

## FIRST HOLY COMMUNION 2009

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church in Volo

26 April 2009

Today is a very special day for ten of our young parishioners, who are about to receive the Most Precious Body of Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, the God of the universe for the first time in their lives. I can remember the day of my First Communion very distinctly. I was seven years old and we belonged to a beautiful old church in Janesville, Wisconsin, St. Mary's. At the beginning of the Mass, a very large group of us First Communicants processed from the school to the church and sat as guests of honor in the first several rows of the pews just like you. When it was time to receive Our Lord, the Dominican sisters, who were our teachers, directed small groups of six, one after the other into the sanctuary. At that time, before the Second Vatican Council, only priests and altar boys could normally be present in the sanctuary during the Holy Sacrifice, so for us, it was an exceptionally special privilege. When my turn came, I walked through the Communion Rail gates to the foot of the altar, and then, as if that wasn't enough of an honor, we were allowed to ascend to the altar and kneel on the top step, where we received the Most Holy Eucharist for the first time in our lives kneeling before the very altar on which Christ had become present.

All of the sacraments are unique channels of God's grace, which help us become holy. St. Thomas Aquinas said that they are visible signs of holy things, which cause holiness in the one, who receives them. But there is one difference between the Eucharist and the other sacraments. All of the others take place when we receive them. Original Sin is washed away at our Baptism, and only then. A marriage is contracted only when the man and woman exchange their vows in front of the altar. Sins are forgiven only when the priest pronounces the words of absolution in the confessional. But with the Holy Eucharist, the sacrament becomes present at the moment the priest pronounces the words of consecration, even though no one has yet received it. And even more, the Eucharistic presence of Christ persists in the form of bread even after the Mass itself has ended. That's why we have Eucharistic adoration. All of the other sacraments give us grace through the power of Christ. The Eucharist gives us Christ Himself.

In fact, all of the other sacraments are ordered to the Most Holy Eucharist. We receive Baptism, so that we can become Christians and receive the Eucharist. We receive absolution, so that we can receive Communion in a state of grace. A man is ordained, so that he can consecrate bread and wine to bring the Eucharist into existence. A man and a woman become joined in Holy Matrimony to become a sign of Christ's union with the Church reflected in the Holy Eucharist.

And except for the sacrament of penance, the Eucharist is the only sacrament that we can receive continually, without limit throughout our whole life. Yet today, the Eucharist is so misunderstood and neglected. It is the greatest of sacraments, yet so many Catholics don't even recognize it for what it is. Some of you here, I'm sure, have already heard the results of a 1992 Gallup Poll, which discovered that 70% of American Catholics don't believe what the Church teaches about the Eucharist, that even though they may receive Communion weekly, they don't believe that what they are receiving is

the Body of Christ. And this is very clearly reflected in the manner in which many Catholics receive Communion, treating it as if they were getting only a blessed wafer or something else like that. I suspect that many of them come up for Communion only out of habit and because everyone else is doing it.

This means that many people are receiving the Lord's Most Sacred Body unworthily but don't even realize it because they don't recognize the Body. But there are also many Catholics, who know that the Eucharist is the Body of Christ but yet chose to receive Him in a state of mortal sin. How many Catholics are not aware that by doing this they are making what we call a sacrilegious Communion and are guilty of another mortal sin. Christ said: "unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you do not have life within you."<sup>1</sup> But St. Paul also wrote: "For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment on himself."<sup>2</sup>

It's appalling but it isn't the only way that disrespect and sacrilege is made to the Most Blessed Sacrament. The instruction in the old traditional ritual said that the priest was to teach people to approach the Holy Eucharist with proper reverence and care. It said: "let communicants be reminded that when the Holy Eucharist is received they are not to leave the Church immediately or to engage in conversation, nor should they look around with wandering eyes ... let them remain some time in prayer, giving thanks to God for so singular a benefit and also for the most sacred passion of the Lord in whose memory this mystery is celebrated and received."<sup>3</sup> Leaving church after receiving Communion is clearly a sign of disrespect for the Most Holy Eucharist and shows a lack of understanding of what, or rather of WHO one has just received. And yet it happens every Sunday, even here.

One of the other ways that a person shows disrespect for the Most Holy Eucharist is by missing Sunday attendance. To understand why, just think about why we have the Mass. Christ could have redeemed us on the Cross without instituting a special sacrament that would allow people of all ages to be present at the Last Supper, as well as at His sacrifice on Calvary. Because the Mass is not just a memorial service, we really and truly are present once again at those two events every bit as much as if we were there two thousand years ago. But He did so because He wanted to remain with us for all time and give us a very tangible means by which we could enter into communion with Him. The Mass, therefore, is His unique gift to mankind, to each one of us personally. Yet, when someone **chooses** willfully, for whatever reason, not to attend Mass on Sunday, the commemoration of the day that He conquered death so that we could also rise from the grave on the Last Day, that person is saying that He is not interested in Most Holy Eucharist. Such a person is showing his lack of respect for the Eucharist because he chooses by an act of his free will to excuse himself from the Lord's Table at which He gives Himself to us. Christ didn't have to give Himself to us but He did and that person is saying that He isn't interested.

And not only do people try to justify their absence at Sunday Mass. They often return to church the next Sunday and receive Communion as if nothing had happened, desecrating the Most Holy Eucharist once again through a sacrilegious Communion.

All of our young first communicants understand what they will be receiving in just a few moments but precisely because they are so young, they don't yet realize the full import of what they will be doing today. On the other hand, each of us has over the years hopefully acquired a much fuller understanding and significance of this great

sacrament. However, we have to admit that all too often we have become a bit too accustomed to it.

For the last several years, the Canons Regular of St. John Cantius have had the opportunity to regularly say Mass for the Missionaries of Charity at their two houses in Chicago. In the sacristy of every one of their house chapels there is a handwritten sign, which says: “Remember, O priest, you should celebrate this Mass as if it were: your First Mass, your Last Mass, your Only Mass.” We should cultivate this same sentiment in every Catholic. Wouldn’t it be awesome if each time you approached the Communion Rail you did so as if “it was your First Communion, your last Communion, your only Communion”? If that were the case, perhaps we would be a lot closer to transforming the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> John 6:53.

<sup>2</sup> 1 Corinthians 11:29.

<sup>3</sup> Buckley, James, FSSP, “The Holy Eucharist: Source of Holiness.”