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Eucharist - Sixth Sunday of Easter

Every year, children from our parish have the great privilege of receiving Holy Communion for the first time. The entire community rejoices at this great event in the life of these young people.

Unlike receiving Baptism, which for many of us happened when we were very young, making first Holy Communion is a clear memory of many of us. Perhaps you remember wondering what the Eucharistic host would taste like. In many places, the traditional white suit or dress added to the festivity of the occasion.

But what truly happens when we receive Holy Communion? It is not accidental that in most places, first Holy Communion takes place during the Easter Season. It is in the Easter Mystery of Christ's death and resurrection that we ground our belief in the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. This reality is not something the Church could possibly invent for itself. It goes back to our Lord's words in the Upper Room, which we repeat at every Mass: "This is my body, which will be given up for you."

On the very first Easter Sunday, Jesus appeared to two of his own disciples who were fleeing from Jerusalem. They were afraid because he had been crucified just days before. All the hopes they had put in this great teacher had been dashed. And in the midst of their travel to Emmaus, Jesus himself appears to them, but they do not recognize him. Even as he explains to them, by means of the Old Testament, how everything was pointing to his death and resurrection, they remain unaware of his identity.

Then something happens. They invite Jesus into the place where they are staying. And when they sat down to eat, "he took bread, said the blessing, broke it, and gave it to them" (Luke 24:31, *NAB*). In that instant – when Jesus repeats his own words and actions from the Last Supper – the disciples finally realize who he is. "He was made known to them in the breaking of the bread," Luke's Gospel recounts (24:35).

When we gather for Mass each Sunday, we enter into that same mystery which moved the disciples on the road to Emmaus. After his resurrection, Christ makes himself present to his Church *through the sacraments*. And there is no sacrament greater than the Eucharist. It is the sacrament to which all of the others point, because in it, Jesus Christ is made substantially present under the appearance of bread and wine. That is why we genuflect when the Eucharist is present. This is why we have processions and Forty Hours Devotions. The Eucharist is not an empty symbol; rather, it is the real presence of Christ, who humbles himself anew for us.

The Eucharist will strengthen our parish children as they seek to live their Christian lives. For us who have received Holy Communion many times, perhaps we can renew our Eucharistic amazement today. Are we as excited about receiving Holy Communion as the children this weekend? Do we truly recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread, such that every other encounter with Christ flows from it? Can we make a greater commitment to our own vocations

through the grace offered in this sacrament, the sign of Christ who loved us “to the end” (John 13:1)?

If we wonder whether this Eucharistic amazement is possible, we need only to look at the bread and wine. Before Mass, they are nothing very special. In the Mediterranean culture in which Jesus was raised, bread and wine were staple foods – ordinary and unremarkable. Foods like this are important, because they keep us from going hungry and give us strength in our work. Food can also be a wonderful way by which family and friends gather together.

But in the Mass, something extraordinary – we can even say supernatural – happens. By means of the priests’ words and gestures, the Holy Spirit sanctifies the bread and wine. And while they maintain their outward forms, so that our senses would experience them as simple bread and wine, our spiritual senses perceive something else. Now, they are not just food to help our physical work, but spiritual nourishment for our journey to God. They no longer help us gather on a human level, but give us grace so that we may be united as one with the Trinity.

The celebration of the Eucharist is the single greatest way we can encounter Christ. Receiving Holy Communion draws us into Christ’s own life. I hope we can say that our time at Mass each week is the highlight of our week. Please congratulate our first communicants when you see them, and encourage them to keep coming to Mass each week. In this way, the Easter Mystery of Christ may take root in the life of our parish community. ~Rev. Eric J. Banecker