



If you asked me what was the most difficult challenge that I felt as pastor here at St. Martin's, it would not be a leaking roof during a Confirmation Mass that almost drenched the Bishop and had Jim Biggin using towels to dry the floor, or snow on a weekend that created empty pews and empty collection baskets. Certainly, people wearing Yankee apparel at Mass continues to be an ongoing disturbing issue as well as the famous Mass of healing where we accidentally mixed the oil of anointing in bowls that still had Lenten ashes in them. After our holy anointing, we all like extras in a horror movie.

In truth, the issue was a very serious and disturbing one: for several weeks, we were occasionally finding Eucharistic hosts in the pews. We could not be sure if they had been consecrated or not, but as I spoke about it at all the Masses, I could see how upsetting this was to all of you as it was to me. We took some steps that seemed to have helped since this serious problem has ceased. Thanks be to God!

Jesus Christ is truly present in the Holy Eucharist, in the consecrated hosts and wine. This is not a symbolic presence to remind us of the Last Supper and one that recalls the last night of Jesus before his death. No, Jesus is present body, soul and divinity in the Holy Eucharist. Jesus Christ is present in the tabernacle and in the hosts that we bring to the infirm and dying. I could offer you a three - dollar word about *transubstantiation* of the host into Jesus, or speak to you the words of some of the greatest thinkers of the Catholic Church, but I would only make one statement why I believe in the Eucharist: Jesus told us: *This is my Body; This is my Blood which will be given up for you. He then said do this in memory of me.* He told us. Jesus said to them, "*Truly, truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh and drink the blood of the Son of Man, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is real food, and My blood is real drink.* When Jesus said this, many walked away since they could not believe that God could do this. It was too

much. *From this time, many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. "You do not want to leave too, do you?"* Jesus asked the Twelve. Simon Peter answered him, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. *We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.* In my readings of the New Testament, the four Gospels, there is no ambiguity about the true presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Our Lord does not say, this is something like my body, a symbol of my body, or a memory or the Last Supper. *This is my Body! This is my Blood. Do this in memory of me. The one who eats my flesh and drinks my blood shall live forever.*

We have many funerals and a fair number of weddings here at St. Martin's. The people who attend these celebrations are good people who want to pay respects to the deceased, or celebrate the love of the couple about to exchange their wedding vows. Some are Catholics who may not have received the Eucharist in many years. Others are members of other faith communities, and some may not believe in God. You get a sense of this when you say, *The Lord be with you* and you are met with dead silence, other than the voice of Elena saying and with you. As communion is distributed, and you say *Body of Christ*, the person may smile at you, or do the quick take of the host out of your hand.

So, I often make an announcement that goes something like this: *We Catholic respect people of all faiths and traditions, but because of what we believe about the Eucharist, we ask only believing Catholics to come forward to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus.*

Saying this is a bit awkward for me. I feel like a bit like a I am telling my guests not to eat the food that we are serving. I know that Jesus loves everyone and he wants to bring all people into his love. Some may even be offended and that is not what I intend. Yet, I also know that to receive the Body and Blood of Jesus with no understanding of what we are receiving is not to truly honor the gift that Jesus has given us. No one can ever completely grasp the mystery of the Eucharist. What we ask of a second grader, who is about to receive his or her first Communion, is that the recognize that this bread is not ordinary bread but it is Jesus.

I also feel like a bit of hypocrite when I announce who might approach the table since I am so very aware of my own sinfulness, the times I struggle with being attentive and focused on mystery, the times that lack of faith enter my heart, the times when I receive without truly appreciating that Jesus is coming into me, those moments when I barely say a devout prayer since I am thinking about what is coming next in the Mass.

Our Church gives us this Feast of Corpus Christi to invite us to truly pause and ponder what it means for God to choose to become present to us in Holy Communion. We are invited to ponder that God is present in a most profound way in every tabernacle of the

world. We need days like this. We have Mothers' Day and today we mark Fathers' Day. We love and appreciate our Fathers' always, but it is important to stop and remind ourselves in a very clear way what a gift God gave us in our Fathers.

Corpus Christi is like this practice. We seek to always reverence and be ever grateful for Jesus' gift of himself to us in the Holy Communion. We pause to strengthen our focus that Jesus is present in a most special way in our tabernacle and that I can visit him and talk to him here. I like this story very much from a letter Flannery O'Connor, the Southern Catholic writer, sent to a friend describing a now-famous literary gathering in the late 1940s or early 1950s, where Mary McCarthy, the well-known writer and essayist was in attendance:

*"Well, toward morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was obviously supposed to defend. Mary McCarthy said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the 'most portable' person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one. I then said, in a very shaky voice, 'Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.' That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable."*