

Over the years, through the course of my journey through life into seminary and into priesthood, as you might imagine much of what I do centers around the Eucharist and Mass.

From my parents and Sister Charlene in 2nd grade, I learned what Communion was - or as best as an 8 year old can understand it. I learned how to receive Communion. Why we genuflect when entering the church. And what the name of the little box was where the priest put the hosts and why there was a candle burning above that box, to remind us that Jesus was always with us.

In seminary, I'd pray at a weekly Holy Hour and visit the chapel for silent prayer before the Tabernacle.

And as a priest, I've celebrated countless Masses, and been through many devotions centering around the Eucharist. Mostly, I've seen respect. You can always hear a pin drop when I hold up the bread and chalice and say "do this in Memory of Me." And its clear people get a lot out of silent prayer in the church and during a holy hour.

The challenge though for us with the Eucharist is to remember that this is not just a personal encounter with Jesus alone. There is the aspect of love, forgiveness, mercy and comfort that is associated with the Eucharist. But there is also the reality that the Eucharist connects us more deeply to one another. If a person leaves Mass, and then the rest of the day doesn't think about how they treat others, the words they use, or if they objectify the body and ignore the soul, then frankly they just aren't getting what the Eucharist is all about. Being human, we all have moments where we do that, where we fail to see Jesus in one another. But the Eucharist must open our eyes to the reality that we are called to serve and to love one another. "Union" is a part of the word "communion" and sometimes I've struggled with that as a human, and certainly seen people struggle with that. But isn't it interesting that in our Gospel for Holy Thursday, we don't actually have the breaking of the bread and the words of institution of the Eucharist said, as our Gospel comes from John, but we have the powerful action of the washing of the feet. Jesus, in giving us His body, shows us the powerful effect that love and service can have on one another. He even washes the feet of Judas. And in this action, he teaches us so much about what the Eucharist is meant to do - namely to open our eyes to love one another as Jesus has loved us. But how do we do this when doing so is so

hard? How do we be like Jesus who loved His betrayer, and knew most at the table would run away from Him? How do we love to the end?

Kristy Dewberry, as a caregiver for her mom, came to realize how to do this as she personified to her own mom what the Eucharist is meant to do for us by giving her mom patient love and helping to take away her fears. But it wasn't easy.

She remembers one night saying: "Mom, please get in the car."

Her mom then ignored her and wandered through her small vacation home—a mobile home, actually, by a lake outside town—in search of her favorite night cream.

"Mom, we have to get Dad to the hospital now." Kristy said as she tried to steer her toward the front door. She shrugged her off. She fought the urge to yank her outside. She had learned it would just agitate her and slow things down.

Five years earlier, Kristy's dad had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and given six months to live. He'd beaten the odds so long, his oncologist called him Superman.

Now the odds were catching up with him. He needed lots of care.

Mom was making caring for him as hard as possible. She didn't mean to. All Kristy's life her mom had a suspicious nature, been hesitant to trust people, plagued by unfounded doubts about Dad's faithfulness. Recently, her suspicions had crossed over into full-blown paranoia. She believed people were stealing from her and hid everything she valued. All caregivers, including doctors, fell under her mistrustful gaze. It made helping Dad supremely challenging.

"I'm not leaving until I find my cream," she said, setting her jaw in the way Kristy knew too well. "I bet someone took it."

Kristy summoned all her willpower to keep from screaming. Dad was coughing up blood. While Mom wasn't looking, Kristy rummaged through her purse, where she often hid things and then forgot about them. Sure

enough, she found the face cream tucked beneath a package of Hostess Twinkies.

“Found it!” Kristy said, waving the jar in the air. She gently tugged her toward the car before she could cause any further delay. Kristy’s husband, Don, started the engine, and they headed quickly to the ER.

It had been like this for months. Actually, it had been like this a lot longer than that. Her mom was emotionally unstable from the time Kristy’s two older sisters and she were kids, veering from intense affection to suspicious possession. Kristy was too young then to wonder whether she suffered from mental illness. Only later did she learn about her dad’s often fruitless efforts to help her as well as his unwavering loyalty, even when she made life hard.

Kristy’s response growing up was to push her mom away, which made her cling more. Her sisters, Kathy and Karen, endured the same treatment, though somehow it felt as if she got the worst of it, maybe because she was the youngest and the only one at home after her sisters left for college and married.

Kristy went to college, married, raised kids and did her best to avoid her mom. Which was hard because she lived in Oklahoma City, where she'd been raised and where Mom and Dad still lived. Kristy loved her dad, and she wanted to spend as much time with him as possible, especially after he retired and got sick.

Her dad was the opposite of her mom. Her dad's idea of heaven was drinking his morning coffee on the deck of the lake house, watching the sun rise over the water. He was the steady presence in the family, Kristy's reassurance that all was well.

Kristy had always resented her mom for making it difficult to spend time with her dad. Now that he was dying, her resentment turned into something harder. In her worst moments, she wished mom were the one who was sick, not dad. How much longer did he have? How much of that time would she waste dealing with Mom's craziness? What were they going to do with her after dad died?

That hospital visit was the beginning of the end for her dad. The cancer, which had responded at first to radiation, came back aggressively, and her dad's digestive system began to fail.

He was placed on hospice. Kristy and her sisters were there most of the time, taking care of him.

Every time she drove to her parents' house, she prayed for patience and charity toward her mom. It wasn't easy. She would arrive to find her hovering over the hospice workers. She criticized any imperfection—shoes not lined up just right by the door, crumbs on the counter, the number of towels someone used—and Kristy would notice things missing that her mom had hidden.

Despite all her prayers, she had to admit she wanted to put mom somewhere safely out of the way so Karen, Kathy and herself could care for her dad properly.

Kristy though thought God would be appalled by the idea. And she knew they couldn't rely on Mom to care for Dad on her own. God's answer to her

prayers was always the same: Just be there. Not the answer she wanted, she admits.

Kristy and her sisters and took time off work to stay at the house. They watched Oklahoma Sooners football games with her parents. Put on DVDs of Dad's favorite Johnny Carson episodes. Kristy kept his mouth moist with a sponge and traded jokes with him—whenever she could snatch moments away from her mom's needs.

At some point, juggling all of this, Kristy realized that after a lifetime of doing everything she could to avoid Mom, she was figuring out how to work with her. Sometimes, as she had with her face cream, she found a way around her delusions. Sometimes she just ignored them and carried on with what she knew needed to be done.

And sometimes, when she had to, she worked up her courage and addressed her directly. To her surprise, she often did what Kristy asked without complaint.

Kristy told her to let the hospice workers do their jobs, and she did. She told her she couldn't help her look for something she'd hidden, and she agreed to wait until she finished helping her dad. She even let Karen's pastor meet with him.

Her dad had never been one for religion, but he and the pastor got along and became friends. Not long before he died, her dad chose to be baptized. Mom insisted on being baptized too. Kristy suspected she couldn't stand to be out of the limelight.

Dad died peacefully one afternoon. Her mom had left the room. Maybe she somehow sensed what was about to happen. Kristy told her dad that it was okay to go, and soon his breathing stopped.

The minute her mom came back in the room, Kristy began sobbing. She'd been holding back tears so her dad wouldn't feel as if he had to hang on. Mom sat next to her and put her arms around her.

"It's okay, Kristy," she said. "Now that your father is gone, we'll have even more time together."

Kristy knew she meant to comfort her, but that was the last thing she wanted to hear. Especially because she knew she was right. She had no friends, no other relatives to care for her. It was her sisters and herself, and Kristy lived closest. Without Dad, she would bear the full brunt of all her fears and needs.

For a while, it seemed as if Mom might do okay. She could still bathe, cook for herself and get around town. Kristy would spend time with her several days a week. She helped her with bills and paperwork and tried to relieve her anxiety.

“I always feel better when you’re here,” she said to her one day. “I know I’m safe. You did such a good job with your father. You were always there for him.”

Kristy wanted to believe she meant that. She didn’t dare ask her to elaborate, for fear she’d start talking about the neighbors stealing her stuff again.

Eventually Kristy knew they had to put Mom in assisted care. The police called one night saying she was filing repeated complaints about the neighbors breaking in.

“You might want to think about another living arrangement for your mother,” the officer said.

Would she agree? Kristy summoned up her best combination of persuasion and insistence. She told her about other people they knew who were happy in assisted living. She dropped hints, knowing that if she told her it was a good idea she would dig in her heels.

“I saw an ad on TV for a lovely assisted living center,” Mom said one day.

“Want to visit?” Kristy asked.

She moved in a short time after. On the recommendation of her friend, she took Mom to see a gerontologist. After a long, patient, respectful visit, the doctor diagnosed her with Alzheimer’s.

“Paranoia is sometimes one of the first signs,” he said. “It can develop quite early in people who later progress to the full disease. Medication can help.”

The doctor prescribed two medications, one for the paranoia and one to slow the advance of Alzheimer’s. The effect was astonishing. Mom suddenly had a peace about her Kristy had never seen. Though her mind slipped away inexorably and she was later diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease, she seemed happier than at any other time in her life. Their relationship, always so complicated, became simple.

Whenever she visits, the staff coo and fawn over her. “Your mom must have been wonderful to grow up with,” an aide said to her.

Kristy didn’t contradict her. Her mom no longer knows who her daughter is. But Kristy knows who she is. It’s been a long time since she wanted to avoid her or resented her needs. She understands now why she made life so difficult. She feels sad, not angry, about how hard it must have been for her to live with her constant, desperate fears.

Just be there, God told her. Kristy spent time with her parents for her Dad's sake. What she didn't know—though God knew—was that she was doing it for her mom's sake too. And her own.

Like Kristy was to her mom, God is to us. I am here with you is the message of Holy Thursday, seen vividly in the Eucharist. He is there for us in our highs and our lows. There to forgive, there to love. He gives because of who He is, not because of who we are. Kristy's mom was paralyzed with anxiety and a mental condition; we are paralyzed with sin. And as her love broke through those barriers, Jesus' love breaks through ours. In washing the feet of His disciples, Jesus wasn't merely making a point about leadership, he was showing them all the very nature of God. He washes Peter's feet because of who God is. God doesn't give us the Eucharist because we are good, but rather because God is good. His love is absolute and unconditional.

Hopefully we are reminded of that when we come to Mass, that the love God has for us is a love without end. But the challenge for us is to remember that Jesus tells us I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do." The witness of our lives, like

Kristy did in all of those actions of love for her mom, is the surest sign of the gift we have received.

How do we do this daily?

As a starting point, we remember that the respect we show Jesus in the Eucharist must be seen in all people. It means the person on the TV screen or computer is a body and a soul, not just a body. It means we are aware of our choice of words with others and we think about what we say about them. We spend a lot more time around people than we do at Mass, and sometimes it can be so hard for us to remember that each person we see whether we know them or not is a unique creation created in God's image.

We then open our eyes to try to ultimately help the people God puts into our lives, striving to respond with love. By all accounts the relationship Kristy had with her mom was not the picture-perfect parent and child relationship. Rarely is there such a thing due to the effects of original sin. But what Kristy did was to look at her mom with the eyes of Jesus. She didn't yell at her. She didn't shut her out of her life. She strived to meet her where she was at, and in the end, this love brought about a profound

transformation in both Kristy as she understood more about her mom's condition, but also in her mom once she got the treatment for her illness she needed. It can be so easy to become blind to the needs people have both in the larger world and right under the roofs of our homes. But think for a moment what so many simple actions do. Earlier today, the Pope did not have Mass in a Roman cathedral, but spent it in a prison in Vallettri, about 36 miles south of Rome where he washed the feet of those in prison. He met with the prisoners and staff too. Simple gestures that speak so loudly, ones that we can emulate. Sitting up with a sick child. Being patient while working on homework. Taking a deep breath during an argument and trying not to say something hurtful. Turning off a computer when we are tempted to divorce the soul from the body and objectify another human being. Showing true contrition and apologizing to a person. Being like Kristy and being patient with a person who is difficult. Or just listening. All of these actions of charity and so many more help people to experience the most important thing - love. Jesus did not just love those who loved Him back. Judas was invited to the Last Supper. All were forgiven from the Cross. God's answer to sin and hate was to love anyway. As sharers in that sacred meal, it's up to you and me to be the hands, face and voice of Jesus

through our words and actions. The Eucharist is meant to open up our eyes to do just that.

Kristy could have made a choice to shut her mom out based on how her mom was reacting. But instead she chose to respond with mercy time and time again. Over the course of our lives, most of us will continue to know when to bow and genuflect and how to receive communion. But do we know what the Eucharist is really all about and what it means when the priest says “do this in memory of me?” The Eucharist is not so much about a looking back to the first Mass, but helps us to look ahead to heaven by Jesus giving us this incredible gift to remind us that He is with us step-by-step. Let’s not forget that as we gaze upon Him in the host, we are also to see Him in one another. Every day we have the opportunity to truly help or hurt one another through our words and actions. The love of Jesus knows no exceptions. Think of Jesus’ love as you receive Him, but also think about how the love that we pass on can also have no exceptions as we wash the feet tonight. The Cross reminds us that love is costly. But as the love of Jesus has no exceptions, may it be something we too strive to emulate as we do this in remembrance of Him - namely celebrating the love in the Eucharist, but also have it open up our eyes to seeing who God

places before us who needs their feet washed too, so that the Eucharist and what it means becomes not just something we celebrate once a week, but a true way of life.