

A 5-year-old asked her mother the question the mother had been dreading, “Mommy, how are babies made?” Her mom did her best to explain, but the little girl still looked confused. “But what about kittens?” she asked. “Well, it’s exactly the same way,” her mom said. “Wow!” the child said excitedly. “My daddy can do anything!”

The late great Catholic writer Andre Dubus said, “If I could give my children my body to eat, again and again without losing it, my body like the loaves and fishes going endlessly into the mouths and stomachs, I would do it,” and of course you who are fathers would too, because this is what fathers do, they give themselves away, willingly, happily, and that is what the Eucharist is, the Father giving us Himself every day....” (Brian Doyle, *THE THORNY GRACE OF IT*, p. 91) So there are my 2 nods to Father’s Day.....

Which brings us to our Feast of Corpus Christi. Annie Dillard grew up Presbyterian in Pittsburgh. She eventually was drawn to Catholicism and moved to Hillsborough, NC. In her marvelous book *TEACHING A STONE TO TALK*, she tells of going to an Advent Mass at a small church in the northeast. At first no one could find the designated opening hymn, including the organist. Then no one could sing it. Finally, the priest gave an elaborate invitation to one family to come forward to light the first candle of the Advent wreath. Everyone but the priest could see that the eager altar servers had already set all 4 candles ablaze. Dillard then writes: “A high school play is more polished than this service we have been rehearsing since year one. In 2000 years we have not worked out the kinks. We positively glorify them. Week after week we witness the same miracle: that God can stifle His own laughter. Week after week, we witness the same miracle: that God, for reasons unfathomable, refrains from blowing our dancing bear act to smithereens. Week after week Christ washes the disciples’ dirty feet, handles our very toes and repeats, It is all right – believe it or not – to be people. Who can believe it?” (p. 22-23) Who indeed?

Most of us were trained that ‘the Body of Christ’ is the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharistic bread. We consumed the Real Presence during Mass and worshiped it during Benediction. We were guaranteed that the more consuming and worshipping we did, the higher place we would one day have in heaven.

Yet I found out as I studied theology for a while, that the EARLIEST use of the term ‘Body of Christ’ did NOT refer to Jesus in the Eucharistic Bread and Cup, but to the risen Jesus’ presence IN THE COMMUNITY. This becomes clear when we return to Paul’s telling of the Last Supper in the original – and EARLIEST – telling of the story in 1 Corinthians chapters 10 and 11, part of which we heard as our second reading today. When we look at the text carefully, we see that it was written because the Corinthians had problems BEING A COMMUNITY – in fact some of them were getting drunk at Mass – all you people do is leave early! Which prompted the great scripture scholar Fr. Raymond Brown to remark about this passage: “If it weren’t for some drunkards in Corinth, we’d never have the earliest scriptural story of what Jesus said and did in the upper room on the night before He died.”

But because we have so often only focused on the elements of bread and wine as the Body of Christ, the Eucharist, we have failed to notice that Paul’s reference to those who were eating the bread and drinking the cup ‘unworthily’ referred not to a lack in recognizing the body and blood of Christ in the bread and wine, but in recognizing the Body of Christ in the community that was participating in the Eucharistic meal.

In this particular case, the well-to-do in the Corinthian church were, in effect, telling the poor that the Mass would begin at 8:00 pm, while they themselves showed up at 6:00 pm to dine – the result being that the

poor had little or nothing to eat or drink, since they could only bring little or nothing to the communal meal – and the rich were already drunk and full by the time they had arrived! (see 1 Cor 11:17-22)

Paul not only pointed out that the poor were just as much other-Christians as the wealthy, but also stressed that what transformed ordinary bread and wine into Christ's body and blood were not some special words uttered by a priest, but the community's willingness to die enough to themselves to recognize everyone in their Eucharistic gathering as part of the Body of the One Christ.

This is one of the most fundamental messages of the Eucharist – that we are the living Body of Christ in the world. So the big question for all of us is simply this: Can we die enough to ourselves – to recognize everyone else here – as the Body of Christ – even the drunkards in our midst? (adapted from Roger Vermalen Karban, in CELEBRATION, 29 May 2016, p. 4-5)

OK, so then what? Point 2. How does this happen?

In other words, why are we here? What is this gathering called? (take answers)....A CONGREGATION! What do we do? We congregate. We assemble. Both of these words mean 'to get ourselves together.' Like a lot of preliminaries, it isn't the most important thing that is going to happen. Except in this sense: If it doesn't happen, if we don't get ourselves together, then all the other things can't happen. It is like making a recipe. Turning on the oven isn't all that important, but if we don't turn it on, then no matter how carefully we mix the flour and baking soda and eggs and sugar, there isn't going to be any cake. That's how it is at Mass. I can have prepared a homily to give you your full normal torture time, the music can be well chosen and played, the lectors and Eucharistic ministers and ushers all doing their job perfectly – but if nobody turns on the oven, we can't get anywhere. And the oven is the assembling – our gathering together and becoming a community – the Body of Christ.

If I board a bus alone, I look for a seat alone. If I board a bus with a friend, we sit together, but we don't need to pay any attention to anyone else on the bus. That's a bus. We ask nothing more from a bus than that it take us from one spot to another. But if we come in here and act like we are on a bus – looking for a place to sit alone or just with a friend or my family – we have misjudged what sort of thing is going on here. This isn't a bus, it is a boat that is rowed by everybody on board. It only goes when all the people participate, move together. This isn't a place where we come to get – it's a place where we come to give. That's what liturgy is: something done by all of us together, each adding our gift. We don't come here 'to get my Jesus,' we come here to give our lives over to Him in service to others. Yes, there are different roles – but the deed itself – moving the boat – is done by everybody. One of the early church fathers put it this way: "What if the bread and wine change and the people don't?" That's the critical issue here. As I've said before, we don't come here for our own purposes – we come here for GOD'S purposes – which is to gather in His Name as His people, the Body of Christ, to be SENT OUT FROM HERE to love and serve and change the world.

When we come through the doors, it's clear what we have to do. We have to make the church look like the church, act like the church, sound like the church. We have to congregate to make a congregation. We have to assemble to make an assembly. We have to talk to one another to make any kind of connection. We have to pray TOGETHER to make a community. This isn't something we watch. It's not a time for us to pray the rosary or read a prayer book, or read the bulletin, which I know NEVER happens here, but you may have heard rumors of it happening at OTHER parishes! It's time to sing with the whole Body of Christ to MAKE the Body of Christ. It's time to do LITURGY – people's work.

There are lots of times in life to come in here and pray alone. But Sunday Mass is not one of those times. Sunday Mass is what we do together. That isn't a theory that will work no matter how we look in here, how we sound, how we act. It isn't a theory, it's practice. The church has to get itself together. If we work at it, all of us, maybe we'll come to a time when we'll walk through the door and, without even thinking about it, head for the empty places closest to the altar. If we work at it, we won't have to imagine that we are one in Christ; we'll act like we are. The reason, let's be clear on this, is not that there is some special holiness in getting close to the altar; the reason is that there is the holiness of the church in getting close to one another and doing this deed together. So, maybe we can begin. TRY CHANGING YOUR SEAT next week! AND IT IS NOT YOUR SEAT! And SIT IN A DIFFERENT SECTION UP FRONT! I promise you, you won't die! And you may even get connected to another member of the Body of Christ. And if a row is empty, don't sit on the end protecting it – be welcoming, have a bit of courtesy – take a place in the middle of that row as if inviting others to sit beside us.

There should be a graciousness to our gathering. Kindness and hospitality are essential to our assembling. Smiling, nodding in welcome even to those we do not know, greeting others warmly, taking time to learn people's names: these are building up the Body of Christ. Ushers have the task of helping us in these first moments together. But ushers only specialize in what we must ALL do for one another: make it clear that all alike are welcome here. That is why we have to do the best we can to make this place welcoming to all. No exceptions. Gay? You are welcome here! Trans? You are welcome here? Confused? Welcome. Holier than the Pope? Welcome? To the left of Attila the Hun? Welcome. Republican? Welcome! Democrat? Welcome. Tree-hugger? Welcome. Jesus welcomed all. As His Body on earth now, we are His hands and feet and welcome. Tough job. But God knows, somebody's got to do it in our splintered and divided world.

Here we welcome people who would perhaps not be our friends. What we have in common is far more than blood, far more than the mutual affection of friends. What we have in common is baptism. That's all that matters here. That's why rich and poor, peasant and king, legal and illegal, should be sitting side by side. Every barrier society erects to keep us apart is meaningless here. Every bond society builds up to put us into this little group or that clan or the other club is also meaningless here. In a sense, we are naked here, like a baby in the waters of baptism. All the externals are gone. All that we wear is Christ. We all wear Christ. And that – not simply that we might like one another – is why we come forward to this altar – the Body of Christ receiving the Body of Christ which is to make us the Body of Christ.

There are a number of key moments in the Mass, and I'll highlight just a few. First, we must sing. The singing of the liturgy is for all of us. It lets us know we are not in this room alone. We are not in this world alone. We are not here for ourselves. We are here for one another – and for the sake of the world. We sing to hear each other, to witness to what we believe by singing God's praises, to let our voice – good or poor as it is – get lost with all the other voices. We sing to signal that we belong to one another, and recognize one another as other Christs. For those of you who think singing is an option, think again. The teaching of the church is crystal clear on this. The liturgy is about the ACTIVE PARTICIPATION of the people. It is not a spectator sport.

Second, we listen to the Word of God and prepare for the torture of yet another 3 points. We listen, rather than read along, because it is meant to be a communal act – because we all know that when we read along – we are all at different places and no longer acting as a community doing something together. We listen because we believe that God is actually speaking to us through these sacred texts. There are challenges, words of comfort and peace and forgiveness for us and our hurting world. We offer prayers on behalf of our world, reminding us that it is what we are going to do out there that is supposed to be the consequence of

what we do in here. And we offer our personal financial gifts. These are supposed to be a symbol of our life – our offering that we make to God – for all that He has done for us. Is the gift true? Is it honest? Is it a real reflection of a heart filled with gratitude? Or is it half-hearted or grudging? Either way, it IS a reflection of our life – for better or worse.

And we receive the gift of Christ which is to make us OTHER CHRISTS. The Body of Christ becoming more fully the Body of Christ. As St. Augustine put it in the fourth century: “Say AMEN to what you receive; say AMEN to what you are.”

And finally, we are sent out – GO IN PEACE TO LOVE AND SERVE – GO IN PEACE, GLORIFYING GOD WITH OUR LIVES – to make the Good New happen in a world so often full of bad news. Be messengers of GOOD NEWS – be messengers of mercy, love, compassion, generosity, and forgiveness. BE the presence of Christ in the world. BE what you ARE – the Body of Christ. Amen. (last section is a far afield adaptation of Gabe Huck’s BOW US DOWN NOW, EACH TO ALL, in CELEBRATION, May 2016, p 8-9)