

Let's begin by picturing a child on their first communion day. What do we see? Innocence, openness, a sense of being one with parents and family. What does the child feel and believe? That's harder to gauge. All of us understand and believe according to the level to which we have come to experience and really know what is in our minds and our hearts.

About a month ago the Conference of Catholic bishops met by zoom and made a decision to craft a statement on the Eucharist in the lives of Catholics. What grabbed our interest and the headlines was the belief of many bishops that communion should not be given to those who do not accept the teachings of the church, particularly on abortion. This would affect public officials in the government who do not condemn abortion.

You might remember that there was a lot of negative reaction to the bishops. Peoples' voices were heard. There was some denial that they ever meant to advocate denial of communion to the President, senators and others. But the voices of some bishops had been clear about this.

So they then said that the main thrust of any statement on the Eucharist would be to correct misinterpretations of the Eucharist and encourage faith in the real presence of Christ in the appearance of bread and wine.

Now we must admit there is some truth in this latter position. In 2019 the Pew Research Center, a very reliable source of religious matters, did a study assessing basic religious knowledge of USA adults. The study reduced significant knowledge of Catholicism to two questions, purgatory and the Eucharist. The poorly worded question on Eucharist offered two possible options on our belief in the real presence - "symbol" or "actual." The results showed that 65% of Catholics believe the presence is a symbol. A good deal of upset and dismay followed. People have lost their faith!

Now let me ask each of you to make this choice. Do you believe the presence of Christ in bread and wine is actual or a symbol? What do you believe? One writer said that "none of the above" would have been the best way to answer.

Just what does actual mean? If actual means we chomp into the arms and legs of Christ when we receive communion, of course we don't believe that. And what does symbol mean. Does symbol mean it is not real?

Now I do perceive that many Catholics have an inadequate understanding of Eucharist. Many believe it is an individual experience – something between me and Jesus. Some believe we receive Eucharist to adore Christ, son of God.

What do we believe? I ask you to pay attention to what we say during the "Eucharistic prayer," called the prayer of consecration, that is the part of the Mass that extends from the Preface, 'Lift up your hearts:" to the great Amen," through him, with him and in him."

Listen as, first, we pray "Send down you Spirit on these gifts."

The Eucharist is the work of the Spirit whom the priest calls upon in the name of the entire assembly. It is not the result of some magic words that the priest utters.

Listen as we pray "... as we celebrate the memorial of his death and resurrection..." The real presence is not a static object. It is an action. It is the recalling of the sacrifice of the crucifixion and the fruit of the resurrection. The body of the risen Christ makes all this possible. And each one of us joins Christ in offering ourselves to God as we bring our lives, our needs, our joys and sufferings to the altar. We are all priests around the altar.

Listen as we pray, that "... partaking of the Body and Blood of Christ, we may be gathered into one by the Holy Spirit." We are to be gathered into one. The Eucharist is not just me and Jesus. It means I am intimately joined with all believers and through them with all people. Our prayer continues, "... bring us to the fullness of charity, together with Francis our Pope, and Sean our Bishop and all your holy people." We are all in this together. We pray for our dead, for all those in need today.

As I look out on you and all gathered here every Sunday, I am inspired by the faith and holiness that is evident. You may not be able to explain what the Eucharist is all about. But you come in reverence; you know there is something holy in

receiving the bread and, when possible, the wine. You know you are broken like bread is broken and as Jesus was broken for us. You pour out your own lives in service to others as blood is poured out. All this you bring to the altar to celebrate what your lives in Jesus Christ are all about.

Yes, the church as well as our world, is in a real mess. We keep faith in God being with us through it all. We come to Mass and receive the Eucharist and we believe the words we proclaim, "When you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes again."

Timothy J. Joyce, S.T.L., O.S.B.