

I vaguely remember being in second grade and learning from Sister Charlene what Communion was about.

We went over to the church and she explained what the tabernacle was, and why there was a candle always burning. She explained about Jesus being present, and my parents did the same. And when the big day of First Communion arrived, there were pictures taken and a little party at my grandparents house.

In the years that have followed, just like most all of you after your First Communion day, I've received Communion thousands of times. But one of the things that I also need to do is to continually remind myself of why it is I do this, or to word it better, why it is so important that I do this because it is about what Jesus does for me.

Jesse Romero is a Catholic speaker who has a show on EWTN, and along the way is a veteran of the LA Sheriff's department and became a champion at kickboxing. These days he spends his time writing, on air and giving talks to adults and teens about our Catholic faith.

In a talk he gives on the Eucharist, he talks about some experiences that he has had personally and with others with respect to Holy Communion. And in his stories, he asks the question if this is just bread, or some representation of Jesus but not Jesus Himself, how is it possible that these things happen.

In one instance he was on patrol and saw a young gang member tagging a liquor store wall with gang symbols and graffiti. He drops his can but gets caught by officer Romeo and starts begging to be let go. He says I'm so stupid and I can't go back to juvenile hall, as he was ditching school at the time. He's a wanabe gang member at this point, and Romero actually felt compassion for him knowing he'd be locked up for 6 months to a year for getting in trouble again. And so he had a conversation with the young man named Juan. He said I'm going to negotiate something with you. And that was he said that he wanted Juan to meet his best friend, and that he wanted his best friend to become Juan's best friend, and if that happened, he would not take him to jail. So he drove to Our Lady of Guadalupe church and took him out of the back seat, this teenager wide eyed and all nervous like Indiana Jones in the Temple of Doom. He asked the young man when was the last time he was in church to which he replied 6 months prior for the funeral of a friend, not uncommon for the young Latinos in East LA to go to church for baptisms, weddings and funerals. He took the handcuffs off, saying if he ran he knew where he lived and he'd find him, and Juan joined officer Romeo and the two knelt as they were having perpetual adoration at that parish. He turned to the young man and said, after being told by the boy he was scared, that he did not have to be afraid. He said do you know who is up there? He replied Jesus. And he said he knew of him as his grandmother had once told him about Jesus. He said that Jesus loves you Juan and has a plan and purpose for your life. And at that moment, Officer Romero gave Juan a divine mercy card and they prayed the chaplet of divine mercy (he gave these cards out to people often). And though he hadn't gotten much church or faith formation from his parents, he said that boy started to cry. And this was because, he

said, he had never felt so much love in his life as he had at that moment, and he did not want to leave that place. They walked out, and Officer Romeo took him back to school, and then followed up on him. Juan didn't join a gang, but did join a confirmation class and Officer Romeo became his sponsor. He graduated high school, college, and started his own business in southern California and became a successful young Latino businessmen, and got married and had two kids. He told Officer Romero that if it wasn't for Jesus in the blessed sacrament and that encounter he had at the age of 16, he'd be in jail like his father and siblings.

A number of years earlier, Officer Romeo was a rookie cop who was like a lot of us in the sense that his faith at that moment was one of being an active Catholic, but he hadn't really pondered the faith deeply. His mom invited him to a Catholic conference in the LA Sports Arena. He went with his newlywed wife and there were confessions, good preaching, some skits. But what was most impactful was when the lights were off and Fr. John started walking flanked by 6 altar boys with candles and incense. All of a sudden 20,000 Catholics were on their knees praying in symphony and harmony. The flood lights were on the monstrance. But then the priest spoke, and said Jesus is here in this arena and He is here because He wants to heal people. The priest said he knew there were people with addictions to violence, and people in the arena had weapons like guns and knives or brass knuckles. He said put them at the foot of the altar. Meanwhile Officer Romero said he's sitting there thinking yeah, right, this is a Catholic conference who is going to admit this or have an illegal weapon in an arena. But hundreds of people came up to the altar and a pile formed under the Blessed Sacrament. The priest then said there are people here addicted to pornography or sexual disorder; and He said in the presence of Jesus surrender to that and turn it over to Jesus. Again, Officer Romero said he recalled wondering who would ever admit to that, and this was 1983 before the Internet and all that. But sure enough, several hundred people went to the altar and relinquished their addiction some even having a magazine on them. And then he spoke about drugs and narcotics, and said Jesus wants you to be free. No less than 500 people walked out of their seats in the 20,000 seat capacity arena. So there he sat, looking at the monstrance, and underneath it is this pile of weapons, drugs, and dirty magazines. And he thought for a moment how powerful Jesus is. For while he believed in theory that Jesus was present, now it hit home - that no ordinary bread could do this. For as an officer, he'd seen the power sin had over people as they were in the abyss, denying their addictions to his face when he caught them in a crime. But now, with 20000 on their knees, many turning things over to God, he realized the power of Jesus in the Holy Eucharist.

We were trained as second graders to bow, to genuflect, to receive Holy Communion. But sometimes we lose sight of the impact of Holy Communion. In fact a recent study found 70% of Catholics didn't believe Jesus was actually present in Holy Communion. But He is indeed. And for as much as we've failed to keep so much of what Jesus has taught us, one thing we have done as the Church is to continually "do this in remembrance of me" in living out the commandment He gave us. Jesus did this because He knows we needed food for the journey. But what we have to think about as

Catholics is why we believe this, and also what this means for us and what it then causes us to do for one another.

With respect to why we believe this, Flannery O'Connor, the Catholic author of the mid 20th century once said to another Catholic author who had fallen away from the faith that the Eucharist was a wonderful symbol that if the Eucharist is just a symbol, then I say, to hell with it. Her point was that this language of Jesus being symbolically present was not true, as much as many have come to believe it. Rather, Jesus was and is and always will be actually present in the Eucharist. How do we know this? Well, it's something we've held as Catholics throughout our history from the time of Jesus to today.

We start with John 6, this week's Gospel which is a preview of the Mass. Prior to our Gospel for today, earlier in the chapter, Jesus multiplies the loaves and fishes. A boy has five barley loaves and two fish; maybe enough for one or two people. But as the crowd sits on the mountain, as a crowd would do before a great teacher, Jesus sees how they are hungry and so he takes this small amount of food and performs the miracle, feeding them until they are full. In a sense, that's what happened at that arena in LA. The people took what they had and gave it to Jesus, who then did the transformation. Jesus though continues and in our Gospel says His bread is the flesh for the life of the world and the living bread, and that unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you do not have life within you. It's an understandable difficult line, as is "my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink." The best translation is to actually "gnaw" the food, meaning devour it not just eat it lightly. This is obviously nasty if cannibalism but also goes against Jewish prohibitions on eating the blood of animals as blood is life. So many walk away. But the apostles don't. They walk away but Jesus doesn't give in. They wouldn't have walked away if what Jesus was saying was I'm giving you some symbol; they do though because this business of His actual Body and Blood makes no sense. This Gospel is the roots for the Mass.

And it continues through the centuries. But there would be trouble along the way as people struggled to grasp the real meaning; though the Church would always emphasize the same thing, that this was no mere symbol, but Jesus himself. Berengarius of Tours who lived in France and was a cathedral school tutor tried to say there is a difference between the historical body of Jesus and the body appearing in the Eucharist; the later being a symbol. This the Church said in a council was not true, because God being God can be in heaven and on earth with us, for He is God. Aquinas would develop this a couple of centuries later saying the Eucharist is spiritual food for our journey to keep us going; it's Jesus gift to us to remind us that He is still with us. And he uses the word "substance," or the core of our very being. It means that in the consecration, there is a fundamental change here on this altar even though the accidents or appearance of bread remains. We're talking about the core reality being changed to manifest and bring about what Jesus tells us to do in the Gospel. The people on the mountain were hungry physically, but the reason they were there sitting by Jesus was they were also hungry spiritually, like those people in the LA Arena and like you and me here. The Eucharist is the answer to our pleas for help and our hunger.

The Council of Trent, Vatican II and Saint Pope Paul VI would reaffirm this as well, Paul VI especially saying how Christ was most present to us in Holy Communion in the sense that the “real” presence of Jesus means presence in the fullest sense - as he put it, the God-Man, wholly and entirely present. It goes back to John 1 - in the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God. His point is that yes, God is present in other ways; in the word; in our actions of charity and love; in other sacraments too. But in the Eucharist, there is a special presence of God that is unique, and it’s as close as we can get to heaven this side of it.

So what is the point of all of this? That through the words “this is my body given up for you” reality is changed. Jesus comes to be here on this altar. And who is Jesus? Someone who wants to feed us. Someone who wants to then transform us. The same Jesus who transformed a 16 year old on the way to a life in a gang and crime and jail into a husband and someone who returned to the Church. Jesus is our food for the journey of life. Holy Communion unites us more deeply with God and one another. I’d invite you to think of 3 ways this happens.

As a starting point, ask yourselves what is it you need Jesus to help you overcome. Jesus is the living bread that comes down from heaven; and just as we need physical food to live, we need the spiritual food for spiritual life. Yet inside all of us, there are the hidden things we ignore. As Officer Romero found out in that packed arena in 1983, filled he said with the “good” Catholics who would never admit their problems, in fact so many of them were carrying burdens. So what is yours? A hidden addiction to images that objectify the body? An addiction to the need for praise? Harboring of resentment and grudges? Racism or hate towards others? Not being the kind of parent or family member you know you could be? A struggle with drugs or alcohol? Jesus wants to help you. And that is why we are given the food for the journey. So open your heart to Him. Turn to Him in prayer and know what when you receive the Body of Christ, Jesus is there to help you become the person you want to become.

Second, look to Jesus for direction. We spend a lot of time talking, but maybe not as much time listening as we should. Our church is open every day for prayer and the First Friday of the month we have adoration. Before the covid situation hit, we were exploring the possibility of a chapel as well with more extended adoration, something I hope may become a reality. Or maybe you can come early or stay a bit after Mass. Silent prayer before the tabernacle or at Eucharistic Adoration is a way we can sort things out and get clarity whether we are discerning a vocation, a career change, or just trying to deal with a situation at work or with the family. Jesus is listening, but He’s also speaking to our hearts and we need to listen to Him.

Lastly, we can take a page from Officer Romero and introduce others to our best friend. Love one another as I have loved you is Jesus’ commandment to us in John 15:13. When we eat the flesh and drink the blood of our Lord, we are one family, united with this meal. No one can welcome Jesus and close the door on his brothers and sisters. We are acknowledging Jesus in the Eucharist, but also that we agree to be the Body of Christ and to give our life to flesh out that Real Presence in others. We do this by trying

not to get overly angry or exclude people based on politics or their differences of opinion with us. But we also do it through fortitude. It took fortitude for Officer Romero to talk about his faith with people, but he did because he took that young man but also so many others to a church, because he wanted people to come to know the love of Jesus. What a difference we can make when we do the same thing. I think sometimes people are fearful of talking about our faith because we live in a world of relativism where anything goes or we as Catholics can hold to things that are counter-cultural when we talk about marriage or abortion. But as I said at Mass yesterday, how many lives have been saved from abortion because of sidewalk counselors talking about life to a mom about to make a choice she couldn't hold back? How many people have been liberated from sin or sadness because like Officer Romeo people said I'd like you to know my best friend, come with me to church? How many people have turned away from being in bad situations of addiction and lives of sin because someone said this is wrong what you are doing, but didn't do so to shame them but to help them and then told them about Jesus? In the face of the online outrage mobs or heaven forbid offending someone, people are losing their way and on the road to perdition because of our silence. But when we have the courage to speak up and become what it is we receive, we may be hated by some or labeled intolerant or a zealot but we just may save souls for Jesus.

Jesus closes by saying "unlike your ancestors who ate and still died, whoever eats this bread will live forever." Eternal life is waiting for us in heaven, but to get there we have to, like the Israelites, journey through our own desert. Sometimes like them we will want to look back as they did to Egypt thinking things were easier there because that is what sin can do to us. It's hard to say no to things, to live a good life. And that's why sin enslaves so many. Jesus though is our liberation, but not just waiting for us in heaven, but also with us every step of the way to be our food for the journey. To get us through. So let us take this food given to us and be strengthened by it, not just ordinary bread, not just a symbol, but Jesus Christ Himself who will strengthen us and lead us into the promised land.