

**Seventh Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(Feb. 18, 2007)**

Worship As Home

Today is one of those Sundays when we take a little time out to reflect on the Eucharist. What does it mean? Why are we here? What are we doing and what effect does it have in our lives?

The Eucharist is primarily prayer and worship. It is also home, which, as the saying goes, is the place where they have to take you in. There is no one who is not welcome in God's house, and nothing can alter that fact. When people come together in worship, they come as God knows them, with their differences, their wildly various experiences and perspectives. And by some miracle they sing, and listen, and pray as one.

An author I read recently (Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*, pp. 246-47) puts it this way:

The worshipping body is not a gathering of like-minded people, or those with a high degree of faith or knowledge concerning spiritual matters. I would like to think that it resembles Christ's ragged band of disciples in this manner, a diverse group with remarkable variance in personalities and attitudes toward Jesus. They were by no means considered respectable by the religious establishment of their day, and they demonstrate many doubts and questions about the Jesus who has come into their lives. In worship disparate people seek a unity far greater than the sum of themselves but don't have much control over how or if this happens. Recklessly we let loose with music, and the words of hymns, psalms, canticles, and prayers. We cast the Word of God out into the world, into each human heart, where, to paraphrase the prophet Isaiah, it needs to go to fulfill God's purpose. Isaiah uses the metaphor of rain to convey this – rain that disappears into the ground for a time, so that we can't see it working. And then it bears abundantly.

I wonder how many of us think of this as our experience at the Eucharist. We come here every week. We take our places in the pews. We stand, we sit, we kneel, we process. Some non-Catholic friends of mine complain that Catholics can't seem to sit still during Mass. But we are not

meant to sit still. Our gestures and our movement are important. We pray and worship God with our whole selves, with our bodies as well as with our minds and voices. And at that all-important moment when we receive the Eucharist we come forward together not as individuals but as a body, indeed the Body of Christ, to receive the Body of Christ and say “Amen” to what we are as St. Augustine tells us.

And if we come, with open minds and open hearts, as indeed we must, something is happening to us. Something wonderful is happening to us. We may not realize it. It may be happening quietly, in a hidden manner, maybe even secretly, in the depths of our being as Isaiah says about the rain. But we are being changed. We are being transformed by the God who is present, by the power of the Spirit, into the image of the Son as Paul says in the second reading.

There is one other thing that happens in our Eucharist that I would like to emphasize today and it also has to do with transformation. And that is reconciliation. Consider first of all what we heard Jesus say in the Gospel passage: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. To the person who strikes you on one cheek offer the other one as well” etc., etc. – all those things we perhaps wish Jesus had not really said – or at least didn’t really mean if he did say them. But I’m afraid he did really mean them the way they are recorded in our Gospels. And that presents us with some pretty big challenges.

That’s why reconciliation is a big part of our celebration. If indeed we are reconciled to God and to one another it will be less difficult to try to live up to those ideals that we heard. We are probably not used to thinking of the Eucharist as a sacrament of reconciliation, but it is. At the beginning we ask the Lord to have mercy on us all, and the priest recites a prayer of absolution, “May almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us all to everlasting life.” And before we come for communion we turn to one another and exchange the peace of Christ. It’s a sign of reconciliation. I turn to the person beside me or behind me or in front of me and I wish them God’s great gift of peace – a peace that can only be there if we truly love one another as the Lord has asked us to do. Then we come together, as I said before, not as individuals but as a community, we

process to the altar to receive the Body and Blood of Christ.

You know when we celebrate the Eucharist the Holy Spirit is here with even greater power than usual. There is a wonderful story in the Acts of the Apostles that tells how the community was all gathered in prayer and their prayer was so powerful that it made the walls of the building shake. In that same vein I recently read an author who said that if we really believed in the power of the Spirit and everything that was going on when we celebrate the Eucharist we would probably come to church wearing crash helmets expecting that same experience of the early church right here with the walls shaking and the building threatening to collapse at any minute. Well it's a metaphorical way of saying that prayer can be pretty powerful, and when it is prayer that comes from a reconciled community celebrating the Eucharist and acknowledging our ties to one another as the Body of Christ, there's no telling what extraordinary things might happen. Who knows, we might even feel the walls shaking