



# DESIRING GOD

*Bishop Giles Butler, OFM DD*

*This article was published in The Seraph, October 2018*

With the current situation in the Church and the world today, we find many souls in virtual spiritual islands. They are isolated from the true Mass and sacraments by great distances. This evil presents many problems of conscience. How do we comply with the Laws of the Church when we are physically so far from the true Church? What do we do when our consciences are weighed down with burdens that can only be removed in the sacrament of Penance? How can we receive Holy Communion when we cannot get to a true Mass?

It is a teaching of the Church that God accepts the desire for the deed. Also, we note that these laws cease to be binding when they are impossible to observe.

It is clear that Jesus taught us that God accepts the desire for the deed. He shows us that the man harboring hatred in his heart for his fellow man is already guilty of murder and is deserving of the punishment for murder. He also shows us that the man lusting in his heart is already guilty of adultery and is deserving of the punishment for adultery. We teach, with the Church, that God also accepts our good desires as if we had already done them.

Those who cannot receive the sacraments should form the desire and spiritually receive them. While this is not truly receiving the sacraments, it opens our souls to receive special graces from God. And, there is no doubt that God is pleased with these desires. Many saints made a habit of practicing frequent “Spiritual Communions” which helped them to advance in grace, virtue, and love of God. We encourage one and all to make use of this means of receiving God’s grace. We can also spiritually attend the Sacrifice of the Mass wherever it is being offered.

Our modern day technology has allowed us to stream the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass over the World Wide Web. This allows those in distant places to follow along and participate in the Mass. It is with great caution that we encourage this. The danger, that we perceive, is that many will view the Mass as “entertainment” rather than as sacrifice and worship. We desire that those who make use of this opportunity should dress as if they were physically entering the House of God. That they (as far as they are able) kneel and stand at the appropriate times. This time is sacred and we should not be checking email or surfing the web, carrying on conversations, etc. while participating in the Mass in this manner – just as we would not do these things if we were physically in the House of God. Those who do not have access to this modern technology are not left abandoned; they still can set aside a time for prayer and reflect upon the Mass as it is offered – forming the desire to unite themselves with the offering of the Sacrifice of the Mass. There are several prepared methods for doing this, some can be found in old prayer books. (We have reprinted in pamphlet form one such spiritual Mass and spiritual Holy Communion, and it is available by writing to THE SERAPH. A small donation to cover costs and postage is always appreciated.)

Many have likely heard of the “Baptism of desire.” This teaching of the Church is often misunderstood and abused. Several saints have written concerning this. St. Augustine has suggested to us that a catechumen who died before he was baptized received the grace of baptism because he truly desired it. The “baptism of desire” is not a sacrament nor is it baptism. It is nothing more than a desire, but it is much more than wishful thinking or a fancy. If there is a true

desire of the heart, there is no doubt that God is pleased with this desire and rewards it – just as He is displeased with evil desires and punishes them. The Church does not teach that physical baptism is not necessary because all you need to do is desire it, as many have suggested. The Church clearly teaches that Baptism is essential – only those that believe and are baptized will be saved. Those who truly desire to be baptized are not content saying that they have no need of baptism because they desire it. On the contrary, the desire for baptism moves them to obtain what they desire. The example that St. Augustine gives us of the catechumen shows us that he was studying and preparing himself to receive the sacrament. This is proof of a real desire. There is no doubt that a true desire is cooperation with the grace of God. God is not only pleased with this cooperation, but He also rewards it – accepting the desire for the deed when it is not physically obtainable.

It takes a very strong faith, to form and maintain these holy desires and to grow in grace and virtue. However, it is the teaching of several spiritual writers that often times these graces are even greater than those received through careless or inattentive physical reception of the sacraments. Also, there are limits to the times or frequency in which we may physically receive the sacraments, but there are no limits to when or how often we may spiritually receive them through holy desire. Some saints have been recorded as making hundreds of spiritual Communion throughout the day.

In the case of the sacrament of Penance, we may also form the desire to confess and we can strive to make perfect Acts of Contrition. (A perfect contrition is when we are sorry for having offended God. It is a sorrow that comes from loving God. An imperfect contrition is when we are sorry because we are deserving of punishment – we don't want to go to Hell, or we do not want to suffer here on earth or in Purgatory.) An imperfect act of contrition combined with the sacrament of Penance is sufficient to absolve us of the sin and the eternal punishment of Hell. We should always strive to have as perfect a contrition as possible. If our contrition is truly perfect, then our sins are forgiven even before we actually receive the sacrament of Penance. (This does not allow us to approach Holy Communion before physically and sacramentally confessing mortal sin. We must confess as soon as we physically can.) If we were to die before we could physically receive the sacrament of Penance, then a perfect act of contrition would wash away our sins and we could enter into Heaven. This grace is, in essence, a grace of desire – and we see that God accepts the desire for the deed.

We have permitted Catholics to receive absolution over the phone. We must understand that this is not actually a sacramental confession; it is more a confession of desire. The priest simply asks the person to make an act of contrition as he says the words of absolution over them. It is similar to a tragic event when a priest may give a general absolution to everyone on a sinking ship. He cannot hear each individual confession, but he can have all make an act of contrition and give a general absolution to those who are truly repentant. Over the phone lines, as this is not secure or private, penitents are not asked to confess their sins. Without the confessing of sins, there is no sacrament – only the holy desire and the graces of this desire. If those who have received a general absolution on a sinking ship survive, they must later confess their sins in the physical sacrament of Penance. Similarly, those who have received absolution over a distance without confessing should actually confess when then the opportunity presents itself. The law is not binding upon us when it is impossible for us to keep it, but it becomes binding upon us the moment the impossibility ceases and we are then able to comply with it.

A truly devout life is brought about through many of these holy desires. It is the burning desires of the heart for God that takes our souls through the various degrees of the spiritual life. Every Catholic should seek to fill their days and lives with holy desires for God and the sacraments. This need not prevent us from any of our other duties or obligations. These desires of the heart can be made while we are engaging in any lawful activity without any detriment to the task at hand.