

Celebrating Mass with the pope

This column is the first in a three-part series by Father Lawrence.

To concelebrate Mass with Pope Benedict XVI at Nationals Park last week, I had to get out of bed by 4 a.m., a task I do not undertake lightly. But I was sure it was going to be worth it, and it was. When you celebrate the Eucharist with the pope, you know – not in your head, nor even in your gut, but deep down in your bones – that you are a part of something that is 25,000 miles around and 2,000 years deep.

The pope, more than anything else, is the sacrament of the unity of the church across time and space, and nowhere is this more able to be experienced than at the Eucharist. When Vatican II said that the church primarily is the church when it comes together for Eucharist, the bishops were only echoing the Scripture and the constant teaching of the fathers: The church makes the Eucharist, and the Eucharist makes the church. This happens for us every Sunday in our parishes. But when one of our bishops comes and presides, it's different; we can feel that we are a part of the church of Baltimore. And when the pope sits at the head of the eucharistic table, we can feel the whole world church present with us.

For a long time, the church was deprived of this experience. Not only did the slow speed of transportation make international papal trips infeasible, the 'recent unpleasantness' between the Vatican and Italy in the 1870s left the pope the 'prisoner of the Vatican.' Recent popes broke this open a little – who can ever forget Paul VI at the U.N. crying out "Guerre, jamais, jamais plus!" – but it was Pope John Paul II, with his theatrical background and his rock star personality, who really restored this ancient theology of the pope as sacrament of the unity of the church to its rightful place in Catholic life.

Not only was he good at it, he loved it. When the kids cried "John Paul II, we love you," he would spontaneously shout back, "John Paul II, he loves you." It was just who he was. Pope Benedict is a very different personality. He is a much more quiet, reserved and private person. It is said that his idea of a fun evening is getting to sit alone at the piano and play a Mozart sonata.

So I was afraid that he would let this whole nascent theology die just because it did not suit who he was as a person. If he had not done international trips the way John Paul did, they could have become just an idiosyncrasy of his predecessor and definitely optional for his successors.

But he didn't let it die. Despite his age and his private personality, Benedict XVI recognized that his predecessor had rediscovered something very important about the papacy, and he seems determined to institutionalize that rediscovery. From now on, regardless of who is pope, these international trips will be an expected part of what it means to be pope. A major part of the job of the pope is now to go around the world, preaching the Gospel and presiding at the Eucharist, so that people all over the world can have the profound sacramental experience of being a part of the worldwide church.

Of course, being a part of the world church has consequences. We get to influence the church in the rest of the world (the topic of Part II), and we have to be open to the influence of the church in the rest of the world, especially when the pope carefully calls it to our attention (the topic of Part III).

But for now, let me say simply: Thank God for Pope Benedict's decision to let me experience in my bones once more what it means to be a part of something that is 25,000 miles around and 2,000 years deep. Thank you, Holy Father.

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