



Thinking About the Eucharist

by Mary Carol Wall

This past Monday evening our First Eucharist group gathered one last time to remember their Eucharistic celebration, and to think and talk about what it means to them in their lives... the remembering and discussion, over time, is what our faith calls 'Mystagogia.' One of the youngsters raised her hand and said, with just a hint of frustration, "I know a lot of stuff about Eucharist, but that whole 'Body of Christ' thing just doesn't make any sense! I mean, we are all LOTS of bodies!"

Well! Out of the mouths of babes!

So, we talked about our own bodies... arms and legs, brains and hearts and lungs, ankles and knees. The kids tried running to the back of church as if they had no working ankles, and returning to the front as if they had no ankles nor any knees! They debated the merits of giving up a brain, or a heart, or a set of lungs. They soon decided they liked their bodies just as they were.

Then we talked about what our lives would be like if we had no mothers... or no fathers. What would things be like if there were no firefighters, police officers, emergency med techs, or medical personnel? They began to understand... we are all part of something bigger than ourselves, and we need all of us, and our different gifts, to be whole. The same youngster raised her hand again, and said, "Oh, I get it now! It's like a family!" And she is, in large measure, right.

The following day I attended a day of discussion on Eucharist, presented by Father Pat van Durme, of Hornell. He wanted to present the concept of Eucharist to us as if we were looking into a cut diamond, or prism, and turn it to look through a different facet, so we could see things in a new perspective, new light, new colors... and that is exactly what he accomplished.

Because we choose to be parts of the Body of Christ, we go to Eucharist. We receive the Eucharist, and are strengthened and sustained as members of that Body. What we may not always realize is that when Christ is on that altar of sacrifice, we are up there with him. Being part of his body means we are also willing to be broken and shared. As St. Augustine observes, that which we receive is who we are.



A very long time ago, the Church developed the concept of "in persona Christi." There were questions about the legitimacy of sacraments, such as the Eucharist, marriage, baptism, and so forth, if the acting priest or bishop was a corrupt individual, living in grave sin. The Church's response was that at the time of the action of the sacrament, the person, himself, was not of consequence. The grace of the sacrament was coming through Christ and, in effect, at that moment of grace, that person was acting in the actual person of Christ. No matter how gravely sinful the minister, the sacrament was valid. The minister's celebration of the sacrament may have been illicit because he was so unworthy, but the sacrament was still valid.

Father Pat presented this same concept in a new light. He counseled that many Catholics receive the Eucharist in a valid, yet illicit, way. For too many Catholics, Mass is a "Spectator Sport." We sit (or kneel or stand) in virtual silence as the liturgy rolls on. We may mouth responses and even sing a little bit, but are busy within ourselves running through our to-do lists for when Mass is over, wondering if there is a coffee hour after Mass, grumping about the wrongs done us by spouse, children, co-worker, etc. In short, we are not present to what is going on. And we definitely are not contemplating our crosses and sorrows in light of the sacrifices of Jesus, and placing them on the altar with him.

When we actually do offer ourselves and our sorrows, our futures and our hopes, our crosses and our joys on that altar of sacrifice along with the bread and wine, then not only is the bread and wine transubstantiated into the body and blood of Christ, but so are we. We are changed, too. And when we choose to not participate, then the Sacrament of the Eucharist is valid... but illicit. And it is illicit by our choice.

Since at least the days of Father Hammond, St. Mary's has been taught that 'Liturgy' means 'The Work of the People'. There is no doubt about it... being present and participative and connected throughout Mass is work. On May 11th, when Matthew carried that huge, heavy cross up the aisle, and Cloe and Grace carried the Eucharistic quilt up, too, and they all carried them back again at the end, that was work. We heard Michael and Evan presenting the readings with clear voices, evenly paced, and with expression... they worked hard to accomplish those deliveries. When Gabriella sang those beautiful clear words and notes of the Responsorial Song along with our choir, and Margaret played 'City of God' on her violin - that was work. And even though it didn't look difficult as Hailey, Emily, Gabriell, and the other children gathered around the altar on their knees during the Eucharistic prayer, knowing everyone's eyes were upon them and still trying to focus on all Father Peter was doing on the altar, that was definitely work!

The question is... are we prepared to work within our liturgy, as well? Are we prepared to lay ourselves on the altar, as we are the Body of Christ? Are we willing to be broken and shared? If we are, then we need that Transubstantiation, for it is through our real connection to God the Father, Son, and Spirit as part of the Body of Christ that gives us our strength, our love, our joy and our peace with no fear to live out our lives fully... to be broken and shared.