

Homily for the 21st Sunday in Ordinary Time

“**Taste and see** the goodness of the Lord”, we sang in today’s responsorial psalm. It’s the same refrain we’ve been singing the past several weeks! And, it’s also where we are in our explanation of the Mass. In fact, in the Communion Rite, we make our immediate preparation to receive the very Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ in Holy Communion.

The Communion Rite itself begins with the Our Father, also known as the Lord’s Prayer. This central prayer, taught by Jesus Himself, has enough material to reflect on for an entire lifetime! In fact, St. Teresa of Avila was so caught up with the first word – “our” – that she wrote profusely about how awesome it is that because of Jesus, we can call His Father, *our* Father! So, we’ll just cover some of the highlights.

Speaking of “Father”, how awesome is it that we can call God, Father? I mean, from the moment He knit our souls into our bodies at the moment of conception, God had always been our Creator. But because of Jesus, the very Son of God made flesh, who is our brother, we, who had been alienated and estranged from God, have now been enabled to have a real, personal relationship with Him. And so, because of what Christ has done for us, this Creator has become our Father, and we have truly become His children! Amazing!

Now, given that we are examining the Mass in light of John 6, the Bread of Life Discourse, I'd like to zoom ahead to the following petition in the Our Father: "Give us this day our daily bread." What type of bread is Jesus talking about here? Well, there's a double meaning, because the ones asking for the "daily bread" – us – are both earthly and spiritual beings, composed of body and soul. On an earthly level, we ask for what we temporally need to survive. But even more than that food our ancestors in the desert who died ate, we ask for the living bread that has come down from heaven – the spiritual nourishment that guards us for eternal life!

The final petition I'd like to comment on is asking the Father to "forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us". A trespass is a sin. And so, we are asking God to forgive our sins *AS* we forgive those who sin against us. What does that little word 'as' mean? Well, it means that if we want God to truly forgive us, then we must forgive those who hurt, wound, and sin against us! If we do not forgive others from the heart, we are the ones bound to and stuck in the past, and so are not really free to receive the forgiveness from God that truly sets us free!

Now, as Catholics we do not immediately add the doxology, "For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory forever and ever". Some people wonder why? Well, it's because those words were not part of the original prayer Jesus taught His Disciples as recorded in the Bible – they were added in later centuries. But since they are venerable words to say, Catholics add them, just after a little interlude from the priest to create a separation.

So, having explained a little of what we pray in the Our Father, *how* do we pray? I mean, do we hold hands, extend our hands, fold our hands together – what do we do? Well, you may have noticed that during the Our Father I close my eyes and lower my voice to focus on truly talking to the Father. But every once in a while, I peek, and notice lots of variations out there. The tradition of the church is for the priest alone to extend his hands and for the people not to join hands. Why? Well, the ultimate sign of unity is Holy Communion, and we're not there yet. So, to join our hands, only to let go at the end, weakens the theme of unity that is building. There's room for flexibility here, though, so I'm not going to legislate one way or the other.

We then come to the **Sign of Peace**. During this part of the Mass, right before we prepare to approach the altar to receive the offering of Jesus, we make peace with those around us, who are most likely our family members and friends – the very ones we often hurt the most. This is the meaning of the sign of peace – asking for forgiveness – not “hi, how ya doin’?” – which we do before Mass starts when we stand and greet each other.

Now, in the ancient Church, one loaf of bread (kind of like pita) was most often used for Holy Communion. This symbolized that the “One Bread” was the one Body of Jesus Christ. Although today we used unleavened bread in the form of hosts, the priest still breaks the larger host, which is shared. This is called the **Fraction Rite**. At the end of it, I put a little piece of the host in the chalice. Why? Because the body separated from blood is a dead body. But, the body and blood together equals a living sacrifice. And our sacrifice is not dead, but living!

At the same time as the Fraction Rite takes place, the **Lamb of God** is sung. This chant offers a moment of prayer for the congregation as we prepare to receive the Body and Blood of Christ. The verses can be repeated as many times as needed until all the bread is broken. But, we usually sing it three times. Our response, then, to being in the very divine presence of the Lamb of God is to drop to our knees and to pray: “Lord, I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof, but only say the word and my soul shall be healed.” These words repeat the words of the Roman soldier in the Scriptures, who desperately wanted Jesus to come heal his sick servant.

Now, the assembly comes forward in procession to receive Holy Communion. This is important. This is our personal encounter with the living Jesus, who is not only Emmanuel, which means “God with us”, but in Holy Communion, He is now God **within** us! How much more intimate of a love could Jesus have for each of us than to really come to physically dwell within us?! As we approach the altar, we make a simple bow with the head to reverence the presence of Christ in His Body (and again before receiving His Blood). And we respond, “Amen” – a statement of faith meaning “yes”; “it is so”. When we return to our pew, we give thanks for all God has given us, especially in this Eucharist. We recall the words of Jesus in John 6: “Amen, amen, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day.”

Now, as you may know, only Catholics can receive Holy Communion at Mass – in particular, Catholics who are properly prepared by going to Confession first, if necessary. The reason is because other Christians by and large do not share our belief regarding the Eucharist. Many other Christians see Communion in a symbolic or spiritual sense – imitating what Jesus did at the Last Supper – but without the belief that they are truly eating and drinking His very Body and Blood. Therefore, when someone who does not share our beliefs potentially wants to receive Holy Communion, we want to respect the fact that they believe differently than us and ask them not to make a statement of faith in something that they don't believe. Although this can sometimes be awkward, it's an unfortunate reality of the separated Body of Christ – we are not yet all one united Church. When someone visiting with you is not familiar with this Catholic teaching, you should educate them about the Eucharist. Let them know they can participate in every way in the Mass, except receive Holy Communion. Point them to the parts and prayers of the Mass in the front of the hymnal/missalette, so they can pray and worship with us.

Following the distribution of Holy Communion, I place any remaining consecrated hosts in the tabernacle, genuflect, and then close the door. It's right after this, that everyone is to be seated. Again, we do this together to maintain the posture of unity. Then, after a period of silent prayer while I purify the vessels used during Holy Communion, the rite is brought to an end with the **Prayer after Communion**.

We've at last come to the end of Mass with the **Concluding Rites**. I know these homilies have been longer than usual – and there's a lot more I could have said, and I even had four weeks!! But there is so much going on in the Mass. I don't want all this information to simply be trivia for you. If Jesus is not in your hearts, little of what I said will matter much to you. But if you seek to love Jesus, you won't be able to know Him enough, and know enough about the great gift He gives us in the Mass.

And so, the Mass concludes with any necessary announcements, and most importantly the final blessing and sending forth. The word "Mass" actually comes from the Latin word 'missa', which translates "sent". It comes from the final phrase of the Mass in Latin 'Ite, missa est', which means "Go, you are sent". Understood in this way, then, we are actually dismissed from Mass. And it's not so much an ending as it is a beginning, because we are sent forth on mission to live as the newly-renewed disciples of Jesus that we are.

To close, the Catholic Mass is the most sacred act of worship a person can participate in on earth. That's a bold statement. But we recall what Mass truly is. At the Last Supper, Jesus did something new, something never done before and yet something that would change the rest of human history as it continued forth from that day on until the end of time. He gave us the food of eternal life – His very Body and Blood, soul and divinity for our salvation. He instituted the holy Mass. This Mass is our means on Earth of drawing closer to Christ, and to live out our salvation in this world. God bless you.