

“LET THE CHILDREN COME TO ME” EUCHARISTIC HOSPITALITY I

Celebrating **First Holy Communion** is always one of the happiest days in the life of a parish, and in our lives as priests. It hearkens back to our own youth and brings back many great memories. It was no different two weeks ago here. Since we believe that the Eucharist is at the very center of our spiritual lives, we are excited to see others experience it for the first time, and our beautiful May weather has only added to the joy. Invariably, I make mistakes in not knowing whether or not a young child has made his or her first Holy Communion, as initially they often remain a bit shy to receive— they are still getting used to it. I tried to count all my “communions” after that day, and made it to about thirteen and fourteen! If I mistakenly bless a child who ought to be receiving, it is not intentional. But it raises the question of the growing practice of **offering blessings to children** not yet old enough to receive Holy Communion. This topic has engendered significant discussion amongst us priests. I myself love to offer the blessings, but not all priests agree.

This customary practice has arisen particularly in the United States and other English speaking countries. While not universally lauded, many parishes have taken the additional step of inviting those who may be unable to receive Communion to approach the priest for a blessing, signaling their intention by crossing their arms over their shoulders. They maintain that such a custom makes it less likely that non-Catholics will approach for Communion out of ignorance. While not found in the rubrics, it is a custom that for the time being is tolerated, absent a definitive ruling from the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, the dicastery charged with these matters.

Nor is the issue limited to the blessing of small children. Allied arguments are proffered in favor of extending this practice to others. Some see it as welcoming to guests of other faiths, as well as providing greater ease for those of the Catholic faith who, due to awareness of grave sin, breaking the Communion fast, or other reasons choose to refrain from receiving Communion. Those who disapprove of this growing custom believe that the Communion procession is not a time for the bestowal of an individual blessing; after all, this happens for all assembled at the end of Mass. It is seen as an introduction of an additional rite within the Eucharist that is not properly speaking a part of the Mass. I sincerely appreciate the liturgical theology behind that logic, but I disagree with it.

Still, the Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales gave tacit approval to this developing practice in a 2005 statement in which they noted, “The invitation often given at Mass to those who may not receive sacramental communion—for example, children before their first communion and adults who are not Catholics—to receive a ‘blessing’ at the moment of Communion emphasizes that a deep spiritual communion is possible even when we do not share together the Sacrament of the Body and blood of Christ.” Such “spiritual Communions” are a reality also for Catholics, who for various reasons choose not to receive.

Around the same time, a 2008 communication emanating from the **Congregation for Divine Worship** (CDW), while acknowledging that “this matter is presently under the attentive study of the Congregation,” and leaving the custom that has emerged intact for the time being, clearly hinted at the theological and liturgical underpinnings of the practice of bestowing blessings in Mass. It notes: “The liturgical blessing of the Holy Mass is properly given to each and to all at the conclusion of the Mass, just a few moments subsequent to the distribution of Holy Communion.” (Protocol No. 930/08/L) In other words, this extra blessing is technically superfluous.

When parishes have an established custom of blessing small children prior to the reception of their First Holy Communion, this has created as many problems as it solves. On the one hand, it is seen as a welcoming gesture, while on the other hand, it leaves some parents (and children) feeling “left out” if a particular priest is against this in principle for the reason cited above. All can agree that Eucharistic hospitality is an important value. People ought to feel welcome when visiting our Churches. It would be beneficial in the long run for a more definitive ruling to come forward regarding the advisability of blessing small children who approach for a blessing. And if the Vatican ever asks my opinion, I’m happy to offer it!

- By his own admission, while returning home from Fatima, Pope Francis' critical comments on **Medjugorje** were offered as his personal opinion. "...I prefer the Madonna as Mother, our Mother, and not a woman who's the head of a telegraphic office, who everyday sends a message at such hour. This is not the Mother of Jesus. And these presumed apparitions don't have a lot of value." But he also acknowledged the fact that many go and have profound experiences of conversion.
- Definitive rulings concerning the authenticity of apparitions are generally only made following the completion of the visions. **Pope Benedict XVI** established a commission under the leadership of **Cardinal Ruini** from 2010-2014. That report (never officially released) was clearly referenced in the airplane interview above. It appears to have yielded mixed results, with many positive aspects (especially regarding the initial visions in 1981), but with more serious reservations about the phenomenon afterwards. Time will tell.
- **Fr. Nicholas Froehle** will offer his Mass of Thanksgiving next Sunday, May 28, at the 10:00 a.m. Mass. A reception follows in Hayden Hall. All are invited to the ordination liturgy on Saturday May 27 at 10:00 a.m. **Deacon Toulee Peter Ly** from our St. Vincent Campus was ordained to the transitional diaconate on May 13. We rejoice as this news and are so proud that a member of parish has persevered in his formation to reach this special day. Congratulations and "Ad Multos Annos."
- **Mrs. Callista Gingrich**, a member of the Choir at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, is slated to be nominated by President Trump as the **U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See**. She was instrumental in her husband Newt's conversion to Catholicism.
- On the cover of today's bulletin is depicted the English translation of the formula recited by the priest or deacon when distributing Holy Communion before the reforms of Vatican II. In those days, it was always said in Latin— "*Corpus Domini nostri Iesu Christi custodiat animam meam in vitam aeternam. Amen.*" It was quite a formula to recite with each communicant, and often came out in a hurried manner. Vatican II shortened the formula to "Corpus Christi."

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel
Rector