

Eucharistic Hospitality

Part two of the column that appeared in this space last week regarding the New York Times will appear in next week's Catholic Review.

The Feast of Corpus Christi, celebrated this coming Sunday, is officially titled “The Solemnity of the Most Holy Body and Blood of Christ,” a rather formidable title and properly so. Since the 13th century, the celebration is meant to draw attention to and elicit special reverence for the unique presence of the Risen Christ among us in the Eucharistic Sacrifice and in the Lord’s enduring Real Presence under the appearances of bread and wine. What a great gift and mystery: that in love and humility, an omniscient, omnipotent God would become like a piece of bread or a drink of wine in order to remain close to us, to nourish us and give us strength. His continued and abiding Presence is a gift of inestimable value that helps us to live our call as disciples and to serve one another.

I have been heartened by the many parishes that have encouraged Eucharistic Adoration, especially for the intention of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life. Indications are that the renewal of Eucharistic devotion is having positive effects, one of which is, in the thought of Pope Benedict XVI, to prolong and intensify all that takes place in the Eucharistic Sacrifice itself.

The Eucharist should never be taken for granted. So great a gift demands of us proper preparation and response. Indeed, too often, the Eucharist is approached as a personal entitlement, with individuals, usually well-meaning I’m sure, setting their own criteria for receiving the Sacrament. Through the years, the pendulum has swung for many in our increasingly secularized society: from refraining from Holy Communion unless one had been to Confession shortly before, to the receiving of Communion without any reference to the necessity of the sacramental forgiveness when serious breach of our Church’s moral teaching is involved.

There are few warnings more serious or severe in the New Testament than that of St. Paul in this regard:

“Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will

be guilty of profaning the body and blood of the Lord. Let one examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself.” (1 Cor. 11: 27-29)

In her teachings, the Church makes explicit this warning of St. Paul. The Church teaches that anyone who is aware of grave sin should not receive Holy Communion until making a full and integral confession and receiving sacramental absolution in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. When the lines for Communion have little relation to the lines for the Sacrament of Reconciliation, soul searching and catechesis are in order.

Another area of Church teaching that eludes many is the reception of Holy Communion at a Catholic Mass by non-Catholics. A convert to the faith, now a strong Catholic, related that his final decision to take instructions in our Faith was made after years of having his wife and children clamber over him as he remained seated in his pew at Communion time. He would not dream of receiving as a non-Catholic. And although as a Protestant, he then acknowledged the True Presence of Christ in the Sacrament, he also knew that to “receive Communion” would indicate that he was, in fact, “in communion” with the Church. The yearning for the Eucharistic Body of Christ led to a yearning for that full communion with the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church, which he finally attained. It was a process, he insists, that he has never regretted.

In contrast was a sad experience of mine last year when, at a funeral Mass, an individual approached Communion who had no idea what to do or say. In such cases, I quietly ask if the person is a Catholic and when they indicate they are not, I suggest to them a blessing with the Host. Invariably, individuals appreciate the gesture.

Not this time, however! Shortly thereafter, I received a blistering letter accusing me, in this case, of false judgment, lack of charity and everything else short of a violation of First Amendment rights. Again, the Eucharist approached as a personal entitlement, a private privilege with little appreciation of the profound unity implied in and with our Catholic communion.

Divisions within the Church, also known as the Body of Christ, are heartbreaking

reality that all Christians should pray and work to overcome. While intercommunion among some Christians is permitted on rare and well-defined occasions, reception of Holy Communion cannot overcome division but reflects a degree of communion already present. The Second Vatican Council reflects the solid tradition of our Church:

“They are fully incorporated in the society of the Church who, possessing the Spirit of Christ accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and are united with her as part of her visible bodily structure and through her with Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. The bonds which bind men to the Church in a visible way are profession of faith, the sacraments, and ecclesiastical government and communion.” (Lumen Gentium 14)

It is a sensitive matter, surely, and one that demands tact – possibly a tact that I lacked in this particular case. I might close, then, with the tactful words of Pope Benedict XVI:

“The Eucharist in fact not only manifests our personal communion with Jesus Christ, but also signifies full communio with the Church. This is the reason why, sadly albeit not without hope, we ask Christians who are not Catholic to understand and respect our conviction, which is grounded in the Bible and Tradition.”