

A Reflection on Eucharist as Thanksgiving Deacon Daniel Lowery

In recent weeks, certain alarming statistics have made the rounds. The numbers are all down: baptisms, confirmations, marriages, adults entering the faith through our RCIA programs, and enrollments in our Catholic schools and in our faith formation programs. The numbers are all down, and not just by a bit. The numbers are all down dramatically in the Diocese of Gary and in the nation, too.

There's another statistic, however, that may explain these alarming trends. The Pew Research Center published a report in August noting that 69 percent of Catholics in the United States believe that the bread and wine consecrated in the celebration of the Eucharist merely "symbolize" the Body and Blood of Jesus. We can quibble with the way the research question was framed, of course, but this statistic and other data indicate that a substantial portion of self-identified Catholics dismiss the reality of Jesus' presence in the Eucharist.

This is remarkable given the fact that our faith tradition has long believed the Eucharist to be the Body and Blood of Jesus. This is why we refer to the Eucharist as the "source and summit" of our faith. No "source and summit," no faith! No "source and summit," no Church!

We would do well, therefore, to recommit ourselves to this central tenet of our faith, and it is good that we do so during this season of thanksgiving. The Thanksgiving holiday is secular in nature, of course, but it invites us, nonetheless, to step away – but for a moment – from the sheer busyness of our day-to-day struggles. It can serve as a "Sabbath moment" in which we pause to reflect on what is truly important in our lives.

And isn't this how we understand the "Eucharist," a term that is drawn from the Greek word for "thanksgiving"? The Sabbath celebration of the Eucharist, in particular, can ground our lives in a way that nothing else can.

But where to begin? How do we re-catechize those who've lost touch with the source and summit of our faith? Five reflections, in particular, would seem to be in order.

First, we understand the Eucharist as an *anamnesis*, a remembering so powerful that it makes present that which is remembered. When we celebrate the Eucharist, we are present at the Last Supper. When we celebrate the Eucharist, we stand at the foot of the cross. As we affirm in our Baptismal rite: "*This is our faith. We are proud to profess it!*" As Catholics, we shouldn't shy away from this core belief.

Second, we would do well to celebrate the Liturgy of the Word as the Word of God. It's more than pious instruction, good counsel, or wise advice. It, too, is a divine presence of sorts. In the Liturgy of the Word, we enter into a "Grand Story." We enter into the Grand Story of God's encounter with those whom he loves.

Let's face it, we can sometimes lose the thread of this Grand Story. We can sometimes lose sight of the forest for the trees. We can get lost in the maze of people and events that populate our readings. It's the Grand Story, however, that holds them together: the story of the Father's love for those who seek him; the story of God's encounter, not just with individuals, but with whole peoples, including the people of ancient Israel and, today, his Church; the story of God's liberating interventions throughout salvation history, first, from captivity and persecution, and, then, in Jesus, from sin and death. Yes, the shattering of sin and death itself! The Grand Story! We're invited, in fact, to link our stories, our individual stories, the stories of our families, and the stories of our faith communities, to the Grand Story of God's love and liberating action in salvation history.

The Liturgy of the Word also prepares us for the Liturgy of the Eucharist. Can you imagine a Thanksgiving celebration in which your relatives and friends popped in just to eat and run? No conversation... No stories... When we gather on special occasions, it's about more than food and drink *per se*. When we gather together, we tell stories. In fact, the stories we tell give meaning to the food and drink we share. It's the same with our Eucharistic celebration. As one scholar put it: "*a ritual loses its moorings when it loses its story.*" And so we share the Grand Story before we break the bread and pass the cup. It's the Grand Story, in fact, that gives meaning to our Eucharistic celebration.

Third, we would do well, perhaps, to embrace the challenging nature of our belief in the real presence of Jesus. Recall Jesus' words in John's Gospel: *"I am the living bread that came down from heaven; whoever eats this bread will live forever and the bread that I will give is my flesh for the life of the world... Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him on the last day. For my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink."* Jesus wasn't describing a symbol. He wasn't speaking metaphorically. No, he was talking about his Body. He was talking about his Blood.

Do we find this hard to accept? If so, we have plenty of company. Listen again to John's Gospel: *"Many of the disciples who were listening to Jesus said: 'This saying is hard. Who can accept it...' And as a result, many of them returned to their former way of life."* Yes, this belief – this "saying" – is hard. It has served, nonetheless, as a core belief in the Church from the very beginning. When Jesus asks if we, too, *"want to leave,"* we are invited to respond just as Peter did: *"Master to whom would we go? You have the words of eternal life?"* As Catholics, we join Peter in making this leap of faith.

Fourth, we would do well to re-imagine the transformation that takes place in the Liturgy of the Eucharist. In the offertory procession, all that we have and all that we are is carried to the altar. This includes our gifts, but so much more, in fact. It includes our suffering, our losses, and our challenges, too. Having heard the Grand Story, we know that God loves us unconditionally, and we know that God embraces not just our gifts, not just our successes, but all of us, including the tragic moments we've experienced in our lives and even our moments of great failure.

Then at the altar, something remarkable happens. It's not just the bread and wine that's transformed. All that we are, all that we do, and all that we've experienced in life has been carried to the altar with the bread and wine; and at the altar, a prayer is quietly recited by the priest or the deacon when the water and the wine are mixed in the chalice: *"By the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled himself to share in our humanity."* Yes, all that we are, all that we do, and all that we have experienced are carried to the altar. Our very lives are put on the altar with the bread and wine. To what end? So that we might *"share in the divinity of Christ."* Remarkable, indeed! In the Liturgy of the Eucharistic, we are transformed. In the Eucharistic Prayer, the bread and wine become the Body and Blood of Jesus, and we are affirmed as the Body of Christ.

Finally, this identity, an identity that flows out of our baptisms, is essential to who we are as the people of God. It's an identity that holds consequences for every one of us. As members of Christ's Body, we have work to do. *"Ita missa est."* In the dismissal, we are sent into the world as Jesus' hands, his feet, and his voice. As one theologian put it: *"We must become what we eat... We have to become bread for the world... The Mass isn't celebrated for our own sake, but for the sake of the world."*

A tall order? You bet! The consequences of discipleship are profound. In fact, we are to do as Jesus did. Jesus makes this especially clear in Luke's Gospel when he sends out, first, the Twelve and, then, the 70 disciples to nearby villages. They are told to do just as he did. They are told to proclaim the Father's love, to heal, and to confront evil when and where they find it.

We are told to do just as Jesus did, too. Like Jesus, we are to proclaim the Father's love to all whom we encounter. We are to proclaim the Father's love in all that we say and do. Like Jesus, we are to engender healing when and where we can. And like Jesus, we are to short-circuit sin's hold over our families, our workplaces, and our communities. We are to do just as Jesus did. That's what it means to be a member of Christ's Body.

"Ita missa est, go you are sent!" A tall order, to be sure, but we proceed in confidence and in gratitude, nonetheless. We proceed in confidence as a consequence of our encounter with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the celebration of the Eucharist, and we proceed in gratitude because we have been provided with an opportunity to experience the living God, because we've had the opportunity to link our individual and collective stories to God's Grand Story, because we've been carried to the altar so that every aspect of our lives can be mingled with the Body of Blood of Jesus, and because we've experienced Jesus himself in the breaking of the bread and in the drinking of the cup.

Eucharist! Thanksgiving!