

Commentary on the Gospel for Fri, Apr 24th 2015

As the Liturgist at St. John's Parish Church at Creighton University I have been praying over and working on planning the specifics for the liturgy for the celebration of First Holy Communion for a few of our young parishioners in the Religious Education program. As I process the liturgical elements that go into this celebration, I have been reading some wonderful articles and books about First Communion. The readings today offer a wonderful connection to two important elements—conversion and Communion.

For a moment, we can reflect on our own First Communion, and ask what we remember about that day and how our faith and understanding of the Eucharist might have changed and grown since then? (For those reading this reflection who are not Christian or have not received communion, it can be good to reflect on what brought us to desire to learn about Christianity or even what made us decide to read a reflection from this site.)

One of the articles I was reading in preparation asked the question, 'at what age should a child be ready for First Communion?' or 'should a child wait until she or he can understand what she or he is doing when receiving Holy Communion?' Well, if that were the case, many of us would still have not made our First Communion. "The Holy Eucharist is a mystery as profound and unfathomable as the Trinity. One does not understand how Christ can assume the form of bread and wine. One believes. A child must believe, and if it helps to substitute the word understand, then he must understand that the bread looks like bread but is not bread, it is the Body of Christ. The wine looks like wine but is not wine, it is the Blood of Christ. To ask him or her to understand the mystery of it is asking of him or her something that even his or her elders do not understand."

In today's readings we hear of Christ's body in a realistic way. Imagine a live human being in front of you saying: "Eat My flesh and drink My blood." This turned a lot of people off, but Jesus refused to change His terminology. Holy Communion really is Jesus. And how can we convey to a child the true nature of what Jesus meant when he said, "Let Me solemnly assure you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:53)? First Communion is a sacrament which is a conduit of God's grace. Sacraments are actions which manifest God working in our lives.

Our First Communion might not have been a conversion story like that of Saul — thrown off his horse, blinded, and made to see the error of his ways. Instead, it is an ongoing realization, a lifelong learning that this is Jesus himself in the Eucharist — fully present and fully alive within us.

As the article on First Communion tries to explain, “Where the Holy Eucharist is, in each host, or even each piece of a Host, Jesus is wholly there. He is the same God Who made the heavens and the earth and all things, and Who is surrounded by the angels and the saints in Heaven. He is the same Jesus Who was born in Bethlehem, and the same Jesus Who died on the Cross.”

The promise of Jesus is clear, “...whoever eats this bread will live forever.” That is a lot to take in, especially for a second grader upon their First Communion... that is a lot to take in for a person of any age. As we receive Jesus in Holy Eucharist, we are united with him... for eternity.

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