The Prodigal Son is one of three parables Jesus tells defending himself against the accusation, “He welcomes sinners and eats with them.” The other parables in the 15th Chapter of St. Luke’s Gospel are the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin. All three parables end with a celebration once the lost object has been found and returned to its home. They are all parables referencing the Eucharist. Jesus tells these parables revealing the future power of the Eucharist. The Risen Lord now welcomes sinners and eats with them.

The Prodigal Son differs in that the lost son does not merely wander away, but deliberately breaks the relational bonds with his own family to fill himself with decadence. St. Luke offers us the image of a “life of dissipation”. It is a life of complete self-indulgence at the expense of everyone else. The dominant image is that of the decadent party that never ends.

When considering the prodigal son in our present time, we almost always consider him to be an individual. But there are times when the prodigal son is a group of people, even a large group of people. Sometimes the prodigal son can be an entire generation, maybe even my generation. In many ways, the prodigal son is the last couple of generations that squandered an inheritance on dissolute living, refusing to acknowledge the price tags and running up debts in many categories.

Is my generation and those a little older than me and those a little younger the ones who have squandered this great inheritance? Have we dissipated the largess, leaving nothing or little to nothing for the next generation? This dissipation includes a massive debt in government expenses. For decades we offered entitlement programs finally providing for basic human needs for the poorest among us as well as stabilizing all workers in retirement and when disabled.

But an unintended consequence became an “entitlement attitude” for every area of our life. If we are in the grocery store, we are “entitled” to move quickly through the checkout line and if denied, then we are “entitled” to give grief to the checkout person. If we are calling the doctor, we are “entitled” to immediate care even if our condition is far from critical or we are not overwhelmed with pain. In the church, we are “entitled” to a convenient Mass time but consider promoting vocations to priesthood as someone else’s responsibility.

In 2002, we conducted wars in two separate countries. At the same time, we cut taxes, running up massive debts placing trillions of dollars on the nation’s credit card to fight these wars. I have read a lot of history, but do not recall any other nation that went to war and cut taxes. Our young people will be paying that war debt for decades.

We have squandered an environment meant to sustain future generations. We dismiss vast consensus of scientific evidence indicating not only a great trend of global
warming, but humanity’s great contribution to that warming. We wear blinders pretending that toxic wastes we dump into the air have no impact on our atmosphere. We scoff at this scientific evidence, thus placing our current children and their future families at great risk.

We have watered down moral obligations to one another, leaving it to each individual deciding what one’s responsibilities really are, if any. We embrace freedom, but limit freedom’s greatness to our ability “to choose” without any moral judgment for what we choose. We demand rights but make responsibilities optional. We have devalued life in the womb, exploited laborers on the workplace, and turned homes and schools into armed fortresses.

We have saturated our media with sexual images, sexualized our marketing, and allowed pornography vast opportunities to influence even young children. This has diminished intimacy, left couples struggling to commit and allowed mistrust to violate sacred bonds.

We want “what we want, when we want it”, running up the tab in the meantime. We blame others for their irresponsibility and accuse them of trying to take what we are convinced is rightly ours even though we have more than we use; and they have little of what they truly need.

The rich got richer, the poor got much poorer and the middle class began to disappear. We are left polarized between “haves” and “have nots” and those that are welcomed and those that are left to the margins. Meanwhile churches closed and union halls disappeared. At the same time unemployment lines and prisons became filled to capacity. And this is the short list.

The Christian writer C. S. Lewis once wrote, “We must picture Hell as a state where everyone is perpetually concerned about his own dignity and advancement, where everyone has a grievance, and where everyone lives the deadly serious passions of envy, self-importance, and resentment.” Grievance, envy and resentments have become the driving forces of our political year. We join forces with others expressing the same grievances issuing from the same envy usually over the same resentments. We have forgotten the truths of the common good and personal responsibility.

The prodigal son’s partying was an exercise in self-indulgence and porous moral boundaries. He partied without considering consequences or any regard for the future. He squandered an inheritance meant to provide for him for many years to come. Not only did he lose the inheritance, he lost a sense of himself. He awakens to emptiness in his stomach, and a greater emptiness in his heart. He gained the world and lost his soul. He seeks an identity, a relationship that can remove his shame and restore some sense of personal security and dignity.
He comes to his senses and begins a journey back home, with little expectations of acceptance. But upon coming into view, his father runs out to meet him, embraces him, refusing to listen to his rehearsed and shallow contrition, and instead invites him to a banquet. My generation may be getting older but we are not dead yet and still have some time to help turn this around. Like the prodigal son, it is time to wake up, come to our senses and go back home.

Our journey back home will take us to the core truths of our Catholic faith. These core truths will remind us that God is a Trinity of persons living in perfect love and peace. These truths will remind us that all people are created in the image of this Trinitarian God from conception to natural death. These truths will remind us that in the Lord Jesus Christ, divinity and humanity exist in perfect communion of life and love. These truths will remind us that the Eucharist makes present to us all saving actions of Christ, his very body and blood, and the promise of eternal life.

These truths will remind us that the common good and our responsibility for one another are not optional. These truths of our faith will remind us all that creation is a gift from God intended to provide for the basic needs of all people and to provide for generations to come. These are all moral obligations entrusted to us as a mission of our Catholic faith.

On our journey back home, we will discover the passionate love of Christ and the unending power of his reconciliation in the life of the Church, especially in the Eucharist. On our journey back home, we will see more clearly the wounds of our heart, each other’s wounds and the wounds of the world. In all of this, we will come to know the very wounds of Christ and his voice calling us to humble service. With humble service, we will touch these wounds with the love of Christ and bring healing and hope to a broken world.

The Eucharistic banquet becomes the complete reverse of the indulgent party. Both are considered celebrations. One leads to emptiness and shame; while the other recreates a family, reconciles past wounds, and raises an entire world to divine glory. At the party, only one’s own satisfaction is considered. At the Eucharist, all are called to share in the sacred meal, and to share the sacred food with others.

The banquet is an invitation to come back to one’s true self. The Eucharist is God’s celebration of sinners who want to come back home. The banquet is the Eucharist, the meal of divine mercy, the heavenly wedding feast.

The Eucharist celebrates what St. Paul states in Second Corinthians, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us.” In other words, it is time to come back home.