

God Acts Through the Sacraments

I have always loved being part of sacramental celebrations. As a priest and a bishop sacramental occasions give me the opportunity to share in the peak personal and religious moments of people lives.

The seven sacraments flow from the ministry of Jesus Christ, and are God's way of being present throughout our lives in special and deeply meaningful actions. The Catechism of the Catholic Church tells us that: "Christ now acts through the sacraments he instituted to communicate his grace. The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) accessible to our human nature...." (1084)

Through each sacrament we are given the grace of God and drawn closer to God. They are a visible sign of God's unconditional love and grace working in our lives and bringing us closer to him.

The blessing of so many celebrations of the sacraments mark my life experience, but since becoming a bishop, I especially enjoy celebrating with our young people the sacrament of confirmation. Their commitment and enthusiasm is just so energizing.

Kate Mills from Glyndon in her confirmation letter to me last year spoke about the Saturday youth and young adult pilgrimage prior to Palm Sunday. She told me "I was inspired to see all the other people there who weren't on a "mandatory" pilgrimage for confirmation. They are so passionate about their faith that they chose to pilgrimage around Baltimore. Their passion made me feel so fortunate to be part of a community that believes so strongly in their faith."

You hear this often from young people. The way of expressing what I see in the young people is the letter Kristina Jackson sent to me this year from St. John's in Columbia. She said "this period in my life is the time where I am beginning to decide what I want to do with my life - and I know for sure I want Christ to keep me company in everything I do."

This deepening of faith and commitment on the part of our young people, and willingness to receive not only the strength of the Holy Spirit, but the challenge to live out their lives more faithfully as Jesus' followers which is so encouraging and

hopeful to me for the future of our Church.

In the sacrament of marriage, God has a conversation with us through the Scripture readings. The couple has a conversation with themselves and with us through their marriage vows. I always encourage the young couples to remember the one guest who did not get a paper invitation in whose house they celebrate their sacramental marriage. I encourage them to keep the Lord as a guest in their lives and home always.

As a bishop I've had the added excitement of being able to celebrate ordinations to the priesthood and diaconate. My own ordinations were highly significant moments in my life - my diaconate, my priesthood, my ordination to the episcopate. It is such an honor to be able to ordain young men to the ministry to continue what Jesus began so long ago.

As much as I am encouraged by the vocation of young couples who come together in marriage and are so committed to one another, and the religious women and men who give their lives for Christ; I am especially encouraged by the men who dedicate their lives to the Lord for the sake of others through the priesthood. Their enthusiasm and spirituality is an inspiration to us "older clerics" and a reminder of our own call to be at the service of the community.

After thirty seven years as a priest the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick is always a consolation to the dying person and their family. But more and more the Sacrament is celebrated not if you are sick or anticipating surgery or simply aging gracefully. There is a grace filled consolation for each person as they know the Lord's spirit and power is there to sustain them in these moments of their lives.

It is similar with the sacrament of reconciliation - the consolation, the forgiveness, the return to closeness with God - brings about real joy. I remember how important that sacrament was to the young people who had retreat experiences at the Monsignor O'Dwyer Retreat House during the 1980s when I was a director there. I know from the letters from our young people today telling me about their confirmation preparation that they too value the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation.

Finally, we come to the Eucharist. I saved this for last because so much of our sacramental life revolves around the Eucharist. As with all the sacraments it is our Lord's way of wanting to be present to us.

Years ago I heard the quote that "Love demands presence." The Eucharist is clearly our Lord's way of saying to each of us that he wants to be present to us because He loves us so much. Also, it is our opportunity to be one with not only him but with each other.

Each time we come to the Eucharistic table, we receive the same Lord Jesus; we are each challenged to take him with us into our part of the world so that he becomes even more present not only within us but among us.

Twelve years ago at my 25th anniversary as a priest, there were about 500 people who celebrated that Mass with me. At the Mass I asked how many I had baptized, how many had received first Communion with me, how many marriages I had witnessed.

As each group stood, and looked at each other, they realized how much the Lord had blessed all of us in our celebrating the sacraments with one another.

When you think back to your own experience of the sacraments in your life, what did they mean then, what do they mean to you now?