

St. Agnes parishioner receives first Communion at Camp GLOW

SPARKS – Gathered in the chapel of the Monsignor O'Dwyer Retreat House for Mass, Deacon Bill Fleming asked the Camp GLOW (God Loves Our World) participants if they had any special intentions.

One camper raised his hand to pray for Noelle Adelsberger, a 29-year-old parishioner of St. Agnes in Catonsville, who was on the verge of receiving her first Communion.

Noelle, who is on the Autism spectrum and is non-verbal, jumped and smiled in joy.

Every year, Noelle looks forward to attending the camp with her older sister, Kate Kleintank, who takes a week off from her ministry as director of religious education at Church of the Resurrection in Ellicott City to serve as Noelle's companion. Kleintank estimates this is either their sixth or seventh year.

"She gets to have her sister with her for a whole week, and that's the best," said Theresa Adelsberger, their mother. "They have a special connection."

The special occasion also included their father, Bill; Will, one of their five brothers; and Kleintank's husband, Nathan, and son, Joshua. Followed by family and accompanied by Kleintank, Noelle received Communion joyfully.

"This is a Camp GLOW first," said Deacon Fleming, who in his retirement from directing the Archdiocese of Baltimore's Office of Disabilities Ministry still leads the camp. "It is truly a blessing. How appropriate to be with her family and friends to receive this blessed gift."

Father Michael Triplett, pastor of Our Lady of Grace in Parkton, was the Mass celebrant. As she received the Eucharist, in lieu of saying "Amen," Noelle closed her hands together in prayer.

"That's the key," Deacon Fleming said, of her ability to distinguish the Eucharist

from unconsecrated bread. “She does know that it’s different.”

Kleintank said it was a process to prepare her sister, who is 12 years younger, for the sacrament, but attributed it to her responsibility as Noelle’s godmother. She used “My Picture Missal” by Loyola Press to help Noelle understand concepts of Catholicism, including that the host, through transubstantiation, becomes more than mere physical sustenance. It becomes the body and blood of Christ.

According to her big sister, prayer is also a big part of Noelle’s life. She likes to pray while waiting for the bus that takes her to a day program in Howard County. She also prays for the babies of family and friends, and gifts them with a bear at their baptisms.

The night before, Deacon Fleming practiced the steps of receiving Communion with Noelle, using an unconsecrated host.

“After we practiced,” Kleintank said, “she bowed to the tabernacle. So she does get it.”

Father Triplett said that all Catholics have a continuing challenge to deepen their understanding of Jesus in the Eucharist.

“For those who have difficulties in communicating, we have to take it on faith that they understand,” he said, adding that Noelle’s awareness was evident. “You could see it in the joy of her expression.”

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