

Pondering All that the Eucharist Means

This weekend we'll be celebrating the first Communions of a number of our young parishioners at our Masses at 5 p.m. and 10:30, along with a special Mass at 12:30.

A lot goes into preparing for the day; the children receive instruction in the classroom and parents are also involved. And when they come up to receive Communion, they are very reverent and it's also an emotionally moving time for their parents as their children receive Jesus in this special way for the first time.

Preaching though at a First Communion can be a challenge. Talking about how Jesus is present and putting it at a second-grade level (or talking about it to any audience for that matter) can cause one to get pretty deep into theology pretty quick. The past few years, I've often used a wonderful book by Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, "In God's Hands," that, while taking place in a synagogue, tells the story that demonstrates beautifully what the Eucharist entails. In the book, a poor man who helps clean the synagogue prays for help as his family is hungry; a wealthy baker who sleeps through the weekly service awakens hearing just part of the reading and believing God was calling him to bake bread and offer it to Him. As such, the baker bakes challah bread, placing it in the tabernacle (where Jewish people would keep the sacred scroll); the poor man opens it one day and they go back and forth until the rabbi realizes what is going on, and tells them the deeper meaning here is we are connected, and help one another. Such is the real meaning of the Eucharist; we are fed by God, but called to feed one another too.

First, what I try to stress to the kids is how much they are loved by God. I often equate celebrating Mass to celebrating Thanksgiving Dinner. The difference is we leave a big meal physically full, but at both we also are full in a sense from the time we've had to reconnect with loved ones and spending time with people we care about. When we celebrate Mass, we believe Jesus comes into the home of our body ("Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof...") and when He does this, we grow closer to Him. It's His way of saying "I love you" and we celebrate Mass to commemorate what He did for us, but not just as a memorial; rather as a representation of the Last Supper and the First Eucharist. Much like a child goes to grandma's house for a big meal and leaves also feeling loved by grandma and grandpa and with an overall good feeling, we should leave Mass with that same feeling. Jesus has freely chosen to give Himself to us, and the Eucharist removes sin, deepens our relationship to God, and brings us closer to one another – for the Eucharist also symbolizes our unity as one Church. But we have to be open to that happening.

One way is of course through prayer and focusing on the importance of Mass. Jesus is made present each time we celebrate Mass, and as that time nears, we need to reflect on how we are loved by God and prepare for that moment when we welcome God, through Communion, in a special way into our hearts. We also need to be open to the effects of the Eucharist, which draws us closer to God and one another, which means actively participating in Mass and prayer rather

than trying to simply fulfill an obligation or go through the motions, (or falling asleep like the baker in the book). Mass isn't about punching a clock. It's about an encounter with our Lord. It's also important to use the Eucharist to help us throughout the week. If we receive Communion and then are fighting in the car on the way home, gossiping about people, or not praying at all until next week's Mass, we might want to think more deeply about what we've just received.

When we receive Communion, the response is "Amen." For most of us, it's quite mechanical, but that's an important word to think about. Our bishops point out that: "The communicant should audibly respond 'Amen,' indicating by that response his or her belief that this small wafer of bread, the wine in this chalice are in reality the body and blood of Christ the Lord." This means that we do not say nothing at all, or say "yes it is" but rather affirm with "Amen" that we believe that it is the Body of Christ.

Among the effects of Communion is to free us from sin and bring us closer to God. Only those who are in a state of mortal sin should refrain from Communion; this needs to be grave in matter, the person has to have done it of free will, and know that it is grave. Jesus loves us deeply, and the Eucharist also frees us from venial sin. Some might feel that they must go to confession first, but this again is **only in cases of mortal sin**. Feel free to ask a priest in confession if you are confused as to the seriousness of something, but by in large most sins people commit are venial. Receiving Communion helps deepen our relationship with God.

Holy Communion must also connect us to one another too, which is why I love that book so much. Remember Holy Thursday and the washing of the feet? Communion is on the one hand a means of growing closer to God. But it also helps us to grow closer to one another. Mass is a sacrifice where we celebrate again the sacrificial love of God for us on the altar. But this is a love we are called to emulate. Holy Communion should open up our eyes on how to be more kind and charitable and how to think of the needs of others and how we treat them.

First Communion is such a special time, and congratulations to all who celebrate this moment. But for all of us, may we never forget the sacredness of what we receive in the Body of Christ. May it never become routine or mechanical, but a means to bring us closer to God and one another.

Have a blessed week!

Fr. Paul