

LESSON ONE: JESUS IS TRULY PRESENT IN THE EUCHARIST

From the earliest of times, it has been the faith of the Church that Jesus is present in the Eucharist. The earliest New Testament witness to the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist comes to us from Paul writing to the community of the Corinthians. "I have passed on to you what I myself received." Paul goes on to recount the words of the Last Supper: "This is my body...this is the blood of the new covenant." Since Paul was in Corinth around the year 51 AD, we can assume that the tradition that Paul received which he passed on to the church dates to the very earliest days of the Church. The gospels of Matthew Mark and Luke, written later than Paul's letters, likewise affirm the tradition of the words that Jesus spoke at the Last supper: "This is my Body, this is my blood." The final scriptural witness to the real presence comes from the sixth chapter of John's gospel in what is called "The Bread of Life discourse." Here, Jesus clearly identifies the "bread come down from heaven" as his very own flesh. The words of Jesus seem so difficult for the crowd to grasp: "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" The gospel story reflects the situation of the early Church community where John's gospel was written; how hard it is to grasp the mystery of Christ's presence in the Eucharist!

Such a question reflects the difficulty that Christians have had through the centuries in trying to understand the manner in which Christ is present in the Eucharist. Is Jesus physically present? In that case, is Eucharistic communion a kind of cannibalism? (The first century pagans, misunderstanding Christian belief in the Eucharist, accused Christians of cannibalism as recounted by the Roman historian Philo). Is his presence in the Eucharist merely symbolic? Certain churches during the protestant reformation in the 16th century affirmed that the Eucharist is just a symbol of Christ's body and blood.

The Church, in the course of the centuries, has centered on the word "real presence." But what does that mean? Obviously, what is present in the Eucharist is not his physical body but his risen, glorified body. But what does *that* mean?

Well, let's look at ourselves – who we are now (in our physical body) and what we shall someday receive (a glorified body in the image of Jesus' risen body). We are made in the image and likeness of God (who is Three-in-one) and so we are made to become many-in-one. But what frustrates our deepest desire for that perfect unity in intimacy for which we were made? Our physical bodies are the source of our frustration. We are limited just by virtue of being *physical* (I can't be everything for everyone in everyplace at every time); add to that the limitations brought on by selfishness and sin and we remain separate, not one. Someday our bodies, however, will be glorified and we will be able to achieve that intimacy for which we were made.

But Christ is the firstborn from the dead – and even now he can enter into a deep

intimacy with us. There are perhaps many ways that Jesus, in his risen body, could be made present to us – but he chose the most intimate means – to become food for us to eat at a sacred meal. And so he bids us to become what we eat. As we behold his real presence in the Eucharist, we are reminded of our own journey – to die to all the particularities of self (my agenda, my rights, my desires, my needs) and so to rise to become that “new person” that St. Paul speaks about as we “put away the old self of your former way of life, corrupted through deceitful desires, and be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and put on the new self, created in God's way in righteousness and holiness of truth.”

As you sit now before the Blessed Sacrament, Jesus shows us our future – someday what we will be capable of in our own glorified bodies (to achieve perfect unity and intimacy without the limitations of self). Let us ask Jesus to teach us how, even now, to be free from all our self-absorbed agenda. Where am I insisting upon what I want? Where is this getting in the way of perfect union and communion with others? Allow Jesus to transform our sinful; body to make our bodies more like his glorified body.

LESSON TWO: THE EUCHARIST AND THE LAST SUPPER

The Last Supper, the event during which Jesus instituted the Eucharist, is a Passover meal, rich in its symbolism that helps us to appreciate the Eucharist in an even more profound way. As you recall, the Hebrews were held in captivity of slavery by the hard-hearted Pharaoh. God promised Moses that he would act in a decisive way in order that the Hebrews could be freed. And so the Hebrew slaves were ordered to take a lamb and slaughter it, placing its blood upon the doorposts where they lived. The angel of death would pass over those houses so marked; meanwhile, those houses not marked (the homes of the Egyptians) would suffer the terrible fate of the death of the firstborn. Throughout the centuries, the Jewish people commemorated this intervention by celebrating the Passover meal, recounting the story of how God saved them and entered into a sacred covenant relationship: “I will be your God, you shall be my people.”

On the night before he died, Jesus uses this Passover meal to speak about a new covenant, not made through the sacrificial blood of a lamb but established through the shedding of his own blood. In this new covenant, Jesus would bring about an even deeper relationship with the Father, for by the shedding of his blood, Jesus emptied himself (literally) in absolute trust and obedience to the Father. In that perfect sacrifice, he taught us how to surrender ourselves in loving trust and absolute obedience to the Father.

And so, Jesus uses the elements of the Passover meal and reinterprets them so that now his disciples will understand what Calvary was all about. For Calvary would not just be the Romans cruel punishment of an undeserving victim delivered by the jealous Sanhedrin; rather, Calvary would be the love-expression of the God-man who teaches us the pathway to surrender. “No one takes my life from me. I have the power to lay it down and I have the power to take it up again.” Jesus wanted his disciples to understand that Calvary was an act of love for in this act of free surrender to the Father he would teach us how to achieve perfect freedom in this world.

Taking bread, Jesus says, “This is my body given for you.” As the bread would be broken, so his body would be broken the next day. “This is the cup of my blood, of the new covenant.” As his blood would be shed the next day, it would establish, on behalf of all mankind, a new relationship of faithfulness to God. For while God has always been faithful to us (God has always upheld his part of the covenant relationship) we have failed because of our own fears and self-absorption. Here, Jesus, on behalf of us, can now respond perfectly to that call of total trust and obedience.

As you sit before the blessed Sacrament, reflect upon the obedience of Jesus to the will of the Father. Ask Jesus to help you to surrender, especially when we want to exercise our own willfulness. Allow Jesus to free you from fear that prevents us from making those acts of absolute surrender and trust. As you sit before the Eucharist, repeat

these words in the quiet of your heart:

“This is His body, broken for me; this is His blood, poured out for me.”

LESSON THREE: EUCHARIST AND THE ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE

The beautiful accounts of the Last Supper that we read in the gospels and in the letter of Paul to the Corinthians, we hear that Jesus has taken bread and “blessed it” (Matthew, Mark) or “gave thanks” (Luke, I Corinthians) before breaking it and giving it to his disciples. The word “bless” and “give thanks” are related actions. When Jesus blessed the bread he obviously didn’t make the sign of the cross over the loaf of bread! The Jewish custom of blessing food is an act of praising God for his goodness to us. “Blessed are you, O God, Lord and King of the universe, for you have given us this bread.” Luke and Paul, writing to a non-Jewish audience, prefer to use a word that would be more understandable to the Gentiles: give thanks (in Greek, *eucharistesis*). As you can see, we have used this Greek word to speak about our great sacrament: Eucharist – a call to give thanks!.

Our tradition, in using the word Eucharist as the word to describe both the ritual of the Mass as well as the communion which we receive, wants us always to remember that the act of giving thanks was at the very heart of the ritual of Jesus at that Passover meal. Recalling that Jesus gave thanks on the night before he died challenges us to likewise give thanks as we do this sacred action in memory of Him. The call of this holy ritual in our lives is that we too will cultivate an attitude of gratitude. But what does that mean? Unfortunately, I think that all too often we go about cultivating this attitude in the wrong way. You see, my experience is that when I want to foster the spirit of gratitude in my life, what I tend to do is divide my life into two parts – a list of the blessings for which I am grateful, and a list of the not-so good things that, for the most part, are the curses of my life right now. And so I would look at my “good list” – my life, my health, my clothing, housing, family, friends, etc. – and feel gratitude. But I would also be aware that there is another list – the list of the garbage in my life – the hurts, the disappointments, the present challenges, the people who get me aggravated – and purposely ignore that list while I am trying to stay focused on the things for which I am grateful.

The real key, however, to doing gratitude work is to see that everything in life has its place – there aren’t two lists, a list of blessings and a list of curses, but there is only one list – things good and bad and in-between. Everything on that list fits because it belongs to a plan. Everyone in my life belongs – because they are part of the larger plan. The question is, can we believe that there is a plan?

The only way that I can foster this attitude of gratitude in my life is to look back over time and to see how every piece of my life did indeed fit together. Hindsight is a wonderful gift that can uncover for us how everything and everyone belongs. However, if I am so overwhelmed by the hurts of the past, and have nurtured that spirit of bitterness and resentment, holding onto the hurts like some kind of sick badge of honor, I will not

be able to see how even the most painful experiences of my life have been used by God to bring about a greater good.

A key, therefore, if we are seriously striving to cultivate an attitude of gratitude, is to ask God to heal us of bitterness and resentment so that we can see our past through His eyes! As you sit before the Eucharist, ask for that grace of haling of past memories - not to forget the past but to see the past in a more glorified way that will allow our hearts to bless and thank God for our own sacred history that has brought us to where we are today.

LESSON FOUR: EUCHARIST AS SACRIFICE

Most of us remember our catechism definition of the Mass: The Mass is both a sacrifice and a meal. Our tradition spoke about the “unbloody sacrifice of the Mass.” How is the Mass a sacrifice?

The obvious answer comes to us that in some way the Mass is a re-presentation of Calvary. The sacrifice of Calvary is now being made present to us in an unbloody manner as Christ, once again, offers to the Father his body and blood, not on the cross, but now on the altar. During the time of the Protestant reformation, a major question was raised: if Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary atones for sins *once and for all* (as we read in Hebrews 9:11-28), what “more” could be accomplished by the sacrifice of the Mass, offered repeatedly through the centuries? For this reason, many protestant churches did not speak about “altars” or “priests” because, according to their view, no sacrifice was going on at the Mass. The Mass, for them, was merely a memorial meal, done to fulfill the Lord’s command at the last supper, but it did not possess a salvific effect in the lives of those who participated.

However, the earliest texts we have concerning the Eucharist speak about an “offering” and a “sacrifice.” From the second century, Saint Irenaeus and Saint Justin Martyr speak of the Eucharist as a sacrifice or oblation. If we are to accept the fact that Calvary accomplished salvation, once and for all time, how are we to understand our most ancient Church language which sees the Mass as a sacrifice?

Believe it or not, the heart of the answer is to be found in our understanding of the Trinity, and, most specifically, the role of the Son within the life of the Trinity. In the gospel of John, Jesus says, “Amen, amen, I say to you, a son cannot do anything on his own, but only what He sees his father doing; for what he does, his son will do also. For the Father loves his Son and shows him everything that he himself does, and he will show him greater works than these, so that you may be amazed.” Within the life of the Trinity, the Son stands in total receptivity of the Father, in total obedience, in a total act of surrender. It is fitting, therefore that the Son should become incarnate so that he could teach us how to live our lives in total surrender to the Father. That ultimate act of surrender happened on Calvary – not my will but your will be done! Even after the resurrection, Jesus stands before the Father in the eternal act of supreme worship of the Father. The beautiful image that is used in the letter to the Hebrews is Jesus the supreme and eternal High Priest who offers himself eternally to the Father.

Each and every celebration of the Eucharist, then, mirrors what is going on in heaven for all eternity. It is not as if every Mass is a new sacrifice, but every Mass echoes on earth the divine liturgy in heaven which is perpetually going on. This is why we begin the Eucharistic prayer with the angelic hymn, “Holy, Holy Holy” for we sing with “all the

choirs of angels in heaven above.” In heaven, the Son continues to stand in absolute surrender to the Father. Surrender is the attitude embodied in sacrifice, and so that sacrificial attitude is present eternally in the very life of the Trinity. We on earth are caught up, with Jesus, in that supreme act of obediential surrender in every sacrifice of the Mass. This is why we end the Eucharistic prayer with the acclamation, “Through Him, with Him and in Him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours, Almighty Father, forever and ever.” Our Amen (called the “Great Amen”) is our yes to this supreme upward movement in union with Jesus, to offer absolute praise and worship of the Father with absolute obedience and trust.

LESSON FIVE: EUCHARIST AS MEMORIAL

To speak about the Eucharist as a memorial might be frightening to some Catholics. After all, we were raised to believe that what separated us from the Protestants is that the Catholics believe that in the Eucharist Jesus is truly present, body and blood, soul and divinity, whereas the Protestants speak about the Eucharist as a symbolic presence of Jesus which “reminds” us of what he did at the Last Supper. And so Catholics speak about the sacrifice of the Mass and the Protestants speak about the Eucharist as a Memorial Meal. Yet, the ancient tradition speaks about the Eucharist as a memorial, certainly calling to mind the words of Jesus at the Last Supper –“Do this in remembrance of me.”

The word in Greek that has come to us concerning this aspect of the Eucharist is *anamnesis* – remembrance. In each of the Eucharistic prayers, we are asked to remember: “We celebrate the memory of Christ your Son” (Eucharistic prayer 1); “In memory of his death and resurrection, we offer you, Father, this life-giving bread, this saving cup.” (Eucharistic prayer 2); “calling to mind the death your son endured for our salvation, his glorious resurrection and ascension into heaven, we offer you in thanksgiving this holy and living sacrifice.” (Eucharistic prayer 3); “Father, we now celebrate the memorial of our redemption. . . we offer you his body and blood.” (Eucharistic prayer 4).

From looking at these texts, we see a clear link between remembering and offering. We remember what Christ accomplished in his death and resurrection in order that we can offer his body and blood as an acceptable sacrifice. It is obvious that the purpose of our remembering is not simply that we can call to mind a past event (Remember the Alamo!), but that, in our remembering, we can now do something in the present moment, namely offer Jesus. What exactly does that mean?

What Jesus accomplished in offering himself to the Father on Calvary was not a solo act – it was not the event of some super-hero which we now watch (in remembrance) with awe and wonder. We are caught up in the act itself. This is our dying and rising – this is our sacrifice which has been united with His sacrifice and thereby made totally perfect. In other words, we are being “membered” into the act of salvation as members of the Body of Christ. Once again, we are made members (re-membered) of Christ’s Body so that we can unite our surrender to His supreme surrender.

My mother was the youngest of six children. The oldest boys were working when my mother was still in grade school. On my grandmother’s birthday, all the children chipped in and bought my grandmother a washing machine. You can imagine what a big item purchase this was back in the early 30's! Of course, my mother couldn’t give any money toward the purchase – but her name appeared on the card! My mother was lavished with the same amount of thanks as my oldest uncle who laid out the lion’s share

for the purchase. She was “membered into” the gift!

Jesus is our big brother who paid the price – but we get the benefit! That is why we are membered into his sacrifice, all our puny and insignificant sacrifices are united with his so that together we make an acceptable offering to the Father at each Mass. We remember what Christ did so as to unite ourselves to Him in this moment of offering.

LESSON SIX: EUCHARIST AS SACRAMENT OF UNITY

We remember from our catechism the definition of a sacrament: an outward sign, instituted by Christ, to give grace.” Sacraments are more than just signs (like a Hallmark card would be a sign of love); they actually bring about the reality that they are pointing toward. In our tradition, we say that sacraments effect what they signify.

From the witness of the New Testament, it is clear that the Eucharist is a sacrament of unity – that it reflects the unity of the Body of Christ and even deepens the bond of that love in the actual moment of communion. In his letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul speaks about the unity that is created through the Eucharist. In the eleventh chapter, he rebukes the people for the division that they have created in the community – the haves and the have-nots – right at the very moment of Eucharist itself. The situation that he speaks about concerns the *agape* meal that the community was to share before the Eucharist. At the meal, the rich made sure that they ate their meal without sharing their food with the poor who came later. Paul writes, “For anyone who eats and drinks (at the Eucharistic meal) without discerning the body (that is understanding the nature of the Body of Christ which we are called to create), eats and drinks judgment on himself.”

The Latin word *sacramentum*, from which we get the word “sacrament” also means “bond.” Thus, to speak about the sacrament of the Eucharist is another way of speaking about the bond that is effected as a result of this moment of communion. Another interesting connection (linguistically speaking) is to realize that the Latin word *sacramentum* was the translation of the Greek Word *mysterion* (from which we get the word mystery). The sacrament of the Eucharist is a mystery, not because it is something we can’t figure out (how does Jesus get into that little piece of bread), but because it points to the bond of love that is being created in the very moment of celebration. One of the most beautiful reflections about this bond (*mysterion, sacramentum*) comes to us in a homily given by St. Augustine in the 5th century. He writes, “If you belong to Christ and are members of his body, then your mystery lies here upon this altar. See who you are, and become what you receive.”

See who you are and become what you receive. These words not only refer to the fact that we are called to become Christ through our reception of the Eucharist, but (and equally important) we are called to become Church in the very reception of the sacrament. This is why Augustine will also write, “The Church makes the Eucharist and the Eucharist makes the Church.” Many centuries later, the fathers of the second Vatican Council would express it in this manner: “Strengthened in Holy Communion by the Body of Christ, they (the worshiping community) then manifest in a concrete way that unity of the people of God which is suitably signified and wondrously brought about by this most August sacrament.”

In reflecting on this important aspect of the Eucharist, we can begin to understand why those who are not a part of our community of faith ought not to receive holy communion. The Eucharist is more than just some kind of divine medicine or holy vitamin; the Eucharist signifies and creates a bond of unity among fellow believers. Those who have no intention of entering into full communion with the Catholic community (or those who have not consistently maintained that bond of fellowship with the community) ought not receive something which signifies this unity.

Our unity as members of the Body of Christ is far from complete. For this reason, in each Mass, we join our prayers with Christ, our great High Priest, who on the night before he died prayed, “Father, I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.”

LESSON SEVEN: THE MASS

Did you ever wonder where the name “Mass” came from as the name for our Eucharistic celebration? “The Mass” is really the dominant way we speak about the liturgy. “What time is Mass? I don’t want to miss Mass. I have to bring the kids to Mass.”

The word Mass comes from the Latin word “Missa” and was the last directive given from the deacon to the people at the conclusion of the liturgy. “Ite, Missa est.” We have translated, “Go, the Mass is ended.” Those who know Latin tell us that the phrase reflects an archaic grammatical phrasing indicating that this formula goes way back in time. The word Missa itself is a form of the Latin word “missio” which means dismissal. “Go, it is the dismissal,” would seem to be an appropriate way of ending the liturgy. Yet, why would the entire liturgy be called a “Missa” or dismissal?

At the very core of this word *Missa* is the idea of being sent out on a mission. Our discipleship in Christ is never a matter of waiting passively for God to make all things new. God has called us first to be co-creators with him, to complete the unfinished work of his creation (see Genesis 1: “Be masters of the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and all creatures.”). Even beyond being co-creators with God, we are called to share in the work of redemption with Christ. We are apostolic, sent into the world to sanctify the world with the very grace which we have received through the Eucharist. The *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* (from Vatican II) states: “The laity must take on the renewal of the temporal order as their own special obligation. Led by the light of the Gospel and the mind of the Church, and motivated by Christian love, let them act directly and definitively in the temporal sphere. . . . The temporal order must be renewed in such a way that it can be brought into conformity with the higher principles of the Christian life.”

From the very moment we have been conceived in the heart and mind of God, God has had a plan for our life – a plan by which we would bring his light into this world. We were consecrated to that work in our Baptism, anointed with holy chrism to carry out the threefold office of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King. As priestly people, we are called to offer spiritual sacrifices and to believe that, even the most tedious daily chores when born patiently in the spirit of love, can be joined to the sacrifice of Christ and therefore has a redemptive value. As God’s prophetic people, we have received the truth of the gospel, and must bear witness to that gospel and apply that gospel to every aspect of daily life. As God’s kingly people, we are called to create order in this world, that is, to prioritize what is important and to help free all creation from its slavery to sin.

It is obvious how our mission is so tied to the Eucharist we have just received. The silent time that we take after having received communion is a wonderful opportunity for us to reflect on how we are going to bring Christ into our world. So many times when we

are quiet and reflective, our minds are assaulted with distractions, our “to-do-lists.” No wonder why people get anxious after communion and need to leave to get on to the next obligation or task to be accomplished! However, the simple question we need to ask after having received communion is not, “What do I have to do next?” but rather, “How am I going to bring Christ into that next situation I must face?” Having reflected on that task in the quiet time after communion, I then feel that sense of empowerment which makes the final dismissal a true missioning forth. Having reflected on our upcoming day in light of the One whom we have just received, I can now hear the priest dismissing me with these words. “You know what to do – now go out there and do it!”

Jesus says “You are the light of the world.” Once again, he has lit that lamp in you. Go forth and let your light shine brightly!

LESSON EIGHT: THE EUCHARIST: A FORETASTE OF HEAVEN

At the Last Supper, Jesus said, “I tell you, from now on I shall not drink this fruit of the vine until the day when I drink it with you new in the kingdom of my Father.” Jesus knew that the event of his passion and death would inaugurate the Kingdom – the reign of God here on earth where God’s love intention for this world (the vision and dream out of which God created the entire universe) would come into being. However, that Kingdom would only be present like a mustard seed or like a small piece of leaven. While the war against evil would be definitively won on Calvary, we will not taste the full fruits of that victory until the end of time. In the meantime, we have a promise, a pledge, that what God has begun in the death and resurrection of his son will be accomplished for us at the end of time.

At the last supper, Jesus gave his disciples a sign of hope; what we consume together, here on earth, we shall someday share more completely in that kingdom of the Father. Through the centuries, what we have come to share through the signs of bread and wine (communion together in the real presence of our Lord) we shall someday share face-to-face, when the veil of sacramental sign shall be lifted. St. Ignatius of Antioch of the first century expresses this hope in his letters to the churches: “We break the one bread that provides the medicine for immortality, the antidote for death, and the food that makes us live forever in Jesus Christ.”

When we think about the Eucharist as an antidote for death itself, we are reminded of the controversy between Jesus and his opponents as recorded in the eighth chapter of John. In that chapter, Jesus makes the following claim: “Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.” If we imagine death as the greatest enemy that we face in life, the enemy over whom we have no control, the enemy which keeps so many people locked in fear, then we can grasp the incredible claim we make as Christians: I will not taste death! Because of the Eucharist, I have already joined myself to Christ in the mystery of dying and rising. Because of my union with Christ in this holy meal, I already know my future is in union with him, and while my “earthly body, a tent, shall be destroyed, I will have a dwelling place, not made with hands, eternal in heaven.” (II Cor 5:1)

The claim that we will not taste death is an extraordinary claim because there is no evidence that there is life beyond the grave. In that controversy which takes place in the eighth chapter of John, the opponents of Jesus say, “Now we are sure that you are possessed. Abraham died, as did the prophets, yet you say, 'Whoever keeps my word will never taste death.' Are you greater than our father Abraham, who died? Or the prophets, who died? Who do you make yourself out to be?” It is difficult to believe in future immortality because there is no evidence that we live past the grave. This is why we need to receive the Eucharist frequently – because the Eucharist itself becomes the school that teaches us how to look past the evidence. Each time I am before the Blessed Sacrament, I

am invited and challenged to look past bread and wine and see the presence of the risen Christ. I need to exercise that muscle of faith that calls me to see past what is hidden to the senses. The more frequently I receive communion, therefore, the more I am drawn into this deep and unshakeable faith that I too shall pass from death to life.

Not only is the Eucharist a pledge of future immortality, a promise that we shall someday share the fruits of this banquet in heaven above, it unites us *even now* with the eternal banquet that is taking place in heaven above. For each celebration of the Mass is a participation in the one eternal banquet. Therefore, present in our own celebration of the Eucharist are the angels and saints and all our own personal heroes who have passed from death to life. When I receive holy Communion, and the priest or minister says, “the Body of Christ,” I am asked to believe that what is here present is the entire Body of Christ – that even now I am being united with all the members of the Body of Christ (the faithful on earth, the souls in purgatory, the saints in heaven). My Amen expresses my belief that I am ever so joined with that Body even now in the hope that I shall even be more united to that Body in that glorious kingdom where every tear of mine will be wiped away.

LESSON NINE: THE EUCHARIST: GOD USES WHAT IS ORDINARY

God comes to us as ordinary food. What an extraordinary claim! The God who made the heavens and the earth, who established the universe in all its beauty and complexity, the God of all eternity comes to earth to be consumed by us! The heart of the mystery of the Eucharist is not so much *how* bread becomes Jesus; the heart of the mystery is *why*? In the mystery of God loving us, he wanted to enter into our world, through the presence of an ordinary human being, one like us in all things, and to continue that Presence by entering into ordinary bread and wine, food to be consumed by us. God reveals his presence in the ordinary.

Many people have walked away from Church because they claim that the Church is full of hypocrites. The holy people inside the Church become the horn-honking fist wavers in the parking lot moments later. But why should this surprise us or cause us scandal? God uses what is ordinary – even what is broken and sinful – to make His presence real in our midst. Eucharist must never be a proclamation of our worthiness but a proclamation of God's fidelity, for, as St. Paul says, "God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something."

It is not a matter that God makes himself present to us despite our human foibles, but he even uses our weakness to make himself known. I wish to quote a beautiful poem written by John Shea entitled "*The Prayer of Holy Sacrifice of the Mass.*"

Those who do not believe in a Higher Harmony
will balk when told an accident crunched
in the parking lot at the very moment
the altar boy's nose began to bleed.
He bled on the surplice, the cassock,
the candle, the other altar boy,
and the priest's unlaced shoe
which bulgingly carried an Ace bandaged ankle.
The priest was stuffing a purificator up the boy's nose,
damning the blood into his eyeballs,
when the lector asked "how do you pronounce E-I-i-s-h-a?"
and the organist pounded the entrance "Praise to the Lord."
They processed.
The bleeding, the halt, and the mute unto the altar of God.

Saturday was late and liquored
and delivered God's people,

sunglassed and slumping, to the epilogue
of weekend life, the Gothic Church.
They were not the community of liberal theology
nor the scrubbed inhabitants of filmstrips.
They were one endless face
and that face was asleep.

"May the grace of our Lord ...
A hungry pause for repentance. A quick feast of sins.

The lector murdered the prophets once again
and bypassed the section where a certain E-I-i-s-h-a
was having prophetic truck with a widow.
The homily parlayed a fairly clear gospel
(you are either with me or against me)
into sentences of vacillation and paragraphs of double-think.
The priest ran to the Creed for refuge
only to find a special creed was prepared for this morning's liturgy by Mrs.
Zardek
"I believe in butterflies and the breath of ..."

The courage of the president of the liturgical assembly
drained into the bolt holes of communion rail days.
The offertory gifts never made it.
They were dropped by an elderly couple
("We never liked the new Mass anyway.")
who collided with a small but speedy child
whose highheeled mother was in klicky-klack pursuit
and whose name was "Rodgercomeback."

The consecration was consistent.
The priest lifted the host
and said "This is my blood."
Instantly aware of his eucharistic goof
but also momentarily in the grip of a bizarre logic
he changed the wine into Jesus' body.
Then
with his whole mind, heart, and soul
he genuflected
to a mystery which masks itself as mistake
and a power which perfects itself in weakness.

(John Shea, *The Hour of the Unexpected*. Niles, IL: Argus communication, 1977)

LESSON TEN: EUCHARIST: TAKEN, BLESSED, BROKEN, SHARED

On the night before he died, Jesus took bread, said the blessing, broke the bread and gave it to his disciples saying, “Take this, all of you, and eat it.” These words, recounting the events of the Last Supper, are repeated in every celebration of the Eucharist as we recall again the words of institution: “This is my body. . . this is my blood.”

As we have said repeatedly in these reflections on the Eucharist, we become what we receive. In this final reflection on the Eucharist, I invite you to reflect upon yourself as a disciple of the Lord as one who, like the bread at the last supper, is “taken, blessed, broken and shared.”

Taken: The word “taken,” when used as a way to describe what Jesus has done to us, may sound rather violent. Perhaps a word that is more fruitful for our reflection would be the word “chosen.” From the very moment of your birth, even from before your birth, you have been chosen by God. As we read in the book of the prophet Isaiah, “Thus says the Lord who made you, your help, who formed you from the womb: Fear not, O Jacob, my servant, the darling whom I have chosen.” As we mentioned in earlier reflections, you are holy, not because of any righteous deed which you have performed but simply by virtue of the fact that you have been set apart, chosen by God for all eternity to fulfill his designs and purposes. Before this very mystery of being chosen, we humbly say in response, “Amen.”

Blessed: In Latin, the word for blessed is *benedictus* – “well spoken.” What are the things which God the Father speaks about his son Jesus? “This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.” Because your very self is hidden in Christ, God the Father speaks the very same words about you: “beloved. . . pleasing.” Again, we remember the words spoken by God in the book of the prophet Isaiah: “No more shall men call you ‘Forsaken,’ or your land ‘Desolate,’ But you shall be called ‘My Delight,’ and your land ‘Espoused.’ For the Lord delights in you, and makes your land his spouse. And as a bridegroom rejoices in his bride so shall your God rejoice in you.” So often we feel we are under the “curse.” Life doesn’t work for us, nothing good comes our way. Such thinking does come from the evil one who does not want you to know the truth of your innermost being. Allow the Lord to take delight in you!

Broken: How amazing it is that we place the sign of the cross on our body, perhaps many times a day! We have heard the words of Jesus, “No servant is greater than his master; if they hate me, they shall hate you as well.” Yet we are surprised when, for the sake of the gospel, we suffer even the slightest inconvenience. Here we proclaim the fact that we are disciples of the Lord, and the Lord himself has said, “If you wish to be my disciple, you must take up your cross and follow me.” But all too often we seek our own comfort and our own convenience over sacrificial love. There is no escaping the

brokenness that comes as a result of the human condition; the cross is an inescapable part of life. The Eucharist can infuse in our hearts a supernatural love which can actually make our crosses a source of joy in our life. In the old marriage rite, the “instruction” which was recited by the priest to every newly married couple at the altar said, “Sacrifice is usually difficult and irksome. Only love can make it easy, and perfect love can make it a joy.” Jesus promises such joy on the night before he died when he said, “I tell you all this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. May the Eucharist allow those sacrifices to become for us moments of joy

Shared: Finally, we come to this final action of the Eucharist – when Jesus is shared for the life of the world. We are called to a generosity, and, at the same time, we feel a certain resentment when we sense that we are being taken advantage of. However, the generous gift that we make of ourselves is not being made to others, it is being made to the Lord. If we keep our focus on Him, then our self-gift will be freed from all resentment and bitterness.