

Reflections on Mass and Communion

As we at St. Germaine prepare to offer Communion under both forms of bread and wine at all our Sunday Masses, Fr. Mike Furlan is offering some reflections on what we do each Sunday.

Part I: Connecting with the family

When I was pastor at St. Leo the Great, I faced some very difficult times. Dealing with the tasks of administration without the resources of an adequate staff, trying to pay bills, maintain the facilities and cover even a meager payroll with limited finances was always a challenge. Many times throughout the week I wondered if it was worth it.

Then Sunday would come. The opportunity to gather with the bulk of the parish faith community for the celebration of the Eucharist always answered my questions and doubts. While the celebration of any Mass is invaluable, Sunday Mass was and is special. It is the one time when all the members of the parish, regardless of age or gender, interests or involvement, organizations or alliances, can come together to celebrate their common faith and their unity as members of the Body of Christ. It was what made the frustrations, headaches and struggles of the week at St. Leo all worth it. It is what still gives value to the efforts and events of the week at St. Germaine.

From a purely social stand point, our Sunday liturgies give us the opportunity to be with other members of our parish family whom we might not otherwise get to see. It is true that our parish provides many opportunities for members to “gather in fun,” or share our baptismal gifts in service (as our parish covenant says). But most of these opportunities are limited to specific sectors of our parish family. Sunday Mass brings together members of all these sectors. In doing so it helps us all to appreciate the diversity of needs and gifts present in our parish. At the same time it helps us to realize that “the Body is one and has many members, but all the members, many though they are are one Body” and, that “there are different gifts, but the same Spirit, different ministries, but the same Lord.”

Part II: Strengthening the bonds

Part I of this series of articles focused on the fact that our Sunday liturgies give us the opportunity to connect with our larger parish family and especially those who may not be a part of our regular “social circle,” those who may have different interests, ministries, or activities. But collecting all this diversity in one place does not necessarily lead to unity. In fact, it could lead to conflict. We proclaim that we are “one in the Spirit, one in the Lord,” but the reality will take some work.

Our sharing in the “one bread and the one cup” makes us one with the Lord. It is the most intimate expression of our unity with the Lord and with one another. But this intimacy is not the only way we express our bond of unity. It begins with our greeting, our acknowledgement of the Lord’s presence and the presence of our brothers and sisters both formally and informally. If we cannot greet our brothers and sisters whom we can see, how can we greet the Lord whom we cannot see? Jesus said that even pagans greet their brothers.

The second principle of our covenant emphasizes “hospitality.” That task is not reserved to a special committee or group of ministers. It is the prelude for all who gather around the table of the Lord’s family. To fully appreciate the meal we are about to share, it helps to know the people we are sharing it with. Similarly, praying and singing with each other builds that relationship.

Perhaps you, like I, have been invited to a wedding or other banquet and have been seated at a table with total strangers. It is possible for everyone to eat their meals in silence, avoiding any kind of contact with the other guests, but I’m sure most people would think that it was pretty strange. Yet often, we seem to do that every week at Mass. To fully participate in Eucharist we need to overcome what isolates us and seek what unites us.

Part III: The One Table

Parts I and II have focused on gathering as a family and strengthening family unity. This week we focus on the family table.

When I was growing up, big family gatherings usually included “the kids’ table.” Sitting at the kids’ table meant that you got some of the same food sent over from the “main table,” but it just wasn’t the same. There were always more choices at the main table. Besides, sitting at the kids’ table meant being excluded from the main part of the event. Sitting at the main table and being able to share in the fullness of the meal meant that you were a full-fledged member of the family.

The changes in our celebration of Sunday Mass at St. Germaine are intended to draw us into a fuller appreciation of what it means to be a parish family. To emphasize that we are all “full-fledged members” of our parish family, everyone will be invited to the “main table” to share in the banquet of the Lord’s Supper. This means that, for the most part, communion will be distributed from the table of the Lord at the edge of the sanctuary. Communion ministers will no longer be sent to the gallery (or other parts of the church) on a regular basis. Exceptions will be made for special circumstances. Similarly, we would like to encourage as many members as possible to fill in the main floor of the church before going upstairs to the gallery. This will serve to build the bond of unity among us and save some steps at communion time.

We’ve all had experiences with those who like to “eat and run” and sometimes it is necessary. But the Mass is a family meal, not a “drive-through” experience. Lingering at the table even after the dishes are cleared is customary and encouraged. Leaving the table early should be an exception.

Next week, we’ll look at the “food and drink.”

Part IV: Eat His Body, Drink His Blood

Previous articles have looked at our Sunday liturgy as the opportunity to gather, united as one family around the one table. This week we consider the “menu” for the feast.

As “full-fledged members” of the Lord’s family we are all invited and encouraged to share in the fullness of the feast not just the portion that gets sent to the “kids’ table.”

Jesus told his followers, “Take and eat,” and “Take and drink.” He did not say “Take a pass.” He also said, “If you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and (emphasis added) drink his blood, you have no life in you.” (Jn. 6:53)

Some have expressed health concerns about drinking from the same cup. All I know is that there is an even greater risk involved in our reception of communion. Think about it. It cost Jesus His life (not just His health) to provide us with this food and drink. By accepting this gift we are accepting the challenge and the responsibility to live a life in union with His life. It is an “all or nothing” commitment to trust in the Father as Jesus did. When He prayed in the garden that the cup would pass Him by, He also accepted His Father’s will. We do the same when we pray the Our Father just before we reach out in peace to our brothers and sisters and then reach out toward the altar for communion. Granted, it is easier to trust God than to trust the stranger who just drank out of the cup ahead of us. That’s why it is important that we “eliminate the strangers in our midst” by getting to know them and accepting them as family. Families are less squeamish about sharing among themselves. If we act as a family then we need to trust that those who are suffering from some contagious disease (like a cold) will refrain from taking the cup out of consideration for their brothers and sisters. While we try minimize whatever health risks there may be, we cannot eliminate them entirely, so it really comes down to a “risk-benefit assessment.” How much a risk am I willing to take to share in the fullness of the Lord’s sacrifice for me?

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