

YEAR OF FAITH 2012-2013

4th SUNDAY OF LENT | March 9-10, 2013

What is your favorite holiday? I'm sure many of you immediately thought of Christmas, Thanksgiving or Easter among others. Now, imagine that holiday without any traditions, without food that is appropriate, without celebration and remembrance... Not much of a holiday is it? The Passover, for the Jewish people is the mother of all holidays and traditions. In our first reading today from Joshua, we hear a lot about the celebration of the Passover. While traveling and encamped on the plains of Jericho, the Israelites stopped and celebrated their most beloved and important feast. Doing this was essential to their way of life, to their being, believing and belonging. To not celebrate the Passover would mean the loss of their very identity and culture, not to mention their faith. This was the glue that kept them together, and it's not simply a meal, but a remembrance, a re-living of an ancient miracle, a re-entry into an eternal covenant, a renewal and rededication of everything they believed. This is exactly what we do each and every time we celebrate a sacrament, which is what our entire diocese is focusing on today, this Fourth Sunday of Lent.

The psalm we just prayed together said, "Taste and see the goodness of the Lord." At the Last Supper, Jesus said, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you...until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." (CCC 1130) Sacraments are an opportunity like no other in our world to engage all of our senses, our whole being, as we encounter the presence of God. They are not simply an intellectual exercise, but rather sensual, as we hear, smell, touch, taste, see and even consume this Divine Presence. What is so very cool about being Catholic is that it means to be fully engaged as a whole person in the celebration, which is not simply a fond recollection of something that happened over 2000 years ago and is done and over with, but a re-living and re-entering into it. Because "outward symbols signify inward things (Tad Guzie, *The Book of Sacramental Basics*, Paulist Press, 1981, p. 38)," "in his preaching the Lord Jesus often makes use of the signs of creation to make known the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. He performs healings and illustrates his preaching with physical signs or symbolic gestures. He gives new meaning to the deeds and signs of the Old Covenant, above all to the Exodus and the Passover, for he himself is the meaning of all these signs." (CCC 1151)

St. Thomas Aquinas pointed out that the only way human beings can know anything is through the senses, and this applies even more to knowing and encountering our God who gave us the gift of our senses. Have you ever had a 'God experience' in which you felt almost lifted out of your body? Perhaps walking on the beach and seeing a beautiful sunset, or listening to an incredible song as the hair on the back of your neck stands up? These are sacramental experiences; - God touching our hearts and lives, making his presence known and felt in intimate and wonderful ways. Yes, sometimes you may cough at the very sight of incense before you even smell it burning, but consider the symbolic nature of seeing the smoke rise up to the heavens, smelling our tradition come alive, and engaging in an ancient ritual that leaves an impact on our very being. That, my friends, is pretty cool! "Take and eat," Jesus says, not simply sit and look and listen. We consume the very presence of our God within our very being. We are what we eat, after all, as members of the Body of Christ; to paraphrase St. Augustine when he held up the consecrated elements: 'see what you believe, become what you receive.' At the Last Supper, as a

last act before he died, Jesus took the ancient Passover tradition and gave it an entirely new meaning; one which we are fully engaged in at each and every celebration of the Mass.

The Sacraments engage us at every pivotal moment of our lives, - from birth to death and many significant moments in between, - such as vocations to marriage and Holy Orders, or times in which we seek God's healing presence or forgiveness; when He calls us to get up again and live as a beloved son or daughter, a member of the Body of Christ. As St. Paul says in our second reading: "God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that the "Sacraments are 'powers that come forth' from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit at work in his Body, the Church. They are 'the masterworks of God' in the new and everlasting covenant." (CCC 1116)

"All too often Christ's sacrifice has become a private devotion, seen essentially as a source of personal grace independent of any involvement with the larger community (Paul Bernier, SSS, Bread Broken and Shared, Ave Maria Press, 1981, p. 92.) This is why our Holy Father, Pope Benedict said, "No-one can baptize himself; ... no-one can become Christian by himself. ... We can only become Christian through the meditation of others, and this gives us the gift of faith. ... Autonomous Christianity is a self-contradiction (Pope Benedict XVI, Audience, Vatican City, December 10, 2008)."

Sometimes when we do something often enough, we don't give it much thought and can take it for granted. The Sacraments are too important for us to ever let that happen! The Second Vatican Council called all the faithful to engage in the sacraments as full, active participants; this means we all carry the responsibility to look and listen attentively, to take and eat responsibly, prayerfully, reverently and respectfully, and to go out from these celebrations renewed in faith and in the commitment to live the Christian life as disciples of Christ in the modern world, -to live out our faith and not merely give it lip service.

Sacraments are celebrations of what God is already doing in our lives. Consider the prodigal son in today's Gospel, - although he was sorry, he needed the tender embrace of his father to know that he was truly forgiven. The Catechism says, "A sacramental celebration is a meeting of God's children with their Father, in Christ and the Holy Spirit." (CCC1153) We need to know we are forgiven and to be affirmed in God's love, simply being sorry is not enough. This is why reconciliation is a sacrament; it's why Jesus died on the cross for us! Pope Benedict said that "the Lenten Season, in which we now find ourselves, reminds us that in our Christian life we must always aspire to conversion and that when we receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the desire for Gospel perfection is kept alive in believers (Pope Benedict XVI, Address, Vatican City, March 7, 2008)."

A couple on their wedding day has already been brought together by God, they are already in love, have already made a commitment, yet they need to celebrate their marriage in the presence of God with their family and friends, - to seal this covenant in a most special way.

Although Christ is already present in the Church, the celebration of the Eucharist breaks open that presence, -makes it real, tangible, touchable, in fact edible, -for us to truly have communion, “an intimate union with Christ Jesus, who said ‘you who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me and I in you.’ (CCC 1390)

And although babies brought to Baptism are already loved by God and belong to God, the sacramental celebration makes them members of Christ’s Body, literally incorporates them into the Church, and bestows upon them Christ himself; it not only celebrates life, but the promise of everlasting life bestowed upon us by the life, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In Confirmation one is given the opportunity to experience this for one’s self at a later age, it is a time to confirm this faith, this baptism, this incredible promise.

The Sacraments connect us directly to our Lord Jesus who instituted them, they connect us to His Church which is His sacrament to the world, they connect us to one another, they bestow grace upon us like nothing else this world can ever offer, and they invoke great power. They are the glue that keeps us together, not simply a remembrance, but a re-living, a re-entry into an eternal covenant, a renewal and rededication of everything we believe. So let me conclude with a quote from the most recent Spiderman movie, which actually was stolen from the Bible: “with great power comes great responsibility.”

The Sacraments are one of the most significant things that identify us as Catholic. In our increasingly secular world, there is greater need than ever for the mystical, the holy, for reverence and ritual. We need to be reminded over and over how very important these direct connections to God are in our lives and in our Church. We need to remember what they are and why we celebrate them so they never become rote or empty rites devoid of meaning or impact. We also need to give more thought, time and attention to how they are celebrated and explained. The sacraments invoke great power; with great power comes great responsibility!