

YEAR OF FAITH 2012-2013

3rd SUNDAY OF EASTER | April 14, 2013

One of the things I love most about being a priest is celebrating First Holy Communion Masses. It is one of the greatest celebrations of a Catholic's life. And it's not just because of the parties and the kids getting all dressed up, it's because they get it, that they are receiving Jesus' Body and Blood. In fact it's not even just the celebration itself that excites me the most but all the teaching and the innocent learning that goes with it.

As we continue our celebration of the Year of Faith, today around the diocese the homilies will all focus on different aspects of the Real Presence. The Catechism defines real presence as follows, "In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist 'the body and blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ and, therefore, the whole Christ is truly, really, and substantially contained.'"

Before First Communion I give the children a tour of the church and the sacristy and I show them all the sacred vessels with their mysterious names like "Chalice" and "paten" and "lavabo bowl". They look on with amazement. Then I give them an unconsecrated host, after much explanation that until we gather as the people of God and the priest says the words Jesus gave at the Last Supper, until all of that has taken place, it is just bread. Some of them always say it tastes like cardboard, to which I reply why are you eating cardboard? I remember one little girl asking "will it taste different when it's Jesus?" Children's faith should be an inspiration to us because they understand the complexities of faith, while we adults have learned to question and doubt everything. When I saw their faces as they came forward to receive Jesus, they were very serious, and it was very special to them. Then some of their parents would come forward for Communion with about as much reverence as they were picking up a potato chip while watching a football game.

Faced with the words of Sacred Scripture it is difficult to say that what we do during Holy Mass is simply re-enact the Last Supper and make symbols. No, clearly what Jesus is saying is that in a supernatural way, more big words here, the bread and the wine are indeed "transubstantiated" and become His Body and Blood while the "accidents" or the appearance still appear as bread and wine. That's a fancy way of saying that it is Jesus, Body, Blood, soul and divinity that we receive.

Sometimes we get so concerned with understanding the "what" that we forget the "why." Christ gives us Himself in order for us to be literally one with Him; that He may physically become one with us. He says in the gospel that this is in order for us to have life, not just eternal life but life with Him right here and right now, that He may remain in us and we in Him. He gives this gift that we may be one with the Father, the Creator of all that is, but who also knows each of us, our struggles our pains our challenges and our joys as if we were His only child. Jesus calls us through the gift of His life to have real life within us. Don't you think that everyone would want this gift? And yet so many people walk around breathing and with hearts that beat but it is as if they are already dead. The writing "An interview with God" that is circulating on the internet puts it as "People live as if they will never die and then die having never lived."

Yes, it is an amazing thing that we do each time we gather. Yes it is hard to understand how bread came become flesh and wine become blood, and yes it is hard to understand why Jesus would choose such graphic imagery in describing what we do. In the early church people heard what happened at Mass and some got the meaning of the Holy Mysteries, and yet the point of it is that we could be one with God in a physical and spiritual way, that He could literally feed us and sustain us in His love. Little children on their First Communion Day know this better than we do. Most of the children come forward and they get it, that this is how Jesus shows us His love.

The hope is that through this catechetical theme the faithful will be invited to reflect more deeply on exactly what we are doing. Many people have drifted away from Mass because it has lost the sense of the holy with the recent emphasis on community. The homilist will want to balance that now well established idea of the communal nature of the Mass with a recovered sense of the transcendent.

It is also hoped that the teaching on the Eucharist will revive Eucharistic devotion, adoration, and a more reverent assistance at Mass by the faithful. An article from America Magazine in 2010 gave some startling statistics:

The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life's recent U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey has unearthed evidence of an identity crisis among American Catholics. 'More than four-in-ten Catholics in the United States (45%) do not know that their church teaches that the bread and wine used in Communion do not merely symbolize but actually become the body and blood of Christ' (Pew, p. 8). Among the American public overall, 'about half of those polled (52%) say, incorrectly, that Catholicism teaches that the bread and wine used for Communion are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus. (America, October 18, 2010, p. 24).

During this year of faith I hope our attention and devotion to the gift of the Eucharist will deepen. Realizing the power of this sacrament can bring people back to the Church and closer to God. In order for that to take place we need to teach more fully the power of what God does when we gather. At the close of an International Eucharistic Congress in Canada the Holy Father said, "The Eucharist is not a meal among friends. It is a mystery of covenant....We are called to enter into this mystery of covenant by conforming our life increasingly every day to the gift received in the Eucharist."