spoke to us on the way and opened the scriptures to us?’” (Luke 24:30-32).*

In this passage we notice three things which are intricately connected and show us the disciples’ love for Jesus: The desire for him to remain with them, the burning within their hearts, and the recognition of Jesus in the scriptures and the breaking of the bread. The one that shows up first in the story is their desire for Jesus to remain with them. When we genuinely love someone, we do not want to leave them or them to leave us.

The second element that is revealed is that the disciples recognize Jesus in the scriptures and the breaking of the bread. This recognition follows an authentic desire to be with and close to Jesus. In recognizing him, they pinpoint the hidden catalyst and third key piece of the encounter. The disciples’ love comes from an inner experience of Christ’s presence



burning within their hearts. The desire for him to remain is expressed before they even recognize who he is. It cannot be attributed to a pious respect for a religious authority. It is the result of an encounter from within. The burning of the disciples' hearts leads both to their desire for him to remain with them and their recognition of him in the breaking of the bread.

It is no coincidence that the words Jesus speaks in this encounter with the disciples on the road to Emmaus are so similar to the words he speaks in the last supper. *"Then he took the bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which will be given for you; do this in memory of me'"* (Luke 22:19). St. Luke intends to connect the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper with the encounter of the disciples on the road to Emmaus. We must allow their experience to inform our own approach to the sacrament.

Considering this, the question that concerns me, as your shepherd and brother, is, *Do our hearts really burn out of love for Christ?* It would be easy to be satisfied by the many faithful who still follow the Lord's command and worship him at Mass. Yet, Jesus longs for all of us to burn with love for him. If we are to spread authentic Eucharistic devotion to the world, our aim must be to foster a burning love for the person of Jesus Christ as much as, if not more than, a correct understanding of the doctrine of the Real Presence. Both are completely necessary, yet love is primary!

When we love Jesus, our experience of the Mass becomes more fruitful. Through the lens of love, Catholics joyfully join their sacrifices to the sacrifice of Christ and long to be transformed by mystery made present. The eyes of their hearts are opened to the choirs of angels and saints who worship alongside us at every Mass. For the lover, no cost is too great, no request too small. Let our hearts burn with the love of Christ, which is the only things that truly satisfies.

*"So they set out at once and returned to Jerusalem where they found gathered together the eleven and those with them who were saying, 'The Lord has truly been raised and has appeared to Simon!' Then the two recounted what had taken place on the way and how he was made known to them in the breaking of the bread"* (Luke 24:33-35).

We must remember that after Jesus is revealed to the disciples in the breaking of the bread, they immediately go and witness to their experience of the Risen Christ. They go on mission. We too, after receiving the Eucharist at every Mass, should go forth into the world, to those on the peripheries, exercising the works of charity for the poor and announcing the Gospel through our testimony. Every reception of the of the Eucharist should propel us deeper into the mission of evangelization.

## The Abandoned Tabernacle

To conclude, I have been moved recently by the writings of St. Manuel González García (d 1940), also known as, the Bishop of the Abandoned Tabernacle. His reflections on the concept of the abandoned tabernacle are pertinent for our times today. He writes of two ways in which the tabernacle is abandoned. The first is exterior. St. Manuel describes this as:

*“The habitual and voluntary absence of Catholics who know Jesus but do not visit him... I am speaking of Catholics who believe and know that Our Lord Jesus Christ, true God and true Man is really present and alive in the Blessed Sacrament. But they do not receive him in Holy Communion, nor visit him, nor have a friendly relationship with him—even though they live close to a Church, and otherwise have time and energy for recreational activities.”*<sup>4</sup>

The second way in which he describes this abandonment is interior. He writes:

*“It is to go to him but not really be with him. It is to receive him with the body, but not with the heart. It is to go to him saying words, bowing our heads, kneeling down, but not performing these acts of piety with our hearts. It is when we do not meditate on what we are receiving. It is when we do not prepare ourselves to receive him with a clean heart and with great spiritual hunger. It is when we do not taste and give thanks for the Food we have received. It is when we do not talk to or listen to the Guest who is visiting us. It is when we are not open to receive and keep the graces he brings us, the warnings he gives us, the example he teaches us, the desires he reveals to us, the love he shares with us. How many times will the Master have to repeat to some communicants and visitors to the Blessed Sacrament: ‘This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me’” (Matthew 15:8).*<sup>5</sup>

I invite the faithful of the Archdiocese of Denver to reflect on the words of St. Manuel González García and use his descriptions of abandoning the tabernacle as an examination of conscience around our own relationship with Jesus in the Eucharist.

Furthermore, during the Advent Season, beginning with the Feast of Christ the King, there will be preaching on the Eucharist, with a focus on love – charity. The Eucharist is the Sacrament of Charity. To nourish your love for the Eucharist, I encourage you during this Advent Season to prayerfully read, either at home or at Eucharistic adoration, the Story of Emmaus, Luke 24:19-34 and John 6: 22-71. As we prepare to celebrate the Word made Flesh at Christmas, so too does the Lord become Flesh in every Eucharist throughout the world.

There will be many opportunities over the next three years for us to grow together in both our understanding and love for Jesus in the Eucharist. I pray that we will be inspired to draw close to Jesus in the Eucharist, that

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<sup>4</sup> St. Manuel González García, *The Bishop of the Abandoned Tabernacle*, trans. Victoria Schneider, (Scepter Publishers: New York, 2018) 33-34.

<sup>5</sup> García, 34.

our appreciation for and participation in the Holy Mass increases, and that many more who do not yet know the living Jesus come to know him because of the grace he pours out to us through the Eucharist. May our hearts burn within us at every Eucharist! Be assured of my prayers for you and for the Father to be glorified in you by your love for him!

+ Samuel J. Aquila  
Archbishop of Denver

