

John Shea has this prayer poem which he titles THE PRAYER OF THE 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-l-i-s-h-a?" and the organist pounded the entrance 'Praise to the Lord.' They processed. The bleeding, 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-l-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 weekend'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 – never to rise – to a mystery which masks itself as mistake – and a power which perfects itself in weakness. (THE HOUR OF THE UNEXPECTED, John Shea, p. 76-77)

Second, this mystery – with all of our stumblings as we try to celebrate it – is what keeps us – and makes us Catholic. The Second Vatican Council called the Eucharist "the source and summit" of our faith in its document on the Liturgy. This gathering is what defines who we are – and what we are trying to become – the Body of Christ. So I'd like to do a bit of the theology of the Eucharist. A few years ago, I heard an interview on the radio with a bishop from a large American diocese. At one point he was asked: "As the leader of a large diocese today, what do you consider as your single most important task?" The bishop, a sincere man I'm sure, answered: "To protect the faith."

I would contrast his answer to one that I once heard from Cardinal Hume when he was faced with essentially the same question. Asked by a journalist in Belgium in 1985 what he considered to be the most important task facing the church, he replied: "To try to help save the planet." These are very different answers. Which runs closer to Jesus?

In defining His meaning and ministry, Jesus said: "My flesh is food – for the life of the world." We can easily miss what's really contained in that. Notice what He's not saying: Jesus isn't saying that His flesh is food for the life of the church or for the life of Christians; albeit we, believers, get fed too and, indeed, generally get fed first, but the ultimate reason why Jesus came was not simply to feed us.

His body is food for the life of the world and the world is larger than the church. Jesus came into the world to be eaten up by the world. This understanding is beautifully symbolized in our gospel story of the feeding of the 5000. For this reason, the Christ was born in a manger, a feeding-trough, a place where animals come to eat, and it's for this reason that He eventually ends up on a table, an altar, to be eaten by human beings (even when done without due reverence or attention). Christ came not to defend Himself, the church, or the faith, but as nourishment for the planet.

We need to keep that horizon always in front of us as we journey through a time of anti-church and anti-clerical sentiment. Today the church, its teachings, and its clergy and members are often under siege, sometimes for good reasons but sometimes simply because of ideology and bias. In the Western world today, the only intellectually-sanctioned bias is that against Roman Catholicism and Evangelical Protestantism. To be bigoted here is not interpreted as intolerance or as being narrow-minded. Rather it's seen as the opposite, a sign that one is enlightened and liberal.

The danger in that is not that the church will somehow collapse, but that the church, us, will become too defensive, too self-protective, lose the vulnerability that Jesus demonstrated and asks for, and instead see the world as an enemy to be fought rather than as a fragile and broken body to which we are asked to give our lives – akin to a parent who has a child whose hostility makes an easy loving relationship difficult, but who must then resist the temptation to write off his or her responsibility for that child. The first task of the church, no matter the difficulty, is not to circle the wagons and defend itself. Even when the world doesn't welcome what we have to offer, we're still asked to give ourselves over to it as food.

It's easy to lose that perspective, especially in a time of disprivilege, and so it's important that we recall why the church exists, and what the Eucharist DOES.

The Church exists not as an end in itself – though, admittedly, partially, the church is an end in itself and needs no justification beyond itself since community in general and church community in particular are already the new life that Jesus promised. But we exist as a church to be food for the life of the world, to be eaten up as nourishment by everyone, including those outside our own circles. As Cardinal Hume put it, our real reason to be is beyond our own lives. Ultimately the church is not about the church, it's food for the world.

That, of course, does not mean the church shouldn't have an internal agenda. It's valid too to sometimes turn inward. In order to be a body that can be nourishment for the world, the church needs to generate, foster, and protect its own life. It needs to be fed on the Eucharist to be strengthened for this noble and wonderful – and exhausting – task. We can't give life if we haven't got any. We need catechesis and formation, good preaching, inspiring liturgies, beautiful music, and solid doctrinal and moral teachings. But these are not an end, but only a means to an end. It's important to keep that in mind.

Church life exists to build up a body, but that body exists not for itself, but for the world. Our task as church, especially today, is not to defend ourselves or even to carve out some peace for ourselves against a world which sometimes prefers not to have us around. No. Like Jesus, our real reason for being here is to try to help nourish and feed that very world that's often hostile to us. (adapted from Rolheiser, Email, Sept 7, 2003) We need to keep this in mind or we can become distracted by endless arguments about what we do IN HERE. And forget to do the real task which is OUT THERE.

OK, I know that's pretty heady. So, third, words from one more Irish poet and essayist -- Brian Doyle -- which he entitled THE SCENTSORY ADVENTURE.

You know what no one talks about when they talk about the Mass? The panoply of scents, the plethora of sensory adventures that enter through the doors of your nose, the layered and complex and lovely subtle messages you *smell* in Mass.

For instance: the sweet intricate tendrils of incense, and the cheerfully dank aura of raincoats and moist jackets and dripping umbrellas by the door; and the faint talcumpowdery smell of the three babies in attendance; and the sharp abrupt smell of matches and lighters as candles are lit; and the ancient dignified redolence of the wooden walls and organ and pews; and the faintest hint of mothballs and incense and cigar smoke as Father sails up the aisle like a battleship draped in layers of linen and cotton; and the deep tang of the wine and sturdy flour tastelessness of the wafer; and the leathery friendly aftershaveish smell of your neighbor as he shakes your hand; and the shaggy musky popcornish teenager scents as you hug your lanky sons, not yet fully awake even yet; and the coolest scent of all, the honey cinnamon coffee beach scent of your lovely mysterious bride, as you kiss her, yes, kiss her, right in the middle of Mass, before all these people, because you wish her well, and you wish her peace, and she somehow got the boys out of bed and into the car, you do not know how, for she is short and they are long, but here all are in the pew, smelling the hundred miraculous smells that have so much to do with the deep pleasure and savor of the Mass.

Such as: the happy oil reek of doughnuts stacked in the lobby, awaiting attack from children who come in waves the second Father sails past them on his way down the aisle, so that he appears to be followed by a troop of children, bouncing behind him like brightly colored balls; and the blunt workmanlike scent of coffee in urns that appear to have been purchased from the Defense Department after the First World War; and the bookish dusty serious smell of the tiny library of missals and Spiritual Literature and songbooks and even, God bless me, the collected works of Anton Chekhov for some reason; and the scent of the vast moist copse of cedar trees across the street, a scent that blows through the lobby like a tide whenever someone opens the door of the church; and the incomprehensible trustworthy graceful scent of Father as he shakes hands and hugs children by the door; *he smells like grandfathers and apples*, as one of my small Sunday School students once said, and indeed he does.

The Mass is a work of quotidian genius in so many gentle human ways; for all we laud and bow at the miracle in it, perhaps the deeper miracle even that the Quiet Guest who arrives midway is the sweet shuffling gathering itself – the miracle of it. We collect, we rise and subside, we sing and chant, we tell stories at the table around the meal, we shake hands and kiss and hug and laugh. The scents and sounds and touches braid and weave and stitch something quite astounding, every day, in a thousand languages all over the world. This morning, with the scents of rain and cedar and babies and cigars and cinnamon and sweat and coffee and apples and trust in my nose, I say thanks. (THE THORNY GRACE OF IT, Brian Doyle, p. 41-42) AMEN!