

Thoughts from the Second Floor Front

V Sunday of Lent

April 7, 2019

The Most Holy Eucharist – Part I

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus, on the night he was handed over, took bread, and, after he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.

Therefore, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily will have to answer for the body and blood of the Lord. A person should examine himself, and so eat the bread and drink the cup.

(I Cor 11: 23 – 28)

St. Paul founded the Church in Corinth and continued to be present to the Corinthians through his letters, the first of which, scholars believe, he wrote about 56 AD. The first letter to the Corinthians was written to address four issues: factions in the community, a case of sexual immorality, a theological question about the resurrection of the dead and abuses that had crept into the celebration of the Eucharist. This passage is Paul's instruction on the Eucharist. He gave it to them, and is now *re-minding* them, of both the teaching and the meaning of the Eucharist.

This is one of the earliest references that we have to the celebration of the Eucharist. Paul reminds them that he has handed on to them what he, himself received from the Lord. "I handed on..." in Latin the Infinitive form of the verb is *tradere*; first person singular is *traditio* – from which we get our English word Tradition. What is fascinating here is that the language Paul uses in his letter to the Corinthians is the same language that the Evangelists use in writing the story of the Last Supper and the language Jesus used at the Last Supper instituting the Eucharist. It is fascinating because Paul was not at the Last Supper and the Gospels have yet to be written. Yet within less than 25 years after the Christ event, less than 25 years after the Last Supper, Paul castigates the Corinthians for not adhering to the Tradition. So firmly planted in the life of the Church, that less than two and a half decades after Jesus' gift of the Eucharist, St. Paul is chastising the community because they are not doing it correctly.

The point is that by this time, so early in the history and development of the Church, the centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the Church has been established. I regularly am struck by that when at Mass. Doctrinal disagreements continued for several hundred years but it seems no one disputes the significance, the absolute necessity, of the Blessed Sacrament in the Church and in the life of a disciple. The Eucharist has been celebrated from the very first days of the church and has continued for 2000 years. And we are privileged to participate. Next week I will address that participation. For now I will close with a famous story of Ferocious Flannery O'Connor.

Taken to dinner in a Manhattan apartment with some of the *literati* and *illuminati* of her day she describes the evening:

"I was once, five or six years ago, taken by some friends to have dinner with Mary McCarthy and her husband, Mr. Broadwater. (She just wrote that book, A Charmed Life). She departed the Church at the age of 15 and is a Big Intellectual.

We went at eight and at one, I hadn't opened my mouth once, there being nothing for me in such company to say. The people who took me were Robert Lowell and his now wife, Elizabeth Hardwick. Having me there was like having a dog present who had been trained to say a few words but overcome with inadequacy had forgotten them.

Well, toward morning the conversation turned on the Eucharist, which I, being the Catholic, was obviously supposed to defend. Mrs. Broadwater said when she was a child and received the Host, she thought of it as the Holy Ghost, He being the 'most portable' person of the Trinity; now she thought of it as a symbol and implied that it was a pretty good one.

I then said, in a very shaky voice, 'Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it.' That was all the defense I was capable of but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, outside of a story, except that it is the center of existence for me; all the rest of life is expendable."

(Habit of Being, 1979)

That excerpt may rightly shock you. O'Connor did that with her fierce devotion and her gothic writing. She knew that the Eucharist is not just a symbol. If you reduce it to a symbol, you do not grasp the enormity of its significance - Jesus, with us in the simple yet extraordinary elements of bread and wine transformed! We are pretty simple too. We, too, are to be transformed.

Faithfully,

Msgr. Diamond